How the mouth changes its shape

by breathedout

Summary

Summary: 1955. Under the placid veneer of suburban playparks and middle-class conformity churns a hidden London: femmes and butches dancing close in basement bars; clandestine love between women. To Sherlock Holmes, struggling private detective and mistress of disguise, it’s a realm she renounced years before. To Johnnie Watson, daredevil ambulance driver turned auto mechanic, it’s become a little too familiar. But when someone is murdered in the washroom of the city’s most notorious lesbian club, the investigation will lead both women to reconsider their assumptions about themselves, each other, and the world in which they live.

Notes

Full acknowledgements in the endnotes to the many, many people who helped make this story possible; I am so grateful for you all.

I added the underage warning because the first few chapters involve Sherlock's time at boarding school in 1943, but the one underage sex scene is, in my opinion, unlikely to be triggering or offensive to most folks. At various times the story engages with racism, homophobia, antisemitism and sexism, although I do my utmost to be thoughtful and sensitive about all of the above.
See the end of the work for more notes.
We look at alien grace,

unfettered
by any determined form,
and we say: balloon, flower,

heart, condom, opera,
lampshade, parasol, ballet.
Hear how the mouth,

so full
of longing for the world,
changes its shape?

—Mark Doty, “Difference”
Prologue: 1955
Lot’s Road, Chelsea, London

Sherlock started counting when they turned the corner. ‘One,’ she said under her breath, ‘two,’ and when she reached ten she tightened her one-armed grip around Johnnie’s waist, tensed her thighs on the bike’s rear seat, and twisted to look behind her. Scanned the rushing dark of the night, the spaces between the retreating street lamps.

Their pursuers had shut off their headlamps: she’d caught onto that fifteen miles back. Their brake lights, though: no time to disable them, not with this fog and the way Johnnie was laying on the throttle. Sherlock, when she’d realised about the headlamps, had shouted to keep to a twisting route, and Johnnie had nodded impatiently, as if cornering were the first lesson she’d been taught in remedial motorbike evasion training. They’d turned a sharp curve by the old gas works, around the edge of an open lot about a half a mile back, and—yes, there it was. A low haze of red as the car’s driver tapped his brakes before taking the turn. ‘Damn,’ muttered Sherlock, turning forward again as Johnnie downshifted to take another corner.

It was June. Stubborn London had been decked out in light summer cottons for weeks. Even so, the wet wind whipped like knives around Sherlock’s throat and her face. Lot’s Road was oil-slick, and
thick with fog, and the sound of the bike’s engine echoed loud off the stone buildings close on either side. Johnnie’s body was coiled under Sherlock’s hands, tight with concentration as she leaned into the turn and rolled the throttle back on.

Sherlock snugged her hips closer to Johnnie’s, hands in Johnnie’s jacket pockets. She buried her face in the short hair next to Johnnie’s ear—fluttering straw; clammy, familiar skin—and yelled above the sound of the engine:

‘We haven’t lost them. About a mile back and gaining, but slowly.’

Johnnie’s eyes stayed straight ahead, trained on the road as far as she could see—which even Sherlock realised could hardly be far enough, not at any speed. The fog was proving their undoing. It should have been easy to outrun or outmaneuver a car, but even Johnnie Watson couldn’t lay into a road properly when it was both wet and invisible.

For a count of seconds it was just the roar of the bike in the narrow space, and then the shuffle of Johnnie’s leg against Sherlock’s inner thigh, moving again to downshift. Johnnie turned her head as she took the turn, and as she leaned into it she yelled back:

‘Get me to a construction site. Someplace with an open pit foundation.’

London maps unfurled, one over the next inside Sherlock’s head. King’s Road was a straight-away, and Johnnie cursed under her breath as she laid on more throttle. Sherlock wondered if it were a threat or a prayer. Construction sites, Sherlock thought. Housing projects, council flats. They were everywhere; she was always remarking them; London housing capacity still hadn’t recovered completely from the Blitz. But most were restoration projects—and Johnnie had said new construction, an open pit foundation. Sherlock’s brain sorted: adrenaline-fed, a precision instrument. There was one in Brompton; another near the Chelsea Embankment.

She could feel in the tense line of Johnnie’s shoulders that they couldn’t keep this up. Her mind flew over streets. Turns, they had to keep turning so that Sherlock could keep an eye on the brake-lights. One-way streets; alleys; detours; anything the bike could do faster than a car could; anything to buy Johnnie — buy them both—a bit more time. Routes; alternates; she would—

‘Sherlock!’ Johnnie yelled back without turning her head. ‘Construction site; tell me!’

Chelsea then; no more time to think. ’Turn left!’ Sherlock shouted into Johnnie’s ear, and the bike swung around almost instantly to take the tight corner. Sherlock could feel the clenching of Johnnie’s abdominal muscles; she pressed her palms against them, tight, warm, inside Johnnie’s jacket pockets. ‘There’s one near the Embankment. They’re still excavating the foundation. Turn right, now.’

Johnnie swung the bike right, cutting across lanes in the vacant intersection. The buildings here were too close to catch a glimpse of the car’s brake lights behind them. Warehouses and shipping centres; occasional flickering neon in the dim windows of pubs.

In the rush of wet air and adrenaline Sherlock reminded herself to breathe. ‘Another right at the one-way,’ she yelled.

It was one-way going the wrong direction. ‘Jesus,’ Johnnie said, but she didn’t hesitate: only slowed infinitesimally and aimed the bike into the loading and pedestrian area, eyes riveted ahead of her.

‘Left at the next throughway,’ yelled Sherlock, ‘and it’ll be a mile up ahead.’ She felt Johnnie’s exhale as they swung back into a proper two-lane road; the engine growled between their legs. Sherlock turned again in her seat, and watched for twenty seconds without spotting the brake lights.
Then the site was to their left. Johnnie slowed. Fenced-off perimeter, but there was no chain at the entrance gate. Through the fog and the dark Sherlock could just make out the furled, ghostly necks of sleeping earth-movers. On the near side, close to the gate, was a sharp drop-off. Beyond it, darkness and air.

Johnnie turned the bike into an alley across the street from the gate, and cut the engine. Immediately she was kicking down the stand and swinging around on the seat, the teeth of metal zips catching on Sherlock’s wrists as her hands were ripped free of Johnnie’s pockets.

‘Give me your coat,’ Johnnie said, low and urgent. Sherlock stared. She clutched her black men’s coat tighter around her shoulders.

‘What are you doing?’ Sherlock whispered. She hadn’t felt frightened, not during any of it, but she was scared now. It was a low whine in her ribcage, a metal taste in her mouth.

‘Listen,’ said Johnnie, ‘You know all those times you said you didn’t have time to explain something?’ Sherlock nodded, resisted the urge to edge closer. ‘I definitely don’t have time to explain this,’ said Johnnie. ‘Give me your coat.’

Sherlock knew she was being irrational, and she hated it. But she couldn’t make herself take off her coat. ‘What are you doing?’ she said again, and then: ‘I won’t be left out of the plans. You’ll probably make an error in judgment.’ There. That sounded like something Sherlock Holmes would say.

Johnnie cursed, and punched the seat. ‘Sherlock, this is not an error in judgment. If those lunatics,’ she pointed back out the alley, ‘catch us up they are not going to take us in for a civil fucking q-and-a, all right? They are gaining on us in town and we’re not going to make it out of city limits before they close the gap, and I am under no bloody circumstances letting them at either of us. Now give me your fucking coat, Sherlock Holmes.’

Sherlock felt her eyes widen and her head shake. Her brain was shooting off sparking, coppery flares of panic, and she couldn’t see past them. A voice inside her head was telling her to strip off the coat, but her fingers were clamped tight to the lapels.

Johnnie barreled forward, grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her off the back of the bike. Sherlock’s brain was so fear-flooded that it didn’t catch up until Johnnie had pushed her up against the wall of the alley, pinned by her shoulders. Her breath knocked out of her lungs by the impact of stone against her back, but breath—she couldn’t care for breath when Johnnie was kissing her. Hard. Rough lips moving on hers.

Johnnie’s tongue was fierce in Sherlock’s mouth, angry, and Sherlock thought that ought to have made her more frightened, not less. But somehow, flattened against the wet wall by Johnnie’s two hands and Johnnie’s mouth, the panic eased. She curled her tongue around Johnnie’s, wound them together, licked at Johnnie’s cold lips, at her teeth as they bit at Sherlock. Their skins both wet with sweat and dirty fog, and everything too cold to taste, but Sherlock was tasting. Straining forward. Low, pleading sounds into Johnnie’s mouth. Please, she thought, more. Please don’t leave me.

Johnnie pulled back from the kiss, panting. She took one hand off Sherlock’s shoulder; tentative for a second, but Sherlock stayed pressed against the wall. Johnnie moved the hand to Sherlock’s waist and pulled her own body close against Sherlock, nuzzling her face into Sherlock’s neck and speaking into her wet hair.
‘Remember when we, what we—’ she swallowed. Sherlock shivered. ‘Remember you kept telling me I could trust you, I had to trust you?’ Johnnie asked. There was a long moment before Sherlock nodded. She snaked her arms around Johnnie’s shoulders, and her back.

‘Well,’ said Johnnie, and swallowed again. A wet, breakable little sound. ‘Now I need you to trust me.’

No, said a rebellious spark in Sherlock’s gut. Not like this. But she knew it had lost out. Her arms tightened impossibly around Johnnie for two—three seconds, thinking scarred - golden - three freckles on her left elbow - never let go. Then she forced herself to let go.

Johnnie stepped back into the alley and held out her hands, and Sherlock slowly unbuttoned her overcoat, slipped it off her shoulders, and held it out. She couldn’t feel the cold, but she was shaking.

Johnnie looked about to collapse from relief as she grabbed the coat. She tore off her own leather jacket, wadding it into the body of the coat and tying the coat’s arms around her shoulders. She threw her leg over the seat and restarted the engine, pulled in the clutch and straddle-walked the bike around so it pointed out of the alley, headlamps still off and well back from the street.

There was no traffic. The fog muffled all sounds, and the whole scene was dimly back-lit from across the river, by the hulking floodlights of Battersea Station. ‘Any time now,’ Johnnie muttered. A second later Sherlock heard it, then saw it: a black car with darkened lights, creeping past on the street ahead.

‘Perfect,’ muttered Johnnie. She flicked on the headlamp at the same moment Sherlock said, ‘Wait here and they might not—’ but Johnnie held up her hand, silhouetted against the swirling fog in the headlamp glare.

‘Wait til you know they’ve gone, Sherlock,’ she said. ‘I’m not doing this for nothing.’

And then, before Sherlock could react, Johnnie had rolled the throttle on hard. The bike roared across the empty street. There was a screech of brakes from the direction of the blacked-out car. Sherlock saw Johnnie lift herself off the seat and brace, knees bent, as the bike hit the unchained gate and the entrance burst open.

Then the fog closed in around motorcycle and rider, but Sherlock could still hear the brake squeal, could still see the sickening jerk and arc of the headlamp as the bike spun lengthwise, wheel over wheel into the void. She stood paralysed and it washed over her: a shattering crunching crash; a rush of hot sound, and the yellow-orange flicker of flames.
PART 1

Chapter 1: 1943
Castle Howard, North Yorkshire
Wartime location of Queen Margaret’s School for Girls

Headmistress Joyce Brown often thought that there were three kinds of girls at Queen Margaret’s: the little mothers; the tomboys; and Sherlock Holmes. In the foyer to her makeshift office, on a Thursday afternoon in early April, sat one unhappy example of each type.

Joyce shuffled the papers on her desk. She pushed back a pile of books. She was putting off calling them in.

The office, as usual, was in disarray. Even now, three years after their evacuation from Scarborough to these palatial yet temporary grounds in the Yorkshire countryside, the flotsam of school administration still failed to conform to that halcyon ideal of ‘a place for everything, and everything in its place’. Joyce looked around at the mess, inflated her cheeks, and let out a robust sigh. Something, she reflected for the hundredth time, ought to be done.

The records and reference books weren’t the only things out of place, after all. The accommodations remained haphazard at best, and the very idea of enforcing standards of uniform dress had been long
abandoned. Girls from St. Aiden’s and Pitlochry Houses were jumbled together in the same wing. Neither Duncan nor Garry Houses were left with enough players to make up a side of rounders. Boxes of records lined the corridors, and the filing solutions that had been devised, filling to overflowing the bookcases and armoires of Howard Castle, lacked any systematic approach. One might be in a third-floor boudoir going through a disciplinary record from 1938, and weeks later discover the file for the student’s 1939 roommate secreted in a ground-floor parlour on the other end of the building.

Joyce’s head throbbed. Had such a state of affairs really been allowed to continue for three years? She hefted herself to her feet and stood back from the desk, her fingers digging into the ache in her lower back.

And yet (so ran Joyce’s train of thought, around and around) who knew how long this dreadful war would continue? One shouldn’t like to exert all the energy of organisation unnecessarily. She eyed the teetering stacks of books and paperwork, balanced on the cushions of the sheeted Georgian settee and piled around the base of the dusty curio cabinet. With her luck, she thought, she would have just put the finishing touches on a brilliant organisational scheme, when the telegram would arrive announcing peace.

She scowled, then shook her head, mildly shocked at her own thoughts. She would, of course, be thrilled with such a scenario, she reminded herself. Peace! The mess of the resulting migration back to civilisation, much as it made her head ache to think of it, would be a small price to pay.

Nonetheless, the office remained disordered.

Joyce sighed again, stood, and opened the door onto the space she called the ‘foyer’—actually a former servant’s hallway abutting the sitting-room-cum-office, with a few chairs snugged up against the facing wall. She stood and surveyed the girls before her, as three sets of reluctant eyes rose to meet hers.

Mary Little, lower sixth form, in a pink-and-cream cardigan with her auburn hair carefully pinned into a Victory Roll, had returned from Christmas break and stopped turning in her papers. Joyce heard staff rumours about a boy met at the big Christmas dance, and a ring Mary sometimes forgot to take off before coming to lectures. All well enough, thought Joyce grimly, if the future of young men these days weren’t so tenuous. Best that Mary, dim and benevolent though she might be, have something to fall back on. Even if she did have a fiancé in the wings.

In the next chair Victoria Trevor, hockey captain and upper sixth-form, with all the familiar attitude problems of the nearly graduated, slouched down in her polo shirt and knee-socks, and shuffled her feet in their black cleats. Wanted to make a point that she’d been dragged off the field, apparently. But she must be dragged, thought Joyce. She’d been caught keeping dogs in the hollow next to her dormitory. Feeding them with kitchen scraps, and it simply could not be allowed to continue, not when rations were so scarce. Had a staff member discovered her, perhaps they could have made some allowance, but…no. It had been another student, and by this time the whole school would have heard.

Joyce turned her gaze to the final chair in her cobbled-together waiting room: a spindly Queen Anne with an even spindlier student perched on the edge of it, clutching a thick book on—Joyce squinted—medicinal plants. Best, Joyce thought, to tackle the prickliest problem first. ‘Miss Holmes,’ she said, and held the door open. The gawky fifth-former slouched through, one stocking ripped beneath her shapeless brown dress, her face partially obscured by a long tangle of black curls.

Sherlock Holmes, if truth be told, made her headmistress a bit nervous—and, consequently, a bit tetchy. Joyce wasn’t proud of it, but there you were. It was only that, in her nearly three decades in
upper administration, she liked to think she had encountered most student ‘types,’ and could rise to
the challenges they presented. Certainly, she had met with bright students before, even exceedingly
bright; she had dealt handily with a spate of combative attitudes and behaviour problems; and had
quashed the sense of entitlement in many a daughter of a moneyed family. She really felt she ought
to be equal to any student who crossed her threshold.

But it was the air Sherlock gave off. The sense that Sherlock Holmes — with no life experience at
all, and none of what the staff called ‘people sense’—knew things about Joyce that earned the girl’s
contempt—or, occasionally, her amusement.

Joyce was at a loss to think what such things might be. Nevertheless, Sherlock’s narrowed grey eyes
with their translucent lids were so unnerving that she found herself searching her memories for
anything incriminating she might have forgotten. Such self-possession in a fifteen-year-old: it wasn’t
natural. And anyone who had read Sherlock’s file knew that the girl had the courage of her
convictions; she’d been chucked out of nearly every other reputable boarding school in the country
for insubordination and gross property damage, and no reputable private tutor would come near her.

Be that as it may, thought Joyce, she had a responsibility to the girl. She took her seat, heavily, and
looked back across the desk. Sherlock had sat down without asking permission, and was now staring
out from behind her black fringe while her fingers picked absently at the crooked seam of her skirt.

‘Professor Martin would help you, if you asked him,’ Sherlock said, in a bored voice, and without
waiting for Joyce to open the conversation.

Joyce put on her thin-lipped, chin-up mask of disapproval. ‘Students wait to speak until they are
spoken to,’ she rapped out. Sherlock looked unimpressed.

‘What do you have to say?’ Joyce demanded.

‘Yes, Professor,’ said Sherlock, with no outward sign of boredom—no eye-roll, no sigh, that would
be too obvious. She managed to communicate them nonetheless. And she kept staring at Joyce until
Joyce thought back to what Sherlock had said: Alfie Martin? Help with what? Joyce didn’t
understand, but she wouldn’t be distracted, either.

‘I hear you’ve been messing about with chemicals again,’ she said instead. ‘Despite what we
discussed.’

Sherlock snorted. ‘If there were any kind of decent chemistry curriculum at this school—’ she began,
but Joyce put up a hand. She had a hard-won concession to offer, though no great hopes of its
success.

‘The classes on offer at Queen Margaret’s are irrelevant to the point at issue, Miss Holmes’, she said,
in her sniffiest voice. Sherlock looked mutinous. Joyce waited a moment before continuing.
‘However’, she said, ‘Professor Hill has agreed to allow you into her upper sixth-form class,
provided—’ she waved her hand to silence Sherlock’s attempt at speech—‘you are on your best
behaviour.’ She sat back in her chair and waited.

Sherlock gaped, obviously horrified. ‘That’s applied chemistry,’ she said. Joyce was silent. ‘For use
in the home,’ Sherlock pressed.

Joyce sighed. ‘I am aware of the class description,’ she said.

‘I don’t know why it’s even offered,’ said Sherlock, with a sneer. ‘What, are you training us up to go
into service, or—’ but Joyce interrupted her, quiet but stony.
‘Not all the students at this school have had your advantages, Miss Holmes,’ she rapped out. She held Sherlock’s gaze in silence. Eventually the grey eyes wavered and flicked down to Sherlock’s lap before turning back to meet Joyce’s, hardened up again if a little wild.

‘Well I don’t want to hand in essays on—on removing wine stains from lace table runners, or—or how to make mayonnaise from egg emulsion,’ Sherlock spluttered, an actual note of panic in her voice. Her gesticulating hands convulsed, pale spiders, nearly catching in her curls. ‘I want to learn the theory of it. I want to balance equations, and run real experiments—ones meant to discover things—ones whose results I haven’t already eaten in my—in my pudding course at supper.’

Joyce stifled an ill-timed chuckle. She always forgot this about Sherlock: that despite the girl’s hostility she could occasionally be funny. Almost charming, if one caught her in the right mood. However, it wasn’t Joyce’s place to be amused just now.

‘Unfortunately for you, Miss Holmes,’ she said, ‘you have been expelled from the limited number of schools in England which offer such courses to young women.’ Sherlock started to protest, looking livid, but Joyce cut back in. ‘And in any case, even boys’ schools don’t teach science courses featuring experiments with unknown results; only ones that demonstrate accepted principles. Even university courses seldom do that. One must master the basics before one can progress.’

Sherlock’s chin went up. Joyce saw with some surprise that the girl’s lip was trembling. ‘I have mastered the basics,’ she said, a touch too loud.

This claim was, sadly, more than true.

The problem was, that in the privacy of her own mind Joyce couldn’t help building castles in the sky—or rather, gleaming laboratories in the sky. State-of-the-art facilities she could extend as if on a platter; a perfect offering to girls like Sherlock. A proof of her faith in them. For Joyce, imperfect though she knew she was, believed in the minds of her girls. Almost painful it was at times, how much she believed in them. In her more grandiose moments, she dreamt of the girls of Queen Margaret’s going on to great things. First woman in a full Oxford professorship. First woman heart surgeon. First (when Joyce had had a few glasses of claret) woman prime minister.

And she would intervene for them, she really would. But after all, only so much was possible—and these, the lean years of war. She had argued bitterly, bitterly with the Board of Governors over this very issue, and had come out much the worse. Old Basil Smythe had made it quite plain, over the course of an agonising half-hour, that such chemistry and physics curricula only masculinised the girls. Joyce had been treated to a bravura performance of the hoary old rants: the next generation of wives and mothers and so on; encouraging dangerous tendencies et cetera; the ghastly spectacle to male eyes of an intellectualised woman and so forth; while all the time Harold Townsend-Farquhar had nodded along in such sententious agreement that Joyce had dug her nails into her palms to prevent herself causing a scene. She knew, when she saw one, a battle whose time had not yet come. Besides, she had thought (a tad hysterically), Townsend-Farquhar would probably publish a highly-coloured account of any histrionics in the next day’s Chronicle. So she had held her peace.

And now Joyce took in Sherlock’s wire-taut defiance, the raised yet trembling chin, and wondered if this truly was her calling: to deliver such girls as Sherlock Holmes into the bosom of matrimony. She sighed. She had never particularly yearned to deliver Joyce Brown into it, either.

‘Miss Holmes,’ she began, in a firm but, she hoped, placating tone, ‘I understand your frustration, but we simply can’t have unsupervised chemical reactions going on in the school. Particularly not with the blackout regulations, and the entire south-east wing already destroyed by fire. You must understand this.’
Sherlock sniffed. Her chin stayed up, but there was a flatness about her voice as she said, ‘My experiments wouldn’t start a fire. I’m not some—some tipsy golden-boy down from Eton, playing about with matches.’

Joyce was momentarily derailed. ‘The fire was an accident,’ she said, startled. ‘Set by—by an undergardener’s capsized lantern.’

Sherlock actually did roll her eyes this time, and finally dropped her chin. ‘So they say,’ she said, with a little shrug of her shoulders.

There was a brief silence. Joyce spent it considering Sherlock, who was now scuffing her already-worn saddle shoes against the legs of her chair. The south-east wing had burned in 1940, shortly after Queen Margaret’s had taken possession, and was now strictly out-of-bounds for all students.

Not that Joyce was a fool, obviously. Even the staff had been known to sneak off there for one thing and another, not all of it as innocent as Harriet McAllister’s photography hobby. She narrowed her eyes.

‘Do you have any specific knowledge you’d like to share, Miss Holmes?’ she asked.

She could actually see Sherlock grinding her teeth as she thought her way around the question. ‘No,’ she said eventually, scowling at the carpet.

Joyce had scarcely ever heard a clearer ‘yes’ than Sherlock’s ‘no,’ but at this point there wasn’t much to be done. The gardener in question had been sacked years ago, and it didn’t do to step on the toes of the Howard family when they were being, by and large, so accommodating. Joyce nodded and rapped her pencil against the desk.

‘In that case,’ she said, ‘listen to me, Miss Holmes. You are fifteen years old. Your exploits have caused property damage, both here and at your previous schools. I understand that you wish to expand your practical chemical knowledge, and it’s an instinct I applaud, but for the safety of the house and the other students I must take a firm line. No more chemical experiments. Do you understand me?’

Sherlock looked ready to tear into something with her teeth. She said, ‘It’s not as though I’ve anything else to do in this—bloody place.’

There was a small but noticeable pause before Sherlock spat out that ‘bloody.’ It didn’t yet sit naturally on her lips; she was deliberately playing the provocateur. Perhaps to distract from the actual content of her statement. A girl like Sherlock: how ought she to occupy her time? A fifth-former who, despite her expulsion from numerous other schools, had already exhausted most of Queen Margaret’s academic offerings—not an athlete, and decidedly not social. Hardly a wonder she found herself at loose ends.

Joyce sighed again, and looked at her watch. Four o’clock already, and still Mary and Victoria to see to.

‘Look,’ she said to Sherlock, and the girl glanced up. ‘I will have a few words with Professor Hill. It’s possible that if you are very accommodating, and cease immediately stealing supplies from her laboratory—of which I officially have no knowledge, so don’t bother to deny it—she will agree to oversee some advanced studies with you on an individual basis.’ A cautious smile teased at Sherlock’s mouth.

‘Do you think you can promise those things?’ asked Joyce, stern. Sherlock nodded, the smile
widening.

‘No more unauthorised experiments? No more stealing?’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock. ‘I mean no. None.’

‘No more straying into the burned wing?’ pressed Joyce. Sherlock shook her head, then added: ‘No, Professor.’

Joyce peered hard at Sherlock. ‘I wish to be understood, Miss Holmes. We are doing our best to accommodate you, but you must meet us halfway. Another major breach of the school rules and I shall have no choice but to expel you. Do you understand?’

Sherlock nodded, looking earnest. ‘Yes, Professor,’ she said.

Joyce gave a brusque nod. ‘In that case,’ she said, ‘you are free to go. Please tell Miss Trevor that I will see her now.’

Sherlock unfolded herself awkwardly from the chair, and brushed her mat of curls back from her face. She was almost to the door when Joyce remembered, and the question left her lips before she could think twice.

‘Miss Holmes,’ she said. ‘With what would Professor Martin help me?’

Sherlock turned. She seemed on the verge of smiling again, but now it was in that peculiar, haughty way of hers. ‘With the office, of course,’ she said, gesturing around at the mess. ‘With all the records.’

Joyce took her eyes off Sherlock to look around herself in surprise, but she heard Sherlock’s derisive snort.

‘You were pushing back the piles of papers just before I came in,’ the girl pointed out, waving a careless hand. ‘It’s obvious from the dust. The mess is preying on you, and it’s only getting worse. Professor Martin amuses himself on the weekends by re-cataloguing his rodent skeletons. Boxes of paper probably aren’t as interesting, but he’s done the skeletons three times already this term. I’d welcome a diversion, if I were him. And he always sits as near you as he can, at the staff table.’

Joyce was struck momentarily dumb. She thought of arguing that Alfie Martin most certainly did not sit near her at the staff table, but such a response was hardly suitable. After all, perhaps he did. She would have to take note in future. She shook herself slightly, drew herself up. ‘Thank you, Miss Holmes,’ she said. ‘You may go.’

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Sherlock Holmes crouched around the corner from Professor Brown’s office, her heart beating in her chest, her nails digging into the fronts of her thighs. Vicky Trevor, she thought. In the room next door. Being scolded by Professor Brown about—Sherlock leaned her ear closer to the office’s side door—something to do with kitchen scraps. Sherlock felt a drop of sweat make its way down her neck and settle in the divot of her clavicle. Vicky Trevor.

Pashes were common business at QM’s. Most of the girls—the normal girls, thought Sherlock—paraded their infatuations freely, egged on by their friends. They trailed after the older, more glamorous objects of their affection, clutching their little gifts and offering up their little favours. They glowed while they were petted by the older girls; hugged by them; drawn close by them. Giggled as the older girls whispered in their ears.
Sometimes that’s all it was, and sometimes—well. A few months before, when term had been about to let out for the Christmas holiday, Sherlock had stumbled into a storage cupboard and found Rosie Bartlett, skirt hiked up, sat back on the rickety countertop with Justine Digby standing between her legs. Rosie had had a hand up Justine’s white cashmere pullover and Justine’s tongue down her throat, and she kept on making helpless little whimpering sounds, even a second after Sherlock had crashed in and Justine had pulled away. Possibly after Sherlock had stumbled back out, too.

And four months later, Sherlock thought, scowling, Rosie was still fawning on Justine. Rosie obviously didn’t care who knew it; she trotted after Justine like nothing else came naturally. But Sherlock simply couldn’t make herself. It wouldn’t come to her, those simpering smiles and pleasant little offerings, though they seemed the easiest things in the world. The injustice of the situation rankled.

For it had never happened before, that Sherlock Holmes should want to do a thing and yet persistently fail.

It was more difficult, after all, without an audience of friends; and through a combination of thievery, contempt, and clever deductions about their home lives, Sherlock had managed to alienate most of the QM’s girls inside of a week. They had then settled into the mutual animosity, the uneasy exchange of barbs for bullying, that had been Sherlock’s accustomed relation to her classmates at all of her many boarding schools. And that was fine, she told herself. She was fine. Alone had always served Sherlock well. Her natural state, she thought, must be watching, and keeping out of sight. Learning, and keeping it to herself. Most of her fellow students were idiots, anyway.

And that was exactly the problem. Because she’d been standing in the library thinking just that—‘Idiots, all of them, how can they be so dull?’—chasing down a detail in a book on the nervous systems of rats, when she’d heard her precise thoughts mirrored back to her from behind the bookshelves.

‘I can’t bloody talk to them,’ a girl’s voice said, footsteps sounding in the corridor. ‘Brats and beaux and table runners, I could die they’re all so boring.’

Sherlock’s heart had clenched in her chest.

The pair of girls had moved at a brisk walk, their conversation audible only briefly. The other one had presumably given her friend a look, because the same speaker said, laughter in her voice, ‘What? It’s only true,’ and her friend had snorted and said, ‘Vicky. Lord, you’re impossible, what about an —’ and then they were fading away, out of earshot. Sherlock had stood behind the set of shelves, fingers frozen and trembling over a diagram of rodent skeletons.

And now Sherlock kept thinking about Vicky Trevor.

Vicky who was apparently just as bored by her fellow students as Sherlock was. And what would Vicky prefer to talk about, Sherlock wondered, if not the endless round of schoolgirl domesticity? There were a dizzying number of possibilities; the key would be choosing correctly. Perhaps the experiment with using St. John’s Wort to increase photosensitivity in dormice? Or Sherlock’s attempts, secreted in the old wine cellar, to distill cyanide from leaves of the wild Cherry Laurel? Vicky looked and smelled, constantly, of the out-of-doors; perhaps she knew something about the growth habits of chemically interesting plants. Or—Sherlock leaned closer to the door, behind which Professor Brown was asking Vicky something about dogs—perhaps they could discuss the two labradors, run down by a lorry last June, whose decomposition Sherlock chronicled from start to finish.

What would it be like, then, to talk with another person about the really interesting things? Sherlock
felt a bit giddy. She pressed the side of her head against the crack between the jamb and the office’s side door, reaching for strains of conversation just at the moment when doing so became unnecessary.

‘You’re going to *drown* them?’ shrieked Vicky’s voice in Sherlock’s ear, and Sherlock’s head snapped back. Professor Brown’s voice was a low murmur; Vicky’s wail cut back in. ‘I’ve only been taking them bits and bobs, left over when everyone’s finished their supper,’ she moaned. ‘You can’t, they’re only *babies*.’

Sherlock revised her mental image of a Vicky enthralled by the chronicle of the decaying labradors. She seemed, on the contrary, to have a soft spot for the things. Pity, Sherlock thought. The fact of the two killed together had been excellent good luck, from a perspective of experimental controls.

Still, Vicky’s seeming extreme attachment to these endangered puppies—Sherlock could hear her through the door, sniffing and hiccuping as Professor Brown said something about self-sufficiency and the school pig trough—presented some interesting possibilities. Sherlock thought briefly about the promises she’d just made; then of the conversations she’d imagined.

Chair legs scraped on the stone floor of Professor Brown’s study as Vicky got up to leave, and Sherlock pictured her. Vicky with her tarnished straw bob, perpetually windblown, flopping in her sea-glass eyes. Vicky with her dry skin and her cracked lips. Vicky in hockey clothes; solid, sand-dark calves pounding down the pitch. Vicky, noisy and rough, banging into their upper-sixth-form biology class, and Sherlock had always found that annoying but now it seemed somehow a blast of cold air on hot skin. Vicky beating her cleats against the delicate legs of a Queen Anne chair, sitting across from Sherlock and not giving her a second glance.

Vicky Trevor was on the other side of that door, blowing her nose wetly into Professor Brown’s handkerchief, and Sherlock would save Vicky’s dogs.

Chapter End Notes

1. Amazed gratitude to Ninette Aubart for the illustrations of Vicky and Sherlock. Good grief, they’re beautiful.
2. Queen Margaret’s School is and was a real, prestigious girls’ boarding school. In the 1940s its “real” location was in Scarborough, but it was relocated to Castle Howard (which, incidentally, was the location of the filming for the BBC version of *Brideshead Revisited*) at the beginning of WWII. Headmistress Joyce Brown really did serve at the helm from 1938 to 1960, although everything else about her in this chapter is invented from whole cloth. All other characters in this chapter are fictional.
3. Information about the applied nature of the sciences in girls’ boarding schools at this time is from Rebecca Jennings’s *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A lesbian history of post-war Britain*, which incidentally is a great read.
4. The real first woman in a full professorship at Oxford was Agnes Headlam-Morley, who was appointed Montague Burton Professor of International Relations in October 1948. The first woman to perform open-heart surgery was American Nina Starr Braunwald, who did the first successful human heart valve replacement in 1960 (she also designed and fabricated the valve). The first female
British Prime Minister, elected in 1979, was, of course, Margaret Thatcher.

5. The southeast wing of Howard Castle really did burn in 1940, though all speculation about the cause is strictly fictional. It was open to the sky for two decades, before being rebuilt in 1960-61.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1943

Castle Howard, North Yorkshire
Wartime location of Queen Margaret’s School for Girls

‘Trevor!’ Sherlock called. Vicky was hunched over, slouching away from the headmistress’s office, her hair falling in her eyes. She kept walking.

‘Trevor!’ Sherlock called again, breaking into a little run. Vicky turned with a huff, and Sherlock saw at once that hers was one of those faces which recovered slowly from an all-out cry. Eyes puffy and red; normally honeyed complexion splotched dark. Sherlock had noticed that some children in the village recovered their looks more quickly than others, after being talked down from temper tantrums.

Vicky stood, embarrassed but defiant. Sherlock swallowed the sharp certainty of making a bad first impression. She wished for a moment she’d waited until Vicky was recovered. Then again, if Professor Brown was sending one of the groundskeepers after Vicky’s dogs, there was very little time.

‘Trevor,’ she said again, drawing level with Vicky, just as Vicky said ‘Right, yeah, and who are you?’

‘Sherlock Holmes,’ said Sherlock, feeling she should put out her hand, and clutching her books to her chest instead. ‘I was in with Professor Brown just before you.’

‘Oh yeah?’ said Vicky. She scuffed her left toe against the floor, looking down. ‘Old battle axe.’
‘Yes, and I, er,’ said Sherlock. ‘I overheard a bit of what you said in there.’

‘Yeah?’ said Vicky again, narrowing her eyes and raising her chin. ‘How’d you happen to do that, Holmes?’

This, thought Sherlock, was going more painfully than anticipated. She could feel her face getting hot. ‘Look,’ she said, ‘I was just walking by, all right, on my way back to my rooms. And I, er, I heard something about—about drowning some dogs.’

Vicky’s mouth screwed itself into a vicious twist, and her cleat kicked out. ‘Yeah,’ she said again. ‘That’s what Brown said. Bloody—virago.’

‘Er,’ said Sherlock. ‘Yes. I think I may be able to help you with that.’ Vicky looked blankly at her, but Sherlock, as she reminded herself now, was used to swimming upstream. ‘Look, we need to hurry, all right?’ she said, and turned about abruptly, motioning with her head for Vicky to come along. When she saw that Vicky was following, she sped up further, pausing only to heave open the heavy back door and lead Vicky through the monumental Georgian pillars and out through the gardens, toward the lake.

The shortest path, if you knew the way, was through the hedge labyrinth, but Sherlock glanced at Vicky and knew the time savings wouldn’t be worth the minutes it would take to convince her. So she let herself be pulled by the older girl around the edge of the maze, and back toward the Pitlochrie House lodgings in the west wing.

‘They’re, uh, back at your dormitory then?’ Sherlock panted, close to jogging as she tried to keep up with Vicky—who was, unsurprisingly, not winded in the least.

‘Yeah,’ said Vicky. Sherlock was beginning to suspect her hopes of finding a brilliant conversationalist in Vicky Trevor may have been misplaced.

‘Listen,’ said Vicky, after a time, ‘Why’re you doing this? You what—you really like dogs?’

‘Er. Something like that,’ Sherlock gasped, thinking of the dead labradors and how Vicky’s voice had broken when she’d said drowned. ‘Listen, have you, er, have you ever been in the burnt wing?’

Vicky eyed her sideways, and Sherlock rolled her eyes. Most QM’s students had snuck in at least once, if only because it was out-of-bounds. But it didn’t do to brag about it, especially if an unknown someone was asking directly. Betty Donnelly had made that mistake, Sherlock remembered, and been tricked into a month of after-class detentions.

‘I might’ve done,’ said Vicky, eventually, after sizing Sherlock up. ‘But it’s not as if—I don’t know it well, if that’s what you mean.’

‘Well,’ said Sherlock, with a certain amount of satisfaction. ‘I do.’

***

It wasn’t a lie. Sherlock knew the burnt wing of Howard Castle very well indeed.

She regretted bitterly, in fact, that she hadn’t been sacked from Hill Brow School as a second-form rather than a fourth. That first, crucial spring after the rooms had burned would have made a fascinating study. As it was, Sherlock had arrived at QM’s a good year and a half after fire had left the walls of the wing charred, smoking, and open to the elements. Her observational baseline, then, had included some impressive colonies of black and slime moulds, which thrived among the fallen, blackened beams; a carpet of moss developing along the tops of the walls; starling-nests amongst the
roofbeams; dormice inside the furniture; and a few clumps of broad, ruffled *Coriolus* mushrooms gathered around one leg of a ruined chest of drawers. Sherlock spent her first weeks at QM’s collecting as many samples as she could, then holing up in a corner of the disused wine cellar with stolen laboratory equipment, running tests.

But the real treasures came with time. For eighteen months now Sherlock had tucked herself under fallen beams and huddled by partial walls, gathering her samples and taking notes. Watching. Blackbirds and ground squirrels had carried beech nuts from the forest behind the school; saplings had sprouted in the sooty mix of blown-in soil and nitrogen-rich sediment created by the fire. Sherlock had monitored the growth of the saplings out of the floors and the window-wells, and even from the split and sodden upholstery of the Queen Anne lounge chairs. Under them sprouted crops of bright-orange *amanita muscaria*: fly agaric toadstools, whose psychotropic fruits were promptly harvested and toted back to Sherlock’s makeshift laboratory for chemical comparison with forest-grown specimens. In a darker corner, under a fall of rotting wood in a clump of leaf debris, was a rarer find: *I. patouillardii*, deadly fibrecap, from whose stained pink tops Sherlock duly distilled the poisonous muscarine.

It wasn’t, she told herself, as if there were anybody she would actually poison. But somehow it was comforting to have the option.

If it hadn’t been for the allure of the burnt wing, Sherlock knew she would have got herself expelled from QM’s months ago. A year and a half was far and away the longest she’d lasted at any boarding school. And it wasn’t just the chemical and biological opportunities that drew her in: she had become a connoisseur of the wing’s human visitors, as well.

Which is to say—she rarely actually saw another person when she was lurking amongst the wreckage. But day-to-day observation of every minuscule change in the burnt rooms meant that she could hardly miss the signs of human activity there. For one thing, the soaked, soot-covered hardwood floors were almost better than damp soil for retaining the shape of footprints, and of anything else a visitor might set on the ground.

Which is how Sherlock knew that Professor McAllister used her free Tuesday afternoons, regular as clockwork, to come traipse from room to room with her camera and heavy tripod; but that she only ever ventured as far as the old Turquoise Drawing Room. And that Professors Hutchins and McCoy snuck off together after hours on fair nights, with his round-bottomed lantern and her stock of hand-rolled cigarettes, to one of the most devastated rooms on the far east side of the wing. Sherlock had at first assumed—the nighttime, the cigarettes, the relative youth of both professors—that these were sexual assignations. But based on the footprint patterns and the abandoned cigarette butts, she had reconsidered. McCoy usually perched on a half-burned wall while Hutchins paced in front of her, approaching only occasionally and not lingering for longer than a few moments. Friends, was Sherlock’s tentative conclusion: close friends, in need of a place for confidential talks. Sherlock assumed it was credible that close friends might need such a place. Never having had any, her data was lacking.

There were the students as well, of course, though their actions were generally less intriguing—not to mention less precisely deducible, since Sherlock had yet to compile, as she had done for the staff, a shoe-size index for the entire student body. Most common was after-hours heavy petting in the more protected of the rooms, the ones far from the other wings but which still retained beds and partial ceilings. Sherlock kept a desultory eye on the state of the bedclothes in these rooms, more to cultivate the habit than out of any true interest. Likewise the abandoned evidence of contraband—beer bottles and fag ends. Her favourite student-left traces were the trails of smaller, hurried footsteps, trails that barely breached the wing’s entrance before retreating in a rush of smudges: first-formers, venturing out-of-bounds on a dare.
In fact Sherlock Holmes, for a few months in 1943, may have been the world’s expert on the south-east wing of Howard Castle. So that now, having retrieved six writhing puppies and one long-suffering terrier bitch from the hollow near the upper-sixth-form Pitlochrie House dormitory, Sherlock couldn’t help noting the slight changes in her surroundings as she and Vicky carried the hamper between them into the far south end of the wing.

The wreckage here tended toward collapse. The outer stone walls still remained, at least to waist height, but inside them it was the area closest to a state of nature, and that least often visited by anyone besides Sherlock.

She motioned to Vicky with her head, and they set the hamper down. The puppies squirmed over one another, one of them flopping over the side of the hamper and snuffling half-blind along the floor. Sherlock mucked about for a minute in the next room over, and came back with a few long boards, formerly part of a bed, which were soon hefted over one corner of the exposed walls to form a kind of den for the animals. Vicky stood back to contemplate it. She nodded uncertainly, scuffing her cleat again against the blackened floor.

‘This is good, really good, I mean,’ she said at last, turning around to retrieve the basket with a bit of a stoop to her shoulders, ‘but Brown’ll be watching the kitchen scraps now.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Sherlock, absenty, watching Vicky’s fingers fidget nervously at the rattan weave of the hamper.

‘Well, I mean to say—what am I supposed to feed them?’ asked Vicky.

Sherlock shrugged, and shifted her eyes. ‘They’re ratlers, aren’t they?’ she said. ‘There’s plenty of mice and rats running about in here.’ Vicky swung the dogs into the den, looking unconvinced, and stepped back a few feet.

Sherlock pushed on the hamper with her toe, her own breath in her ears. ‘And, er,’ she said, ‘I suppose Brown won’t be watching my dinner. I could, you know, sneak some out to them.’

She felt this offer strayed dangerously close to fawning, so she knelt down by the basket to cover her embarrassment, and reached out to push back a branch.

Vicky was making a disbelieving noise. ‘You couldn’t. Not really.’

‘You were,’ Sherlock pointed out, but Vicky shook her head.

‘I was nicking the leftovers from everybody’s plates. We hardly get enough to eat as it—Holmes!’

For Sherlock’s wrist had strayed too close to the puppies, and the bitch had swung her head around and snapped her jaws into the flesh of Sherlock’s forearm. Sherlock squeaked and scrambled back, her hand clamped over her injured arm.

‘Hell!’ said Vicky, closing the distance between them and almost-touching Sherlock’s arm. ‘Are you all right? You’ve got to go to the nurse’s room, you—’

‘No,’ Sherlock was saying over her in a calm voice, peeling her sleeve back from the blood- and spit-wet bite, ‘I’m fine.’

Vicky laughed at that. ‘No you’re not,’ she said. ‘You’re bleeding all over, god, look at it all, you need—’

‘It’s fine,’ said Sherlock again, distracted now as she prodded at the wound. ‘I don’t want it covered
up by a bandage. There are things I want to see about it. Tests…’

There was a silence, in which Sherlock was too distracted by the dog bite to notice Vicky gaping. ‘There are—what you want to do?’ she said at last, and Sherlock looked up.

‘Tests,’ she said, secretly thrilled at this show of interest. ‘I’ve charted progress of similar-sized wounds caused by nail punctures and knife abrasions, but nothing from animal teeth, so naturally I—’

‘You’re mad,’ Vicky said, her voice a bit hysterical. ‘You cut yourself to see what happens?’

‘Of course not,’ said Sherlock, congratulating herself on her own patience. ‘I just make use of the opportunities that come along.’

Vicky still looked stubborn. ‘That’ll get infected,’ she said.

Sherlock rolled her eyes, but she was pleased again to be given such an opening. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘I’ll show you what I want to do. And you can watch me rinse it off and clean it up.’ And Vicky had little choice but to follow her back out of the burnt wing, and down into the wine cellar.

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Hours later, alone in her narrow bed by the window, with Annie snoring away in the cot across the room, Sherlock ran over and over her interactions with Vicky Trevor, sorting through them, cataloguing. She was keyed-up, buzzing from the unaccustomed interaction with another person, another QM’s girl. She felt full of all those things she didn’t know.

Vicky hadn’t revealed any hidden brilliance in conversation, which might have been disappointing. Then again, she hadn’t been disgusted with Sherlock over the removal of various fungi from the dogs’ room, and had seemed really a bit impressed with the makeshift laboratory in the wine cellar—especially after Sherlock had shrugged and told her she didn’t mind, Vicky could help herself to a bottle of the Bordeaux.

After that, Vicky had seemed happy to sit and watch, taking swigs from the bottle as Sherlock had disinfected the bite, and even asking the occasional question. What were those poultices, the red and the white? Was Sherlock sure what she was doing? Why was she taking measurements of the wound? Did she need Vicky’s help? Sherlock hadn’t strictly speaking, needed anything of the sort, so she was a bit surprised with herself for beckoning Vicky over, Vicky’s chapped fingers holding the calipers firm against Sherlock’s goose-fleshed arm as Sherlock jotted figures in a notebook.

Close-up Vicky’s skin had been splotchy, and there had been shiny blackheads all across her chin. Still, she had smelled sweet and dirty like the new-mown football pitch after a rain.

In her narrow bed by the window, Sherlock thought of Justine and Rosie, tangled in the cupboard before Christmas. She rolled over and gave a huge yawn, thinking about Rosie’s hands up Justine’s cashmere pullover, and then about the compressed curves of Vicky’s chest under her argyle sweater-vest, and the soft-looking fuzz on her golden calves.

***

Sherlock was proud of the fact that her motivation in refusing dog-bite treatment actually had been—primarily, at least—the opportunity for experimentation on the wound. There was, however, an unforeseen benefit, in the form of a guilt-stricken Vicky Trevor.

Vicky, it seemed, felt obligated to check up on the wound’s healing progress frequently over the next
two weeks, and Sherlock did nothing to discourage the impulse. She may, in fact, have altered the composition of the white poultice to be ever-so-slightly more acidic, which she may have already known would cause an angry rash. Vicky had been properly horrified. Afterward she had brought Sherlock a wafer from the Upper Sixth Form Tea—and a few days later, when Cecilia MacIntosh had teased Sherlock about the rash, Vicky had nearly punched her. Sherlock couldn’t remember ever being defended before.

Continued contact, then, had required little to no fawning on Sherlock’s part. Vicky was especially amenable since Sherlock, true to her word, had been saving aside her meat and cheese rations from dinner and supper, and slipping them to the newly-relocated dogs—which Sherlock scarcely minded. Forcing herself to swallow the grease and gristle of the third-rate meats had always been more of a trial than a boon, anyway.

Most evenings, then, as the chilly mists of April gave way to faltering May sunshine, found Sherlock and Vicky perched on the moss tops of the half-walls in the south-east wing, while the buff-coloured terrier pups rolled about on the floor and blinked open their gummy eyes.

Sherlock was beginning to admit to herself, in the privacy of her own mind, that Vicky Trevor was not, nor ever would be, a brilliant mind. She found herself surprisingly unfazed by this; Vicky was a girl of action, and Sherlock was becoming fonder all the time of watching her act. Whenever Vicky touched Sherlock—glancing touches in the wine cellar and the burnt wing, brushing fingers as Vicky handed her the gift of the tea wafer—somehow those parts of Vicky’s body which had come into contact with Sherlock’s, acquired an added interest in Sherlock’s eyes. Sherlock had taken to sitting across the aisle from Vicky in their shared Biology class, and watching Vicky’s fingers as she fidgeted with her pencil. The memory of the calipers would come back to her. ‘They touched me once,’ hovered around her unvoiced, and Sherlock would shiver.

So Vicky did have other points of interest. What was more disappointing than her lack of genius, is that she often seemed uninterested in the topics Sherlock raised—and Sherlock told herself that she was sure, at least, of her own brilliance. They had taken a few good walks around the grounds together, but Vicky had seemed keenest on discussing hockey and rounders. Sherlock found this discouraging. Vicky had yawned when Sherlock brought up the botanical curiosities of the beech forest, and had seemed frankly appalled at the barest hints about the photosensitivity experiment.

So Sherlock was surprised, one evening in early May, when she hit at last upon a topic that did interest Vicky Trevor.

‘Apparently,’ Sherlock was saying, lounging on the sooty floor in front of Vicky, ‘Professor Brown has talked to Professor Hill, and I’ll be starting private lessons with her next year, in chemistry.’ Vicky, sat on the wall with her heels kicking against the wall, grunted. ‘Non-applied chemistry,’ clarified Sherlock. Vicky grunted again, and Sherlock sighed. There was a silence, as Sherlock’s thoughts wandered and Vicky’s heels kicked.

‘It drove me mad, seeing Brown again and her being so—so nice to me,’ mused Sherlock, after a moment. ‘She asked me again about this place, and I really did want to tell her, you know? But I’d promised I wouldn’t come here, so—obviously I couldn’t say.’ Sherlock scowled, pulling up tufts of grass from between the floor boards.

‘What about this place?’ said Vicky. ‘What could you have to say about it?’

‘Oh,’ Sherlock waved her hand, ‘about the fire. It’s so obvious the Howard boy was lying; I doubt anyone even called in the police to go over the Orange Room before they sacked the gardener. But of course students aren’t supposed to come here. I’ve been a bad influence on y—’
‘How on earth do you know about the fire?’ interrupted Vicky, and Sherlock thought she noticed a hint of a blush on the other girl’s tanned cheeks. The next second she questioned the evidence of her own eyes—but still felt a bit daring, nonetheless.

‘I just looked around, in the room where it started,’ she said, shrugging. Vicky raised her eyebrows, so Sherlock said, ‘What, you think I’m lying? You want to see?’

‘Course I do,’ said Vicky, which was the most emphatic statement of interest Sherlock had managed to prise from her in three weeks of attempted conversation.

So Vicky raced after Sherlock down the wrecked corridors to the entrance of the Orange Room. The door here was still on its hinges, though it didn’t latch, and Sherlock nudged it open with the toe of her shoe. The room behind the door was blacker than anywhere else in the burnt wing, with no recognisable furniture remaining—only piles of sooty timber and melted scraps. Sherlock walked directly to the charred stone of a fireplace and chimney in one corner, and gestured.

‘So you see,’ she said.

Vicky pulled a face. ‘Do not,’ she said. ‘You’re having me on.’

‘I am not!’ Sherlock exclaimed, incensed. ‘Just look for a minute. They admit this is where the fire started. But they say it was started by the tipped-over lantern of an under-gardener.’ She paused; surely after that it would be obvious?

‘So what?’ Vicky said. Sherlock inflated her cheeks and exhaled through her mouth.

‘So just look at the way the fire burned. It obviously started in the fireplace; that’s where the scorch marks are most intense, and you can even see how it traveled, how the flames slanted, if you look along the walls.’ She pointed. ‘And first of all, this room is in the interior of the house, on a side away from the gardens. Why would the under-gardener be here in the first place?’

Vicky started to speak, but Sherlock cut her off. ‘Second,’ she said, why should he be using his lantern this far inside the house? It’s been wired for electricity since sometime in the 20s; I checked. Third, why would he put his lit lantern down in the fireplace? Fourth, once it was in there, how do you reckon it would have got tipped over? It’s not like it’s easy to trip and fall into it, even how the room is now, and back then it was protected by a fire screen.’

Vicky’s eyebrows were up again, but this time she seemed more impressed than doubtful. ‘Yeah?’ she said. ‘Maybe you’re right.’ She stared at the fireplace, thinking it over.

Sherlock snorted. ‘Course I am,’ she said. ‘I told you.’

‘So how do you know it was the Howard boy who was lying?’ asked Vicky.

Sherlock pointed to the side of the fireplace, where some glass debris had been gathered into a pile. ‘They didn’t even bother clearing it out,’ she said, disgusted. ‘They obviously knew nobody would question their story. It hasn’t been left here since then,’ she added, reacting to the movement of Vicky’s face. ‘The pieces are charred and some of them are a bit melted. Someone was in here drinking—cheap liquor, it’s glass from the kind of bottle Mr. Mulligan from town always wraps up in brown paper.’

Sherlock pointed to the intact threads of a fragment of bottle-neck. Vicky said, ‘That’s Brown Bear gin,’ and Sherlock couldn’t help her grin; it was oddly thrilling that Vicky could add something Sherlock hadn’t known. ‘Really?’ she said. ‘You recognise it?’
Vicky shuffled a little, looking much less thrilled. ‘M’dad drinks it, sometimes,’ she mumbled.

‘Well,’ said Sherlock, slightly awkward herself, ‘the Howards can obviously afford better than Brown Bear. The servants have their own quarters, on the other side of the house; they’d have no reason to drink in here. And of the three Howard children, one was only seven at the time, and the other had already gone up to Cambridge. Young Ralph was home on Easter holiday from Eton, so. That’s that. Can’t tell Brown, though, or she’d know for sure I was here.’

Vicky was looking from the glass shards to Sherlock’s face. ‘I don’t reckon,’ she said, quiet. Sherlock was still crouched down, looking at the shards. ‘Say,’ said Vicky, ‘is this what you plan to do, later? You training to, I dunno, go into that new ladies’ division of the Met? Something like that?’

‘I—hadn’t really thought,’ said Sherlock, distracted halfway through straightening up next to the blackened wall. It had always been something she did without questioning, this piecing together of one thing with another, this solving of the puzzles around her. She felt alive when she was doing it. She hadn’t thought any further than that. ‘Is this what they do? Those lady Met officers?’

‘No idea,’ said Vicky, standing too. ‘If it is, you’d be brilliant at it.’ Sherlock felt herself flush.

With Sherlock nearly leaning against the wall and Vicky having stepped over the glass shards when she stood, they were suddenly close together, closer than Sherlock had expected. The physicality of Vicky was slightly overwhelming this close up. Sherlock could hear Vicky’s breathing, and see the shinier rougher texture of her forehead in the middle, where her skin turned from dry to oily. Sherlock had been so absorbed in explaining the glass and the lantern—she hadn’t thought what would happen next. Her mouth was dry.

‘Do you,’ she cleared her throat. ‘Do you know—what you’re doing then?’ Vicky’s hand came up and pushed Sherlock’s hair back from her face, and then stayed nestled in Sherlock’s curls. Vicky was licking dry lips. ‘Er,’ said Sherlock, realising Vicky might think she was referring to the hand, and the closeness. ‘Er. Doing—after you graduate next month, I mean?’

‘I, uh,’ said Vicky, breathy, like she hardly knew what she was saying. She was leaning even closer to Sherlock. ‘My aunt wants me at home but I thought I might—’ and Sherlock gave a little squeak as Vicky brushed her lips across Sherlock’s, hand tightening in Sherlock’s hair.

Sherlock’s wild instinct, for the first moment of the kiss, was to break and run. The panic of all this new touching, and of not knowing what to do with her body, were too much. She wanted to be somewhere else, alone like she was used to, thinking it all out—that’s what would be comfortable, what would be familiar. But a second later she remembered Rosie and Justine. She remembered lying in her narrow bed thinking of Rosie and Justine and of Vicky, and she took a sudden, deep breath through her nose and pushed her lips back against Vicky’s lips, and lifted her hands up, feeling they ought to come in useful somehow. After a moment she brought them down again, to rest uncertainly on Vicky’s curved and compact hips.

Vicky’s other arm went around Sherlock’s middle, blunt fingers exploring her waist, and the bones of her back. Sherlock could feel the drag of each of Vicky’s fingertips through her light blouse. Her skin tingled where they touched. That was nice, she thought. She pushed into the kiss again.

And Vicky’s breath caught, tiny in her throat. Sherlock felt the gentlest touch of Vicky’s wet tongue lapping against her bottom lip, and she thought: soft...wet. And then something slid into place inside her. She no longer wanted to bolt; she wanted more touching, more texture. More sensation of Vicky’s skin against her skin. Vicky’s solid, curvy little body beating under Sherlock’s hands, and she wanted to—she wanted—
She opened her mouth blindly around the tip of Vicky’s tongue, pressed her hips forward into Vicky’s hips—just as Vicky pulled away.

‘Nugh—’ said Sherlock, chasing after Vicky’s mouth, but Vicky turned her head to the side, panting and not looking at Sherlock. Sherlock was out of breath, herself.

‘I d-don’t know why—’ stammered Vicky. ‘You’re not—I usually—’

‘I just—’

Vicky looked back at Sherlock’s forehead then, and Sherlock had no idea what was going on. Had she done something wrong? She had only grasped the appeal of the kiss in the last few seconds, and now her skin and her lips were tingling and her chest was tight, and Vicky was petting her hair but refusing to meet her eyes. Perhaps if she tried again, things would go better? But when she pushed forward again, Vicky’s hand held her fast by the shoulder as her other hand raked through Sherlock’s curls.

‘You’re so—odd,’ said Vicky, and kept petting. Sherlock was completely at sea. Vicky’s eyes were focused so intensely on her hairline; it was unnerving. ‘You could be pretty, you know,’ said Vicky at last, still petting, ‘if you spruced yourself up a bit.”

Pardon? thought Sherlock, but she couldn’t form the word. ‘I—’ she said, stupidly, and stopped.

Vicky didn’t seem to notice. ‘You’ve got the maddest eyes,’ she said. And she stepped back from Sherlock, looking anywhere else but her face.

After an extremely awkward silence, in which Sherlock boggled at Vicky and Vicky developed an interest in the burn patterns on the walls, Sherlock cleared her throat.

‘We should get back,’ she said. ‘It must be getting toward curfew.’

Vicky nodded, and in later years Sherlock wouldn’t be able to remember walking with Vicky from the burnt wing, or whether they said anything at all, or how she made her way back to her own room and crawled into her cold bed. The only thing she would remember, when she thought back to that night, was huddling under the covers in utter perplexity, remembering the feel of Vicky’s wet tongue on her lower lip.

Chapter End Notes

Practically no end-notes on this chapter! Nobody is more surprised than I.

I just wanted to reiterate that, although Castle Howard and the 1940 fire in its south-east wing are real, all the other circumstances surrounding them are purely fictional.

And also, more huge thanks to Ninette Aubart for the amaaaazing art. <3
Sherlock Holmes looked in the mirror. Hard.

The room was awash in rumpled, stolen garments. Nicked, despite the stern words of Professor Brown, from the drama department and the lost and found, they were now strewn on the bed, on the floor, over the lampshade, between stacks of books. Distant shouts and whistles filtered through the open window from a football match on the pitch, and out in the corridor Cassie Rogers was giggling into the telephone. Sherlock let it all sink quietly into the back surfaces of her mind as she focused on her reflection.

The clothes were...intriguing. They sat uncomfortably—unnaturally—on her frame. The dark woolen skirt was more restricting, with its trim lines, than her usual sack-like frocks; the stiffened ruffles down the front of the cardigan were fussy and intrusive against the skin of her chest. Strange, too, her feet in the heeled sandals. The long lines of her calves looked tighter, and her hips, of their own accord, pushed forward slightly to balance. She’d pulled her mass of curls up off her neck and away from her face, and the weight of the gathered ponytail dragged at the back of her head. It didn’t feel natural, certainly.

But it did feel interesting.

It felt a bit, thought Sherlock, turning to examine the effect in profile, like trying on another person, for size. As if she could step into another’s skin, live in another’s body. This was the outer casing of a Cassie Rogers, or a Stasia Hamilton, or any one of Sherlock’s docile, marriage-minded classmates. Is this what Vicky wanted? You could be pretty, you know, if you spruced yourself up a bit. You’ve got the maddest eyes. Is this what she’d meant? And then, Sherlock’s mind charging forward, she wondered: is this what it felt like, to move through one’s days as one of the normal girls?

It must be a hobbled sort of life, she thought, shifting around to check the lines up the backs of Annie’s good stockings. So many seams to keep in alignment, to be thinking of constantly. A limited range of motion. When she walked in the heels (low as they were) her steps were shorter; she was very aware of her knees and her hips. She wondered if she would be able to run, should the opportunity present itself.

She faced forward again, and met her own eyes in the mirror. Grimaced. Her face, she thought, was all wrong. Too sharp, too demanding. She softened her features: opened her eyes wider, pursed her lips. No; too much. She smoothed her features back to their neutral expression; then stopped her lips just short of a purse, so their edges were soft, and added a hint of a smile. Held the smile and turned away from the mirror, noting the feel of that facial expression. It had looked, she thought, slightly wistful. And it felt...vulnerable.

This was all very interesting.
Sherlock could remember three instances in the last two weeks alone when it would have been to her advantage to look convincingly wistful. At that thought her expression broke into a full, involuntary smile, and she turned back to the mirror, grinning, but—.

But no, she thought, looking through critical eyes at her smiling mouth. That wouldn’t do at all. Her teeth looked sharp, though she couldn’t see their edges. She looked hungry. Sherlock couldn’t think of a time she’d ever seen Cassie Rogers look hungry like that. So she rearranged her features again: a soft, maternal sort of smile. The kind of smile she’d seen on Cassie’s face when Cassie’s young man visited with his baby sister during Parents’ Weekend. Solicitous. Caring. Verging on fawning.

Sherlock held it for as long as she could, trying to feel what might be inside Cassie to produce such a simper. Then her façade shattered and she dissolved into laughter, collapsing on the floor in giggles in front of the mirror.

But this was all fantastic, she thought, when her laughing jag had abated. Bloody fantastic. Her blood was running high in her cheeks and her chest, and she felt herself grinning. It was like the rush of a first-time success in the laboratory, like a magic power she hadn’t realised she possessed. Sherlock sat sprawled on the floor, marveling. If she could learn to sham Cassie Rogers—Cassie, of all people!—then who couldn’t she put on? She scrambled breathless to her feet and looked around at the wrecked room, all thoughts of Vicky Trevor momentarily forgotten.

A stable of potential selves crowded Sherlock’s mind. Whom should she call? Who would be useful? She thought of the week before, when she’d attempted to win her way into the greenhouses by persuading the new gardener that she was twelve instead of fifteen, terribly homesick after her first month at school.

Yes: shamming youth, then. Her bottom lip caught in her teeth, she pawed through the drama department pile, coming out with a little girl’s green playsuit. It looked just slightly too small. Then:

Pulling her hair down. Chucking the twinset and skirt. Shimmying into the playsuit. A little tight, as predicted, but that should work to her advantage, shouldn’t it, because she wanted to—oh.

No.

She’d turned to face the mirror again, and made a face. This wouldn’t do at all. The undersized child’s clothes made her appear older, not younger. She looked like some kind of grotesque vaudeville child performer kept on the circuit past her prime. She gave a horrified giggle; reached up and sectioned her hair on either side of her head, twisting it into schoolgirl plaits. Even worse. She stuck out her tongue, then let her face collapse back into its natural impassivity.

Data, she thought. Her longest-lasting tutor had always said, that the resounding failure of a hypothesis sometimes proved more useful than a success. Data.

Sherlock could not imagine a scenario in which she would benefit from looking like an overgrown infant. But if aged-down and undersized produced the impression of age, then aged-up and oversized…

Throwing the playsuit back on the pile. Climbing into a charcoal-grey skirt suit. Looking in the mirror and: yes. This was much more the thing. The woolen fabric, standing out from her slim frame; her neck and arms dwarfed by the shoulder pads. The skirt just snug enough to stay up. The contours of Sherlock’s body lost in a sea of material. It was magic: how she seemed, instantly, smaller yet and younger than she was.

Fascinating, thought Sherlock, breathing hard, staring in the mirror, colour rising in her cheeks. And she had to school away that shark-like grin.
Fascinating, she reminded herself, but of limited immediate use. Relaxed clothing rules or no, she could hardly start walking around QM’s dressed like somebody’s stenographer. She shucked off the jacket and started undoing the button placket on the skirt. If only the rules on uniforms were still in place, she thought. It would be so easy to nick a whole set of school uniforms in varying sizes, to alter them in discreet ways. One slightly too small, for when she wanted to intimidate the younger girls; one slightly too large, for when she wanted to plead innocence with the staff.

She was throwing clothes aside now, digging down into the pile. Perhaps a few old uniforms had been delivered to the lost and found. And yes indeed: here was one toward the bottom. Mis-matched, which might be why it had escaped salvage: a smaller skirt paired with a larger blouse and cardigan. She looked at it critically. Another thing her tutor had told her once: every idiosyncrasy can be put to use.

Some of the girls, Sherlock knew, let out their tops and padded out their brassieres with handkerchiefs. It was something to try, she thought skeptically, looking at the over-large blouse in the mirror, though she had never seen it look convincing on anyone else.

There was, nonetheless, sometimes a certain appeal. Sherlock had seen Cecilia McIntosh do it before she’d snuck out one night to meet a boy in the village, high heels in a shopping bag over her shoulder, to change into outside the pub. Cecilia had done up her lips with a red lipstick she’d stolen off her married sister, and had even rouged her cheeks. She hadn’t looked convincingly older, thought Sherlock, but she had looked convincingly Cecilia. Wild and reckless, and courting disaster. Sherlock felt that way too, at times. It was conceivable, wasn’t it, that looking convincingly Cecilia might have its advantages? Cecilia certainly seemed to think so.

So Sherlock crossed the room; rummaged in Annie’s bedside table for cosmetics. Her mouth was open; her skin prickling; her tongue between her teeth. A light pink lipstick and one the colour of wine; black mascara, and a blusher compact. Sherlock crossed back to the mirror and pursed her lips. Painted them wine-dark, thinking of Cecilia. Of that boy from St. George’s asking Cecilia ‘Do you know how to hold the bat, then?’ and the way Cecilia’s mouth moved when she said ‘You could show me.’ Thinking of Cecilia’s lips, of Cecilia’s feet in black patent leather heels. Switching to mascara and—she promptly poked herself in the eye trying to blacken her lashes. When she stepped back to look, she couldn’t stifle a groan.

There was obviously more to being convincingly Cecilia than met the eye. The paint looked clownish, laughable. An amateur’s attempt at a forbidden act; of no conceivable use. She wet a flannel at the basin to scrub it off. Perhaps, if Sherlock offered to do Annie’s chemistry and biology papers for a spell, Annie might teach her the trick of putting the stuff on properly. It was so—

Sherlock glanced back up into the mirror and started. Then drew close, fascinated, her eyes wide.

The flannel had only smeared the mascara, not taken it off. Now she appeared to have two black eyes. And the one on the left, she thought, getting even closer to the mirror, was passingly convincing. She remembered Vicky, threatening to punch Cecilia for teasing Sherlock. Staff reactions to physical fights nearly always favoured the party with the more serious injuries, regardless of who had provoked whom. Perhaps a pre-ripped uniform would be worth adding to the arsenal: a pre-ripped uniform, a mascara tube, and a wet flannel.

Better and better, she thought, raising her eyebrows at her reflection, her tongue darting out to run over her bottom lip. And she wondered—

She dragged the towel across her mouth. Smear the paint on one side, staring at her own lips. Made a fist; punched herself lightly in the mouth on the opposite side, knocking her lip against her teeth and smearing dark red across her jawline. Grunted a little, soft and involuntary, deep in her
diaphragm as her knuckles connected with her own mouth.

She regarded the results, breathing hard, frowning in concentration. Neither side was entirely satisfactory. She was limited by her body’s instinctive reluctance to split its own lip. Nevertheless, with the proper, dark-rust colour of paint, the punched side might make a passable imitation of blood. Perhaps she could lay in some supplies during the next school trip into town, and—

Town. *Going into town.* Sherlock sagged against the mirror, gripping the sides to hold herself up. QM’s girls weren’t allowed there without an escort, but nobody kept tabs on the village children. Vistas of freedom opened out before her eyes and she blinked hard, biting her paint-smeared lips. She had seen the village girls roaming all around the markets and the common squares, and the boys—

—and here Sherlock’s ruined mouth opened in a perfect O, and she gaped at her reflection. Her breath punched out of her lungs in a soft moan, standing in front of the mirror in an oversized white blouse and a uniform skirt.

The boys.

They could go *anywhere.*

Sherlock had seen village boys running in and out of shops and market stalls and even public houses, delivering messages to their fathers there. She turned to the pile of clothes again, her hands tearing at the zip on the back of the skirt. This, she thought, stripped and laughing and burrowing into her fabric hoard, was going to be *brilliant.*

***

Vicky Trevor sat, ill at ease in a starched blue pinafore dress, her hair curled for the first time in two years. She lifted her teacup to the drone of her aunt’s voice.

Ever since Vicky’s mother had died in a boating accident, Emily Trevor had taken it upon herself to impart to her niece select pieces of motherly wisdom. Vicky sometimes thought bitterly that, as Aunt Emily’s own children hated the sight of her and of each other, she was hardly qualified for the position. It could not have been plainer, however—for the simple reason that she came right out and said so, loudly and often—that Aunt Emily fancied these lectures to be indispensable to Vicky’s welfare. Her self-sacrifice in bestowing them was amongst her favourite subjects on which to remark—along with speculation as to where Vicky would be without her, and dire pronouncements about young ladies left to grow up without female role models. Vicky let her gaze wander to the rounders pitch, where a group of girls had got together a pick-up game. She sighed.

‘I’m sure,’ Aunt Emily was saying, ‘that the entire family is very proud of you, my dear, for sticking out your education into your upper sixth year. Heaven knows it’s more than your mother did.’

She paused here, and Vicky said ‘Mmmm,’ still gazing over at the pitch. It was encouragement enough, apparently.

‘Not that I would dream of criticising your dear sweet mother,’ Aunt Emily went on. ‘A lovelier woman I could never hope to meet. And after all, she was engaged by the time she was sixteen, wasn’t she? No sense in pressing on with Tennyson and, what have you, trigonometry, when she had a home waiting for her, was there?’

‘Mm,’ said Vicky again, watching Amy Larson swing wide of a bowl from Tara Fredericks-Halloway. There was an accompanying groan from the rest of the side as those previously in line to
bat headed out toward the posts. Vicky could have made that, she was sure. She could almost feel
the swing her shoulders would have taken: the satisfying *thwack* of the ball connecting with the bat.

‘And the way she doted on your father,’ Aunt Emily was saying. ‘You know, he was so happy in
those days, it was plain how much he loved her…’ She trailed off, and sighed. Vicky supposed that
by ‘happy’ Aunt Emily must mean ‘sober.’ In her mind’s eye she ran past the first post, cleats
digging into the turf as she skidded into second and faced Tara’s imaginary back, waiting for the next
ball.

‘And you know, dear, it won’t be much longer before he’s looking to retire, and he’ll need
* somewhere* to rest, after all the hard work he’s put into paying for your schooling. A fine strapping
young girl like you, you’ll soon have a home and a family of your own, and I’m sure you’ll have
plenty of room for your sweet old dad, won’t you?’

‘I—’ Vicky said, her tongue seeming to curdle in her mouth at this picture of domesticity. The
imaginary match vanished, and the real one took its place: Tara off the mound, and Vicky out of the
game.

‘But I’m getting ahead of myself,’ said Aunt Emily, seemingly oblivious to Vicky’s discomfort. ‘You
have yet to tell me about your prospects. Have you a beau in the wings?’ She looked so hopeful that
Vicky almost laughed into her teacup.

‘Not—no, not exactly,’ she stammered.

Aunt Emily tutted. ‘The headmistress *assures* me that there are opportunities specially designed to
allow you to socialise with the area boys’ schools,’ she said, stiffly.

Vicky scowled into her teacup. ‘Yeah, but,’ she said, ‘I went to the Christmas dance with all the
hockey girls. It was—you know, we had a laugh. Miss Gower was visiting; her younger sister’s still
here, and—’

She shut her mouth, cursing herself, but it was too late. Aunt Emily had assumed what Vicky always
thought of as “*that look*”: drawing herself up in her chair, her eyes slitting toward on Vicky; her
mouth screwing down on itself.

‘Anabelle Gower,’ Aunt Emily said. And waited.

‘Yes,’ said Vicky. ‘She came to—er, to see us all. Again.’

‘You know that Miss Gower is *engaged,*’ said Aunt Emily. ‘You know that she made the most of
her opportunities while she was a student here.’

‘Yes,’ said Vicky, miserably, looking away from her aunt to where the match was breaking up, and
the groundskeeper was dragging a young village boy up the drive by his ear.

She knew it now, anyway. Anabelle had looked every inch the grown-up lady in her fitted black
evening gown, with the décolletage and the wrap skirt that teased open at the side. She’d been the
only woman at the dance with real stockings, not just seams painted up the backs of her legs.

Anabelle, Vicky remembered, had always loved to complain; and now she had complained about
how rationing made a proper trousseau impossible; about how the war would force them to
honeymoon in Scotland instead of France. Vicky had sneaked out back with Tara Fredericks-
Halloway and drunk most of a flask of gin, and when they’d come back in she had imagined to
herself that *she* was Anabelle’s rich young fiancé; that *she* was showering lovely, soft Anabelle with
black-market stockings and highland holidays. That it would be Vicky making Anabelle gasp and
squirm on a hotel bed in Edinburgh. She had a vague memory of trying to kiss Anabelle’s pale neck in the darkened corridor, sloppy and earnest, and Anabelle laughing and calling her a silly old thing before returning to the party. Afterward Vicky had thrown up in the WC for most of the night, thinking of her dad.

Now, sitting across from Aunt Emily, Vicky felt repulsed. Everything about the scene was wrong: her starched dress, her curled hair, her aunt’s questions. It wasn’t where Vicky belonged. She thought of Anabelle—and then, with a stab of discomfort, about kissing odd, grubby little Sherlock Holmes that night last week in the burnt wing. Flashes of Sherlock’s knobby elbows, and her dirty knees, and her mad grey eyes—nothing about her like Anabelle at all, and nothing like Vicky, either.

Desperately confusing. She pushed the memory down. She thought of marriage, and Anabelle, and her dad getting old and feeble in Beverley, and wanted to lash out at something, anything. ‘I—I thought I might join up,’ she blurted out, cutting off Aunt Emily mid-sentence. ‘You know, the ATS, the women’s service.’

Aunt Emily looked shocked at the interruption. Vicky ploughed on. ‘Do my part for King and Country,’ she said, blindly, feeling she must make headway somehow against the tide. She had never been good with words. She thought of the recruitment adverts. ‘We all must all pitch in and do our part, I think,’ she said. ‘The war effort needs all of us. I believe, that is I’ve—I’ve heard, that girls like me—do well there.’

Aunt Emily glared at her a moment; then her face softened, grew sad. Not the response Vicky had anticipated. Horrified, Vicky felt tears start in her eyes. She looked away again, across the green, to where the groundskeeper seemed to be giving the village lad a telling-off.

‘You must do as you see fit, Victoria,’ Aunt Emily sighed. ‘But I do hope you’ll think things over during these next few months. This flirtation with—well, this tomboy manner you’ve cultivated. It’s all very well for schoolgirls, but there comes a time to put away childish things. You—you could be a real lady. You must choose now, before it’s too late.’

Vicky blinked hard and jutted out her chin, still looking away. She started when her aunt’s weathered hand closed over her arm.

‘Believe me, my dear,’ said Aunt Emily, her voice oddly kind, ‘it will be a lonely kind of life, otherwise. It’s a kind of—of perpetual childhood. Your friends will all grow up around you. You’ll be forever left behind.’

Vicky took her eyes from the groundskeeper and stared at her aunt in horror, but Emily Trevor had an unwonted earnestness in her damp brown eyes. They looked at each other, woman and girl in the May sunlight. Emily squeezed, then patted Vicky’s arm.

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It was a near thing, but Sherlock was reasonably sure that none of her classmates—and most especially not Vicky, sitting on the terrace with an elderly harridan, looking incongruous in a baby-blue frock—had recognised the urchin boy being dragged back onto the QM’s campus by a harassed Groundskeeper MacNeil. And, though it was an even closer thing, she had eventually managed to persuade Mr. MacNeil not to report her to the headmistress. That, she supposed, was all she could have asked for.

He’d been quite livid, after all, when he’d discovered her looking in the back windows of the High Street pub in the village. Shocking, he’d said: a QM’s girl dressing up as a boy in order to break school rules. He had talked a blue streak about the dire punishments in store; and he had only
relented when Sherlock was able to deduce, based on the remnants in its feed bag and the way it was favouring its left forefoot, the cause of the ongoing problems he’d been having with his favourite horse. In the end he had let her go with a bruised ear and a stern telling-off.

The most irksome thing about the whole adventure, Sherlock thought, banging back into her empty room, was how quickly Mr. MacNeil had recognised her as female. Apparently, her facility with male disguises still needed significant work. She threw her cap on the bed and began tearing off the shirt, wondering how to go about collecting the necessary data. Was it the way she’d moved? Something about her face, her posture? She could hardly ask Mr. MacNeil what had tipped him off, not after she’d sworn so earnestly never to attempt such a thing again. She scowled as she unbuttoned the flies of her trousers.

And now she was cutting things close on her meeting with Vicky. Male village urchin was definitely not the appearance best calculated to impress on that particular front. Sherlock pulled on an aubergine shirtwaist dress, glancing at her wristwatch as she did up the buttons.

Annie had agreed, in the end, to teach Sherlock to ‘do’ her lips and eyes, although it had been a harder bargain than Sherlock had anticipated. Annie had been oddly averse to Sherlock’s appropriation of her cosmetics and stockings. ‘My only ones and you’ve stretched them out!’ she’d wailed, ‘You’re so dratted tall,’ and Sherlock had had to spend most of her remaining term pocket money on replacing the lipstick whose shape, Annie claimed, Sherlock had forever ruined with her punching experiment.

Still, Sherlock thought, widening her eyes and tarring her lashes, it had been worth it. Annie had a sister-in-law who was once on the stage, and she had showed Sherlock how to create any number of ‘looks.’ She had showed her how to apply the paint so that nobody would realise it was there, but so that Sherlock’s face would appear subtly transformed. And she had showed her how to make herself up for stage-lights, so her face was a mask like those of the women she’d seen at night in Piccadilly. Sherlock had watched version after version of herself take shape in the mirror, and had nearly kissed Annie on the lips.

Now there were footsteps trailing up the corridor; she took a last look in the mirror. The Sherlock who looked back at her, borrowed bits from Rosie Bartlett: subtle and girlish, with just a touch more daring about the mouth. She arranged her features, and turned—and Vicky Trevor, changed out of her blue dress and back into her hockey skirt and dark jacket, stopped so suddenly at the sight of her that the door swung to and hit Vicky hard on the shoulder.

‘Hello,’ said Sherlock. She smiled a Rosie Bartlett smile, tinged with Stasia Hamilton. Vicky just stared.

Sherlock’s run-in with Mr. MacNeil had shaken her confidence. Was Vicky’s current poleaxed expression one of approval, or horror?

‘Er. Hullo,’ said Vicky. Her eyebrows were drawn together, her eyes wide. ‘You, er.’ She cleared her throat. ‘You look…’ She took a step forward, and gestured to Sherlock’s dress, her upswept hair.

Sherlock could feel her eyebrows trying to rise; she kept them in check. Rosie would keep smiling, she thought, and kept smiling. ‘I, er,’ she said, ‘Annie thought I could do with some…’

Vicky took another step—another two steps—and Sherlock could see now that she was barely breathing. Eyes still wide. ‘You look,’ Vicky said again, ‘like a real lady,’ and Sherlock laughed, because surely even Rosie Bartlett would laugh if someone told her that.

‘I do not,’ Sherlock said, with a grin hopefully devoid of sharks.
Vicky took another step; reached out a hand and touched Sherlock’s arm, just below the purple cuff. ‘You’re so pale,’ she said, low in her throat. ‘Your skin’s soft.’

Inhabiting Rosie was a bit distracting, Sherlock thought, but the softness was coming easier now. She liked Vicky’s sport-rough hand against her arm.

She’d thought, at night in bed, about the compact curve of Vicky’s hip, so she reached out and rested her own palm against the place where Vicky’s waist bowed outward. It was somehow—compelling. She rubbed her hand against the tweed. Vicky said, quickly, ‘Er,’ and Sherlock stopped rubbing.

‘Er,’ said Vicky again, inching closer to her, ‘I’d like—can I kiss you?’

Sherlock was taken aback. ‘You didn’t ask first, last time,’ she blurted out. It wasn’t what Rosie would have said.

‘I—it seemed different, last time,’ said Vicky, moving like she might pull away, so Sherlock closed Rosie-light fingers around Vicky’s wrist and tugged it back around her own waist. Now they were face-to-face, of a height with one another, and breathing each other’s air. ‘It’s all right. You know, if you want—,’ said Sherlock, low and quick, and Vicky’s breath caught, and she leaned in and touched her lips to Sherlock’s.

It was the same shock, at first, of too-close-too-much and the unwonted pressure of Vicky, the unaccustomed salty-sharp scent of her. There was so much more sensation here than in lying in her bed, running back over their kiss in her head, imagining other, theoretical kisses. It was a sharp shock to her system, the system of the Sherlock who was always, always alone.

So it was a godsend, being able to slip sideways into Rosie Bartlett. Sherlock had run over and over Rosie: Rosie in class; Rosie in the dining hall; Rosie in the storage cupboard sucking on Justine Digby’s tongue. Sherlock thought of Rosie and let her body soften against Vicky’s body, and opened her mouth against Vicky’s mouth.

This seemed the thing; Vicky made a soft, approving whine. She tightened her arm around Sherlock’s middle, pulling her close, opening her mouth to Sherlock’s open mouth and licking sloppily at her lips, which was somehow both invasive and intriguing. And her hand, again, at Sherlock’s back like the last time: Vicky’s clumsy fingers splayed out and holding her steady, curling against the knobs of Sherlock’s lizard spine.

It was that hand. Sherlock focused on the insistent nervous pressure of that hand, and Rosie’s eager softness washed through her muscles and her skin. It was warm and rushing here pressed against Vicky. Sherlock was being held up. She felt heavy, limp. And she broke the kiss to look around at her narrow bed by the window just as Vicky tried to steer her in the same direction. The twisting and pushing together made her stumble; Vicky caught her and half-hauled her backwards. She came to rest in a sitting position, flustered, her back against the cast-iron rails of the headboard, looking anywhere but at Vicky.

‘Annie’s, er, won’t be back,’ said Sherlock, nervous again and losing some of that heavy hot liquid feeling like Rosie in the storage cupboard. She felt herself blushing. Vicky didn’t particularly seem to mind it, though; she was crawling over Sherlock’s lap, knees on either side of Sherlock’s legs as she cupped Sherlock’s face in her hands, and kissed Sherlock’s cheekbones where they felt the warmest. Sherlock shut her eyes; Vicky’s hockey skirt was spread out behind and in front of her on Sherlock’s lap, and Sherlock could feel Vicky’s pubic bone hitching against her thighs through the thin cotton of her aubergine dress.

‘You’re pretty when you blush,’ Vicky said, at which Sherlock blushed even more, and Vicky
purred. She mouthed at Sherlock’s upper lip, shuffled one leg between Sherlock’s, and pushed her body down all along Sherlock’s front. A lovely soft weight, shifting and pressing, and the warm liquid feeling was back in earnest now. It pooled in Sherlock’s chest and pricked along her skin, and leaked from between her legs where Vicky was rocking into her, pressing her thigh down between Sherlock’s thighs. Sherlock exhaled, her edges soft and shifting, and arched her hips up into the pressure of Vicky’s leg.

‘Oh,’ said Vicky, sounding surprised, ‘you’re lovely, you’re so lovely,’ which caused another rush of heat between Sherlock’s legs, so she pushed up again, and Vicky gasped. Vicky leaned her weight on one arm and blundered the other hand against the buttons down the front of Sherlock’s shirtwaist dress, still pressing and shifting her hips.

Vicky’s normally-dry hands were tacky with moisture. Sherlock felt the sticky traces where Vicky’s fingertips pressed into her collarbone, and her sternum, and the skin of her ribcage just below the strap of her brassiere. Vicky leaned down and nosed aside the white cotton. Kissed the small, tender swelling of Sherlock’s breast just beside her pebbled nipple, and the warm liquid pooled there as well, under Sherlock’s skin. Sherlock whimpered.

‘What if I got you in—in black lace,’ Vicky panted, eyes glassy. ‘You’re so pale, so—so delicate—’

The whole surface of Sherlock’s body felt hot, sensitised. She’d sometimes, alone in her room at home, but this was—so much—. Her lips were dry from breathing through an open mouth, and her hands were restless on the coverlet. She reached up under Vicky’s plain blouse, wanting to feel Vicky’s skin, her skin that made Sherlock think of tea with honey. And what would it be like to taste it, all the sweetness hidden under Vicky’s blouse and even under her tight athletic brassiere, what would the soft mounds of her breasts feel like filling Sherlock’s palms if Sherlock undid the binding, but Vicky’s sweaty hands came up and pushed Sherlock’s hands back down to rest on Vicky’s hips.

‘I just want to see if I can—can make you—,’ said Vicky, still grinding down into Sherlock, and Sherlock tried to ask make me? but the liquid heat was gathering in her gut and her hands, after all, did seem to unable to stop clutching onto Vicky’s hips. And so what she said as she moved her hands back to the solid curve of Vicky’s bottom, and dug in her fingers, and dragged Vicky down hard against her as Sherlock pushed up hard under Vicky’s hockey skirt, sounded more akin to ‘ung.’

And because the coiling heat between her legs kept building on itself, and her hips were moving in sharp little spasms against Vicky’s leg, she kept making that noise, making it and making it helplessly as the heat crested, and Vicky looked down at her, mouth open, as Sherlock arched her back off the bed and clenched her thighs around Vicky’s leg, and pulsed and pulsed.

Afterward, as Sherlock was lying flushed and panting on the quilt, Vicky snuggled up next to her, looking almost smug. Sherlock reached over, fascinated, and ran her fingers through the spot where wetness had soaked through Sherlock’s underwear and coated Vicky’s upper thigh. That was—new, she thought, from any of her previous experiments, few though they had been. Vicky didn’t pull away, but she didn’t react either, and when Sherlock said ‘Do you want…’ Vicky shook her head and petted Sherlock’s hair.

‘It’s not for girls like you to do,’ she said. ‘It’s something I can give you.’

Which, despite Sherlock’s curiosity about how Vicky would look, and sound, and feel had their roles been reversed, seemed to her perfectly acceptable in the sleepy, contented afterglow.
1. “Rounders” and hockey were cited as common girls’ school games in my reading about this period, so they’re the sports I had Vicky play. As far as I can tell, rounders is more or less like softball/baseball, if that helps make sense of what’s going on in the second scene.

2. Aunt Emily’s attitude was pretty common at the time: lesbianism was regarded as “arrested development” - something fairly normal during adolescence, which women were expected to grow out of at puberty or remain forever emotionally stunted. Rebecca Jennings, in Tomboys and Bachelor Girls, quotes ATS director Albertine Winner: "Winner reiterated the emphasis on adolescence as the defining moment in the formation of a lesbian identity, commenting that:

   In dealing with large numbers of Lesbians one of the most striking things is the recurrent traits of immaturity, mainly emotional, but showing themselves in many unexpected ways, that one meets in women of high intellectual or artistic development. This certainly bears out the view that the homosexual relation is an immature one, an arrest of normal sexual development at an adolescent age.

The dilemma was often put to these women as a choice between stifling their same-sex desires and becoming fully emotionally mature, or continuing to pursue them and condemning themselves to a lifetime of emotional immaturity (not to mention loneliness and tragedy).

3. ATS stood for Auxiliary Territorial Service. It was indeed the branch of the Armed Forces that admitted women during WWII, although the recruits were confined to supposedly non-combat roles (which nonetheless included positions, like ambulance drivers and message couriers, which exposed the women to combat levels of danger). Vicky’s comments about “girls like me” draws on several testimonies in Jennings and Gardiner, from lesbian women who joined up because they had heard that the service was a haven for “women like them.”
Looking back, that next week with Vicky would prove the happiest of Sherlock’s academic career.

Not that her standards were exactly high. She had twice staged explosions she knew would be traced back to their source, simply to make sure she was expelled from a school she despised. Even her best days at Hill Brow School had only been distinguished from her bad days by the absence of outright hostility from the other girls.

Still, after that first afternoon in her room with Vicky Trevor, she was, for a few days, almost joyful. It felt weightless and odd, as if there were something she should be worried about but she couldn’t quite remember what it was. Vicky made no objection to spending time with Sherlock, and they were together as much as possible between classes and Vicky’s sport practices.

Whenever she was with Vicky, Sherlock would slip into a persona made up mostly of Rosie Bartlett, with just a pinch of Cecilia McIntosh for spice. Taking refuge in Rosie was a relief; the easiest way Sherlock had found to overcome her initial overstimulation. As Rosie she could soften herself, could sink into the warm, liquid heaviness brought on by Vicky’s hands, and mouth, and body. Vicky, for her part, seemed to find the Cecilia-Rosie cocktail both reassuring and exciting; she had twice dragged Sherlock into the very same storage cupboard where Rosie and Justine had hidden away at Christmas.

And Vicky’s responsiveness was intoxicating. So much so that Sherlock had put most of her other trials on hold, had started a whole new laboratory notebook devoted to Vicky’s reactions. Every night she took it out and recorded her findings, replacing it carefully inside her mattress – on top of the novel Vicky had slipped her, giggling, telling her to look at page 153. Vicky didn’t know about the notebook, precisely. But Sherlock still felt, for the first time, that she had a teammate: someone almost as invested in her work as she. It was a giddy sensation.

With Vicky as her silent partner, she had experimented with, for one example, presenting increased and lowered dosages of Cecilia. The results had been intriguing. Too much Cecilia in the mix, and Vicky became cold; contemptuous; quickly losing interest in kissing or even talking to Sherlock, and Sherlock felt sick. But once, when Sherlock had stolen Cecilia’s black, side-slit wrap dress and paired it with a smile like Stasia Hamilton, Vicky had turned almost wild, pushing Sherlock against the wall next to Annie’s bed and shoving a hand inside the skirt at the slit, grappling between Sherlock’s legs, rutting against her thigh. It was the closest Vicky had come to letting Sherlock do to her what Vicky did to Sherlock: Sherlock was sure that if she had held out a few more minutes she could have felt Vicky clenching and melting against her, could have heard the sounds Vicky would make when she was helpless with pleasure.

Sherlock had to admit, if only to herself, that she was extremely curious about those sounds.

Then, late in the week, Sherlock had tried throwing in a hint of Vicky herself—nothing overt, just a taste. But Vicky had turned skittish and irritable; Sherlock’s stomach had clenched. So she had softened herself down with a quick injection of Cassie Rogers: dimpled and domestic and dim. Sherlock had noticed that whenever she slipped into Cassie, Vicky was especially gentle with her: standing between Sherlock and other girls in the corridors, bringing Sherlock little sweets, carrying Sherlock’s books. And when Vicky kissed a Cassie-like Sherlock, it was as if Vicky wanted to envelop her completely, keep her in a cocoon of gentling limbs and sticky-sweet lips.
And that’s how Vicky was kissing Sherlock, trembling with tenderness against a stone wall in the burnt wing, on the day when it all fell apart. Vicky was cupping the bulge of Sherlock’s left breast with a tentative palm, barely pressing her lips to Sherlock’s lips, when Sherlock stiffened and clamped a hand over Vicky’s wrist. A muffled squelching sound had come from the other side of the destroyed wall. And if Sherlock could hear another person walking, then that person could hear Sherlock and Vicky. The girls froze in place, out-of-bounds and half-undressed, pressed together against the wall.

The soft footsteps made their sodden way across the abandoned room and split apart from one another, the two visitors standing near the wall perpendicular to their hidden listeners.

In the absence of a ceiling or even complete walls, Sherlock could hear everything perfectly. She kept silent as she did up the buttons on the front of her dress.

There was the flick of a cigarette lighter, the inhale and exhale of a fag being lit. A pause. Then the voice of—all people—Headmistress Brown, saying ‘Thank you,’ and, after another pause in which her companion lit up as well: ‘It’s been such a day.’

The answering voice mmm’ed in response. It was male: deep, and no longer young, but Sherlock couldn’t immediately identify its owner.

‘Heard you had a visit from Henry Godwin today,’ it said, warm and amused, and Sherlock knew him at once from her sixth-form biology classes.

‘It’s Professor Martin!’ Vicky hissed in Sherlock’s ear. Sherlock nodded, making a frantic shushing gesture, her finger to Vicky’s mouth. It was odd to hear his mellow, hesitant voice sounding so informal, verging on joking.

Brown laughed, joylessly. ‘I sometimes feel I spend my every waking hour appeasing the Board of Governors.’ She sighed. ‘Quite a trick when they all pull in different directions.’

Martin chuckled. ‘Men at that level forget there’s any work to a thing unless they do it themselves.’

Brown made a tsking sound against her teeth, and Sherlock heard the carbonated release of two bottles uncapped. ‘I’ll drink to that,’ Brown said. There was a clink of bottles, one against the other. Then, surprisingly, came a lusty ‘Ahh’ from Professor Martin. It was a sound like men made in bars in American films. Vicky raised her eyebrows at Sherlock, and Sherlock smirked.

There came the noises of Professor Brown settling down on the remnants of the wooden chest Sherlock had seen in that room, and of Professor Martin rubbing his shoulders against the splintered doorjamb on the other side of Sherlock and Vicky.

‘You must never let on I told you this, Alf,’ said Brown, after a pause, ‘but I really thought I might wring the man’s neck.’

Martin chuckled again. ‘Mum’s the word,’ he said. ‘What did he want, then?’

Brown groaned, and there was another deep inhale and exhale before she answered. ‘You’ve read about this Dr. Williams? The one Townsend-Farquhar and his Chronicle lot are falling all over themselves to praise?’

‘Mmm, name rings a bell. Educational reformer of some kind?’

‘The man’s never been employed by a school in his life,’ replied Brown tartly, clinking the bottle against her teeth, ‘but yes. He’s convinced he’s developed the curricula of the future. Scientifically
backed recommendations for the best methods to educate girls. I’d wager my winter coat he doesn’t even have daughters.’ Vicky’s eyes were wide and bright at such forthrightness from the headmistress; her mouth fell open. Sherlock slid her hand over it to keep Vicky quiet, a hint of teeth against Sherlock’s palm.

Martin snorted. ’So Godwin wanted—’

‘He wanted—no, pardon me, he’d already arranged, without bothering to consult me beforehand I might add, that this Williams should come give a guest lecture at Queen Margaret’s.’

‘Oh, Joyce,’ Martin said, his voice rich with sympathy and also shaking with suppressed laughter.

‘Oh Joyce indeed,’ groaned Brown. ‘Joyce Joyce Joyce. Well, what could I do?’ she said, unhappy-sounding chuckles bubbling up behind her words. ‘It’s all arranged among the governors. Townsend-Farquhar’s even wangled access to the school calendar, so I can’t claim a conflict. We’ll just have to grin and bear whatever twaddle the man comes out with.’

There was a muffled movement, and then a creak of the chest again, as Martin presumably sat himself next to Brown. Sherlock strained to hear his next words, which were much quieter and spoken away from the girls’ hiding place.

‘Perhaps it won’t be so bad?’ he said. ‘You don’t know what he’s planning. Perhaps he’ll keep to generalities, you know, eat your porridge—’ Brown was laughing dully now, ‘—be a good lass. Could happen.’

‘Alf,’ said Brown’s smoke-roughened voice on an exhale, and Sherlock heard what she guessed was a hand slapping down on a wool-covered knee, and the sizzle of a cigarette butt being ground into the wet floor, ‘you have no idea what you’re on about. The man’s a loon. His pet theory at the moment involves the swollen glands of female lacrosse players, and how the kidney stimulation caused by a physics curriculum would result in a generation of bitter, irreversibly masculinised homosexuals.’ Martin choked on his beer.

Sherlock felt Vicky stiffen against her side, and heard Brown tsk again.

Martin was still laughing too hard to reply. ’S-seriously?’ he wheezed at last.

‘Yes!’ said Brown, exasperated but also oddly affectionate. ‘Yes, seriously,’ she repeated, which set Martin off in another round of helpless giggles.

Sherlock was distracted from the events in other room by the fact that Vicky was still stiff against her and breathing shallowly, all the delighted incredulity gone from her face.

Soon came the sound of Professor Martin rising from the chest, still chuckling as he gathered up the now-empty bottles. Sherlock tipped her head in the direction of the other room, grinning. Vicky moved her lips in a weak smile under Sherlock’s hand, but it never reached her eyes.

‘The whole thing will be a circus,’ Professor Brown went on, half-angry and half-laughing. ‘And I shall be sitting there in the front row, at the podium no less, having to act as if this utter drivel is something I’ve voluntarily invited into my school. You must not on any account meet my eyes, Alfie Martin, or I know I shall never manage to keep a—keep a straight face.’

Sherlock’s hand slid off of Vicky’s mouth and her own dropped open; Professor Brown’s voice had caught, just a bit, on the last word, and not with laughter. A clink of the bottles on the floor, and then there was a susurrrus of wool against wool: one suited person embracing another.

‘Hush,’ Martin was saying. ‘Joyce.’
‘They’re just such—bullies,’ said Professor Brown, no tears in her voice but sounding fierce and frustrated in a way Sherlock had never heard. ‘And when I think of the sixth-form girls, all sitting listening to this—this—’

‘Shh,’ said Professor Martin. ‘The girls will have an hour and a half of Williams, and seven years of you.’ Professor Brown drew a long, shaky breath, and there was silence for a time from the other room. Sherlock and Vicky leaned their ears close to the wall, waiting.

When Brown spoke again, her no-nonsense air had returned. ‘You’re too kind to me, Alfred Martin,’ she said. ‘What kind of example am I setting, going to pieces in a burned-out bedroom when there’s work to be done?’ There were two squelches as she stepped back, and they heard another deep breath. ‘Come along, we’ll be missed. Wouldn’t want a scandal at Queen Margaret’s on top of everything else.’

Then the teachers’ footsteps padded out of the room, their voices retreating down the ruined corridors. Sherlock turned, wide-eyed, to look at Vicky, who was staring down at her own shuffling feet.

‘What do you reckon?’ asked Sherlock, still in a whisper, although Brown and Martin were surely out of earshot by now.

‘Dunno,’ said Vicky, stubbing at the sooty floor with her toe.

‘You don’t know?’ said Sherlock, incredulous. ‘That’s all you’ve got to say? I’ve never heard Brown get so upset. This Williams sounds a complete idiot.’

‘Dunno,’ Vicky said again. ‘School governors seem to like what he’s doing.’

‘Well of course they do,’ said Sherlock, speaking slowly, as if to the mentally deficient. ‘They like anything that means they don’t have to pay for a proper physics department.’ She looked harder at Vicky, who still wouldn’t meet her eyes. ‘What’s got into you, anyway?’ she asked.

Vicky heaved a breath into her lungs. ‘I don’t—I suppose you’re lucky then, that you’re only a fifth form. You don’t have to go listen to Dr. Williams. Maybe I’m just—interested to hear what he’s got to say.’

Sherlock was momentarily dumbstruck. ‘You’re interested. To hear what he’s got to say.’ Her voice was flat as she repeated the words, and she stared intently at the top of Vicky’s head where it was bent toward the ground. Vicky nodded, minutely. Sherlock licked her lips, kept watching.

‘You can’t be—worried?’ she said slowly, still looking at Vicky’s part. Vicky didn’t respond. Sherlock was incredulous. ‘You are. You’re actually worried that playing hockey has made you—what? Where are you going? Vicky!’

For Vicky had kicked the wall and started walking, fast, in the other direction, back toward the castle. ‘Vicky, wait!’ Sherlock called, but Vicky broke into a run, and Sherlock thought she heard a mumbled ‘Leave me alone, Holmes,’ as Vicky’s blonde head disappeared through the stone doorway.

Well! thought Sherlock, kicking the wall herself.

Apparently Vicky was even slower than she had wanted to admit. Sherlock crossed her arms, and, though there was no one to see, rolled her eyes. She thought of Vicky, being stupid about the lecture, yawning when Sherlock talked about poisons.
Then she thought about Vicky defending Sherlock to Cecilia McIntosh. Calling Sherlock lovely. Making her cry out, and melt. Telling her she’d make a brilliant detective. She kicked the wall again.

Well.

It was a problem, and problems could be solved. If Vicky Trevor were silly enough to believe in so-called ‘science’ so shabby it couldn’t even fool Professor Brown, then Sherlock would just have to do some research. She would have to look over Dr. Williams’s data, and present the opposing case.

She nodded to herself, alone against the burnt-out wall. It was a simple matter, she thought, of reviewing the evidence and presenting a logical argument; and it was lucky, wasn’t it? that Sherlock was so uniquely suited to the job. Vicky was worried, which was ridiculous. But Sherlock would set Vicky’s fears to rest. It was the least she could do.

Sherlock smiled to herself. She kicked the wall again, but in decisiveness this time, rather than anger. It was, she thought again, the least she could do—and she knew just the way to make it stick.

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Vicky Trevor settled into her seat in the lecture hall, surrounded by her hockey friends, and let out a held breath.

She felt, in fact, like she’d been holding her breath constantly the last two weeks. What with Aunt Emily’s warnings still echoing in her head—and the heavy petting with a new, distractingly lovely Sherlock Holmes—and Vicky’s fears about whether she was already too far down Dr. Williams’s abhorred road to turn about—and her anxieties about whether she would want to turn about even if she could—what with all of that, May hadn’t been the easy coast to graduation Vicky had been expecting.

She felt vaguely guilty admitting it to herself, but it was a relief to be away from Sherlock. The fifth forms were not invited to Dr. Williams’s lecture, and so Vicky sat in the down-at-heel splendour of the Castle Howard ballroom in her baby-blue frock, relieved and awkward, like a sailor who spends his shore leave at a feud-filled family Christmas.

She felt a kind of—of responsibility, she supposed, to this softer, more girlish Sherlock, this Sherlock who hardly seemed, anymore, to be odd or off-putting at all. Vicky sometimes wondered if the strange, grubby kid, the Sherlock who had run tests on her own dog bites and chattered about poisonous mushrooms, had been all in Vicky’s head. Around the new Sherlock it was difficult to think, difficult to understand: Vicky was filled with such sharp longing—to have her, to keep her—and with a strange sense of duty. It was a protectiveness incompatible, she thought, with baby-blue frocks and demure smiles, and with crossing her legs at the knee instead of the ankle. With all the things, according to Aunt Emily and now Dr. Williams, that could save Vicky from perpetual disappointment, from a lifetime of abandonment.

Vicky fidgeted in her starched cotton frock; tugged at her white gloves. They were all the things Vicky hated, anyhow. But it would be so much easier, if she didn’t.

Professor Brown and a few of the senior staff were moving about on the makeshift stage, arranging and rearranging the dinner chairs that flanked the ad hoc podium. Vicky amused herself looking about for Professor Martin. She spotted him in the second row, head bowed over a book. He’d taken Brown at her word, then, and was avoiding meeting her eyes. Vicky smiled to herself. Then she felt anxious, and stopped.

She took a deep breath. She needn’t think of Sherlock all this evening, she reminded herself. She
could just—just blend in with the other girls, and listen to the lecture. She glanced over at Tara Fredericks-Halloway; Tara pulled a grotesque face, then grinned. Vicky grinned back.

Brown was standing at the podium now, ringing the bell for quiet. Vicky faced forward. Despite herself, she noticed how Brown kept her stern glance from lighting anywhere near Martin, who had now stowed his book and raised his head attentively. Vicky imagined his look of mild, politely-feigned interest. Brown started in about the great honour being done to Queen Margaret’s by the visit of such an eminent et cetera et cetera, and Vicky wondered idly whether Brown, at this precise moment, was closer to tears or laughter. She turned her head to roll her eyes at Tara, and then—froze.

Inching around the corner of one of the ballroom’s side doors, and dressed, for some odd reason, in an old QM’s uniform, was the very person Vicky had been trying to banish from her thoughts. Vicky blinked, and looked again. The pale face emerging from the low doorway light persisted stubbornly in being Sherlock’s. Vicky’s stomach dropped, full of a leaden dread.

So much for her bit of sanctuary. What was Sherlock doing here? Why was she lurking in the shadows? And why had she got an oversized notebook clutched under her arm? Sherlock caught Vicky’s panicked eye at that moment, and her mouth curled into a brilliant smile—one wider, and somehow sharper, than Vicky had ever seen.

Vicky’s intestines felt gripped by a dreadful squeezing hand. She shook her head, a minute jerk side to side. Sherlock kept smiling, and put her finger to her lips. Vicky turned forward. Her face was flushed; her palms damp. This was all wrong, all dreadfully wrong. Sherlock was dreadfully wrong.

She simply wouldn’t look at Sherlock, Vicky told herself, as the audience clapped politely for the end of Professor Brown’s speech, and Brown was replaced at the podium by a slim, balding blond man in a grey suit and a navy tie. She didn’t have the slightest notion what Sherlock meant by sneaking in here, but surely no one need suspect any connexion with Vicky. And perhaps, she thought wildly, as the clapping died down and Dr. Williams flashed the room a grin full of straight white teeth, nothing would happen at all. Perhaps Sherlock merely wanted to observe. Perhaps Sherlock—dare Vicky hope it?—had been swayed by Vicky’s own interest in the lecture, and had decided to come herself. There was no reason for panic.

Vicky attempted to focus on the stage, where Dr. Williams had launched into his introductory gambit. Praise to the long and illustrious history of Queen Margaret’s School, and all the upstanding, hard-working wives and mothers it had educated; sincere wishes that this tradition continue long into the future. Vicky thought it would be hard paying attention to such waffle, even if her guts hadn’t been trying to tie themselves in knots. In her peripheral vision, Rosie Barlett was ostentatiously stifling a yawn.

‘Well-meaning intellectuals in recent years,’ Dr. Williams was saying, ‘have lobbied for greater parity—’ and Vicky actively restrained her head from turning around to look. What was Sherlock doing? What was wrong with her? Had she moved forward from her spot near the door, since the last time Vicky had seen her? Vicky stared stubbornly ahead.

‘However,’ Dr. Williams went on, removing the cover on one of several easels set up next to the podium, ‘the best modern science strongly suggests that these arguments, while well-meant, are far from serving the best interests of the girls in question—or indeed, if I may say so—’ he flashed an ingratiating smirk, ‘—the best interests of the nation. In studies tracking the development of the suprarenal gland in female students reading English, History, Physics and Mathematics at Girton College, Cambridge, for example—’

At the mention of physics Vicky could no longer control her head. It whipped round without her
consent, searching out Sherlock. She scanned the crowd for a few seconds before spotting her: Sherlock had slipped into a seat on the edge of the room. Vicky couldn’t see the oversized notebook; she supposed it must be under Sherlock’s seat. Sherlock herself, much to Vicky’s surprised relief, was leaning back in her chair, head tipped to the side and fingers steepled in front of her mouth, seemingly deeply absorbed in Dr. Williams’s speech.

Vicky faced forward again, feeling her eyebrows go up. Perhaps, after all, Sherlock had only wanted to listen to the lecture. The fist around Vicky’s intestines unclenched ever so slightly. She wondered, as Dr. Williams droned on about glandular development in laboratory rats, what Sherlock must be making of it all. The lecture was so far failing to answer many of Vicky’s questions—but then, her attention had been compromised. She cleared her throat, attempted to put Sherlock out of her mind, and wrenched her thoughts back to the stage.

‘All of which goes to show,’ Dr. Williams was saying, gesturing emphatically with his pointer at the third easel, ‘That you cannot confine the desire and aptitude for combat to cricket and football, nor the overdevelopment of intellectualism to the study of physics and mathematics.’ Vicky noticed that Professor Brown, at this point, seemed to be biting the inside of her own lips, her mouth contorting, her eyes fixed on Professor Martin. ‘These qualities,’ Dr. Williams went on, ‘inevitably appear in the whole character, and what was originally a gentle, feminine girl becomes harsh and bellicose in all relations to life, and deluded as to her own strengths and weaknesses.’

*Deluded*, thought Vicky, dully. *Harsh and bellicose.* Was this her future, then? Dr. Williams’s words melded in her mind with others: a perpetual childhood, Aunt Emily had said, and you will always be left behind. It was true that Vicky could hardly imagine herself turning out correctly, not ‘gentle’ or ‘feminine’ like Anabelle or Cassie or even, these days, Sherlo—

‘Pardon me, Dr. Williams,’ said a high voice, lifting itself from the shuffling of the audience to interrupt Vicky’s thoughts. Heads all throughout the ballroom snapped around. A chorus of tittering laughter went up from the little group of hockey girls across the way, and Vicky’s surprise turned to sheer dread as she recognised Sherlock’s voice. She turned her head slowly, feeling she was caught in a nightmare.

‘Pardon me,’ said Sherlock again, ‘but have there, by any chance, been long-term studies on the glandular changes experienced by rats and university students removed from habitual physical and mental stimulation?’

Williams shaded his eyes, peering peevishly into the crowd. Sherlock was getting to her feet, one hand still in the air, the other clutching the oversized notebook. Tara Fredericks-Halloway and Caitlin Pierce were giggling behind their hands; Tara caught Vicky’s gaze. ‘*Holmes*,’ Tara mouthed, and rolled her eyes. Vicky tried to smile back.

‘Only I’ve been looking into it,’ Sherlock continued, seemingly oblivious to all the gaping she was receiving, ‘and I can’t find—well, any. Nor have I been able to uncover evidence of a link between oversized ductless glands and aggressive behaviour in humans, only in rats. While the two organisms are sufficiently similar to suggest a connexion, there have been medical trials which showed promise in rats but failed in humans—those involving bacterial digestion in the upper intestine, for example, or functionality after certain kinds of brain damage. That should certainly bring into question an across-the-board analogy between the two.’

Vicky’s mouth was dry with panic. Caitlin and Tara were doubled up now, gripping each others’ shoulders and laughing. What was Caitlin thinking? Couldn’t she see that she was proving Dr. Williams’s point? She was a living demonstration of the—the harsh, the *bellicose* traits of women allowed to study these—physics, and—and mathematics. She was giving all of them at QM’s a bad
name. And what of the smiling, girlish Sherlock, whom Vicky had wanted to protect? The look Sherlock was giving Dr. Williams was brash, verging on smug. Vicky felt repulsed.

Dr. Williams was coming out of his shocked trance, and gesturing impatiently. ‘Miss—’ he said, waving his hand.

‘Holmes,’ said Sherlock, glancing down at her notebook and then briefly over at Vicky, who cringed down in her seat, heart trying to hold to something that was fast slipping away. ‘And I also seem to have missed the portion of the report in which your team outlined their laboratory controls. For example, while there does seem to be a correlation between oversized glands and combative behaviour in rats, there is little discussion of breeding, environment, or other secondary causes which might lead to either condition.’

Dr. Williams and Professor Brown seemed to snap back to themselves at the same moment. ‘That will be quite enough, Miss Holmes,’ barked out Brown, just as Williams was flashing another toothy smile and saying ‘I regret to inform the young lady that this is not the approved question-and-answer period—’. What would Dr. Williams think of this? Wondered Vicky wildly. And Tara and Caitlin had seen Vicky with Sherlock, had seen her defend Sherlock. (But that had been a different Sherlock, a different Sherlock altogether.) Who would they tell? What might Aunt Emily think? Vicky was sure she was about to be sick.

‘But Professor,’ Sherlock said, looking wide-eyed toward Brown. ‘You must see that in the absence of a differential analysis, or long-term studies on the reversibility of these effects, Dr. Williams’s conclusions are deeply—’

Then three things happened simultaneously, and only later could Vicky separate them in her mind. One was that Groundskeeper MacNeil, who had been hovering near the ballroom door, moved up and hooked his arms into Sherlock’s elbows, tugging her backward toward the exit and throwing her off-balance. She looked ridiculous in her too-tight uniform, kicking and fighting him as he dragged her back toward the door. Caitlin Pierce lost all semblance of control, literally rolling on the floor laughing.

Another was that Professor Brown, looking unaccountably stricken and still biting the inside of her mouth, called out: ‘We will discuss this in my office, Miss Holmes,’ sounding almost stricken. As if she were speaking to herself.

And the third was that Vicky Trevor felt herself rise up from her seat snarling, her hands balled into fists, ready to drum Sherlock Holmes out of Queen Margaret’s herself.

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The train’s wheels pushed and pulled, faster and faster. The whistle blew, and the station receded, and Sherlock hunkered down in her seat, a dirty knot of sandy-hot eyes and mismatched clothes.

Since the evening after the lecture (just repulsive can’t believe you’ll be lonely for) she had refused to brush her hair, or to clothe herself in anything but khaki trousers and a stolen drama-department smock. Three days later that’s what she was wearing still, slouched in the seat of the first-class compartment, on her way back to the family estate. There hadn’t been much anyone could do to dissuade her, after all, once they had told her she was expelled.

Not that she could be surprised to be chucked out. Brown had warned her, hadn’t she, that she
would have to expel Sherlock if Sherlock broke any more school rules? And Sherlock, alight with fury and indignation, had delivered up the evidence herself. The stolen clothes she was wearing. The outing into the (don’t you touch me you’ll be lonely for) burnt wing. Eavesdropping on Professor Brown’s private conversations. All on top of Sherlock’s insubordination at the lecture. Brown’s mouth had become grimmer and paler the longer Sherlock talked, and soon the headmistress had been pushing her knuckles into her eye sockets every few minutes, just giving Sherlock enough rope.

In the end it had hardly mattered that Sherlock had avoided mention of (just the kind of miserable never want to see you) Vicky Trevor. Brown had assumed Sherlock had been in the burnt wing to gather specimens for more forbidden experiments; Sherlock hadn’t argued. A few hours later she hadn’t particularly wanted to think about Vicky, anyway.

The train slowed, its brakes screeching as they entered a village station. The outer door of Sherlock’s car clanged. A man and woman lurched into her compartment. Sherlock’s brain supplied information without conscious effort on her part: both in their mid-twenties. Strangers to one another, the woman better-off than the man. The man invalided home from the war with a foot injury, the woman having lost her fiancé. They sat on opposite sides of the aisle, as far from Sherlock as they could get. She supposed that she probably smelled as foul as she (repulsive mortified childish) looked, and felt a rush of vindictive pleasure.

It wasn’t that Queen Margeret’s was any great loss, she thought bitterly, with a twinge of regret for the slime mould colonies in the burnt wing. It was only that she had thought, after Brown herself had spoken of Dr. Williams with such frustration and disdain—but no matter. She had the measure of the woman now.

Just as she had the measure of Vicky Trevor. Sherlock inched further down in her seat, scowling and thinking of Vicky’s contorted face, the curl of her upper lip as she’d told Sherlock—well. All the tedious (disgust me such a selfish childish never been so mortified you’re just the kind of miserable bitter dyke hope they chuck you never want to speak to you again) uncivilised things she’d said. Sherlock yawned, ostentatiously, trying to feel bored.

It was all so dreary, after all. Just another trip back to Mummy and Mycroft, another round of tutors and condescension and stern disappointment. Nothing tremendously different, was there, from all the other expulsions? So Sherlock had thought she could comfort Vicky, that they could fly in the face of it together. That Sherlock would be clever and Vicky would be fond, and they would laugh together as they’d done at first, that day in the burnt wing.

So Sherlock had been wrong.

And she should have known, really, that such an idea was (miserable kind of never speak to you) ridiculous. The evidence had all been there: the times Vicky’d been gentle, the times she’d been bored. That first kiss, Sherlock realised now, the one that followed on her deductions about the fire, was an outlier. An irrelevancy. With romance, with girls like Vicky, it would always be about control, about someone building themselves up by diminishing Sherlock into normalcy. Mediocrity. Controlling Sherlock’s body: how it looked, what it felt, what it…felt.

But it was one thing, thought Sherlock, to try on Cassie Rogers or Rosie Bartlett when convenient. That had been of interest, even exhilarating. It was quite another to contemplate (unnatural repulsive hope they chuck you) never being anyone else. If that was the condition of romance, it was unacceptable. Never, never again. Never again.

The towns came closer and faster as the train approached London. Sherlock wondered dully if someone would be waiting for her. It was too much to hope, surely, that she would have any time alone in the city. The weather was clement enough; she could sleep outside, or break into an
evacuated flat. The remainder of her term pocket money would buy her a few meals, enough for two or three days. In her filthy, mismatched clothes she could try, again, passing for a boy—could determine where she’d gone wrong last week in the village.

She sat up a bit straighter, turning to the side of the compartment to count the coins in her bag. It wasn’t impossible, was it? Even if Mummy or Mycroft had sent a servant, she might sneak past unnoticed. To think of London’s myriad transformations of the past eighteen months, all waiting in beloved squares and avenues to be discovered. To think of the wide, wild city, with all its abandoned spaces opened by the Blitz to the night sky. Sherlock hugged herself suddenly with a fierce, angry joy.

For there was one thing precious, Sherlock thought, about her time with Vicky Trevor at (repulsive don’t touch) Queen Margaret’s School. Somewhere between Groundskeeper MacNeil boxing her ears and Vicky saying she’d be brilliant at the Met; between Cassie Rogers’s sticky smile and Cecilia McIntosh’s wrap dress; between breaking her first promise to Professor Brown and slamming the front door behind herself for the last time; right in the middle of it all there she was: holding herself up on a dormitory mirror, breathless, with the freedom to be anyone she chose.

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End Part 1

Chapter End Notes

1. Dr. Williams was a real person, working around this time period in Britain. His theories, sadly, were more or less as described.

2. All of the troublesome schoolboard members are fictional, as is the Tory Chronicle newspaper. Professor Martin is also invented, and the only thing historical about Joyce Brown is her name and her profession.

3. Part of Dr. Williams’s lecture here is taken verbatim from a paper of his quoted in Rebecca Jennings’s Tomboys and Bachelor Girls:

   the effect on the temperament of the ductless glands, and said that games such as hockey and lacrosse develop that part of the suprarenal gland which presides over the combative element of a person’s character. ‘You cannot confine the desire and aptitude for combat to cricket and football,’ he said. ‘They inevitably appear in the whole character, and what was originally a gentle, feminine girl becomes harsh and bellicose in all relations to life. The women who have the responsibility of teaching these girls are, many of them themselves embittered, sexless or homosexual hoydens who try to mould the girls into their own pattern.

4. Since I apparently just can’t restrain myself when it comes to Bloomsbury, Girton College, Cambridge, is an all-women’s college referenced obliquely in Virginia Woolf’s famous A Room of One’s Own essay. It seems apropos to include it here.

5. I suspect Sherlock’s specific citations re: the differences between rats and humans might not actually have been accessible in 1943, especially the one about recovery from brain damage. (However, for her first point see page 44 of this document; for her second point see this one.) She’s a bit magic, though; so shh,
let’s roll with it.
PART 2

August, 1954
Stamford's Auto Repair, Euston Road, St. Pancras
London, England

Johnnie Watson was waist-deep under the bonnet of a Mercedes 170, spanner in her hand.
‘Right, try now?’ she called. The engine attempted to say ‘room’; managed only ‘you.’ ‘You’ it said, once—twice—three times before sputtering out.

‘Damn,’ said Johnnie.

She chewed the inside of her cheek, her lips twisting. One grease-smeared hand scratched absently at her grease-smeared cheekbone.

A shadow came up on her left, round and maternal and trailing the scent of coffee. ‘Reckon the whole cylinder is shot, Mick,’ she said, gesturing with the hand not holding the spanner. ‘Replaced the gasket, but I’m still not getting a seal.’

The shadow grunted. Lean to look. ‘Looks like,’ Mickey said, and Johnnie nodded.

They both stood in silence, contemplating the aged engine like surgeons in a sombre post-op. At last Mickey grunted again.

‘Doubt it’ll come to that,’ she said.

‘Ramsay won’t lay out for a new cylinder?’ asked Johnnie.

Mickey chuckled. The dimples looked more at home on her ruddy face than the wistfulness she’d just been trying on.

‘I’d put money on it he won’t. Rabbiting on to Roger McAllister about buying a Cadillac, a few nights ago.’

Johnnie snorted. ‘Buying American,’ she said, and spat on the packed dirt floor.

Mickey’s smile widened, and she looked from the engine to Johnnie. ‘A Mercedes-Benz isn’t a British car either,’ she said, her voice teasing. ‘You might say buying German is worse, even.’

Johnnie groaned, and made a face. Always having a laugh, she thought. Then she looked back at the engine, and her expression softened. ‘Yeah,’ she said, ‘but it’s a beautiful old thing, anyway.’ Her free hand reached out to snug the spark plugs against their contacts.

Mickey’s smile faltered. ‘Oi there,’ she said, raising a cautionary finger, ‘don’t even think about it, John. No, I’m serious—’ as Johnnie groaned again, ‘—you don’t have space for a monster like this, you don’t even have a proper place for that gorgeous bike you’ve got. Don’t be—’

‘I know, I know, Mick,’ said Johnnie, but it was no good. Mickey’d got herself started.

‘It’s only I don’t employ vagrants from off the street, Johnnie,’ she said. ‘Hell, you haven’t even got a place for yourself for long. When’s Margrit due back, end of next week? I told you, take a day off and look at some flats.’

Johnnie fiddled with the spanner. ‘I’m looking, I just—it’s not easy, you know, there’s still not a lot out there. It’s not as if I can kip on the sofa of some married dear with two wee ones and a semi-detached in New Town Bugger-All.’

Mickey let out a bark of a laugh, and Johnnie’s lip twitched. She spit over the side again and tried to look offended.

‘Yeah, you laugh. I’ll be huddled behind the rubbish bins of some starving artist in a godforsaken garret in the godforsaken East End. Can’t afford much more on my own.’
Mickey looked indulgent. ‘You don’t have to keep living in North Kensington,’ she pointed out. Johnnie glared daggers.

‘I’m not. I plan to get as far from those posh Kensington and Chelsea bints as I possibly can, thanks very much.’

‘No, you don’t,’ Mickey said, reasonably. ‘How will you meet someone new?’

Johnnie spluttered, actually looked over at her. ‘Mickey Stamford,’ she said. ‘Are you playing matchmaker?’

Mickey shrugged, in what Johnnie considered an unnecessarily provoking way. Johnnie tried to kick her without turning away from the engine, jabbing her foot out behind her. ‘What do you know about Chelsea, Stamford? You know all about it out there? Yeah?’

Mickey chuckled, and dodged easily out of her way. Mickey wasn’t on the scene, was married to a man and quite happy, but she had her opinions, anyway. Johnnie drew her foot back in.

‘Seriously though, I’m off the scene for a while,’ she said, reaching back into the car’s guts. ‘More trouble than it’s worth. What? I’m serious,’ she continued, as Mickey’s laughter redoubled.

‘Right,’ Mickey said, her face schooling itself into submission. ‘Johanna Watson, born-again celibate. I can see it now. Sworn off the fairer sex for the rest of her days. Devoted herself to good works.’ Johnnie was starting to snicker despite herself, leaning over to check for cracks in the cylinder.

‘All I can say is,’ said Mickey, ‘you’d best find yourself an unsuspecting career girl willing to room with you, and you’d best do it yesterday. Margrit O’Brian will flay you alive if she comes home to find you still sleeping on her sofa when she told you months ago to get out.’

‘Yeah,’ Johnnie said, distracted now as she bent over to check the other side of the faulty cylinder. ‘Magine she will. And that’s if I’d stuck to the sofa. Look, I’d like to try something, you want to get back behind the wheel?’

Mickey looked doubtful, but set her now-cold cup of coffee on the counter by the wall, and hauled herself back into the driver’s seat. ‘Say when,’ she called, and Johnnie called out ‘When!’

The next moment Johnnie leapt back, clutching at her head.

‘Bollocks!’ she yelled. ‘Mickey! Keep off the bloody horn, can’t you?’

‘Sorry, sorry!’ came a harassed voice from behind the windscreen, and the scuffling noises of Mickey getting back down. ‘Sorry Johnnie,’ she said again, more sincerely, taking in the gash on Johnnie’s scalp, dripping red where she’d straightened into the underside of the open bonnet.

‘I’ll get you a bandage,’ Mickey said, and headed in the back.

‘Fuck,’ said Johnnie.

Which is how Johnnie Watson came to be doubled halfway over and making a sound like a prolonged grunt, the heel of one hand digging engine grease into her bloodied scalp and the ball of one booted foot kicking against the dirt, when Sherlock Holmes wheeled a bicycle into the garage.

Johnnie, at first, didn’t hear the clicking of the wheel spokes over the sounds of her own breath and cursing, and so she was surprised to look up and see the kid’s amused grey eyes taking her in.
Because Sherlock struck her so, that first August day: a scruffy kid, dark curls piled haphazardly on her head and trailing down her temples and over her eyes. She was all angles and too thin for her clothes, which were an odd mixture of the type Johnnie had seen on the young East Enders hanging about in the smoke billowing from holes in the walls. Dark, cuffed denim trousers; a ladies’ blouse with a high Edwardian collar and frayed lace on the yoke; scuffed black mens’ brogues and a tailored riding habit probably made for a woman of Johnnie’s mother’s generation. Not that Martha Watson had ever had call to wear such a thing.

Johnnie just stood there, clutching at her head like an idiot, even after she’d seen the girl waiting to be helped. Kid must be all of seventeen, but she did have eyes. Mad grey eyes, and they ought to have been cold. They were hard and sharp, all right, but also somehow burning, and Johnnie Watson, who had once talked the legendary Diana Dors out of her £200 cocktail dress in the washroom of the Gateways for a barroom bet, felt suddenly ill-at-ease in front of a gawky sixth-former.

Or at least self-conscious, anyway. Of her grimy blue coveralls. Of the black oil in her hair. Of her grease-streaked face.

Hell, Johnnie thought. No more of that.

So she scrubbed at her hands with a rag from the counter, and ambled over to the girl with her best serving-the-public expression firmly in place. ‘Bent your brake rotor disk,’ she said, gesturing with the rag to the bicycle’s front wheel. ‘We’ll get you sorted.’

Johnnie didn’t feel bad for grinning. Ten years now serving customers and she knew what made her seem approachable, trustworthy. Mickey called it her boyish charm; the clients all liked her. But she could feel a hint of self-satisfaction in her smile at making such a quick diagnosis. One of the brake pads was resting against the disk, though the girl’s hands were off the handbrakes.

The grey eyes blinked once. ‘I see you served in the north during the war,’ the girl said, in a voice surprisingly deep for one so young, and surprisingly plummy for one so dressed. ‘Was it Germany, or Poland? Must have driven an ambulance for a few years, but not the full four. Injured in the shoulder, either in battle or through many repetitions of a task, or…yes, both, I think. You’re staying in North Kensington with a—ah.’ The girl’s fingers went to her mouth, and she paused a moment. ‘No parents living,’ she finished up.

Johnnie was no longer grinning; her mouth was hanging open. ‘Bloody—I mean—pardon my language, but you can’t even be old enough to remember the war.’

‘Can’t I?’ the girl said, smirking.

‘I—well, it’s none of my business, but that was—remarkable. Unless—have you been, I don’t know, reading up on me?’ She squinted at her. ‘You’re not a Watson cousin, are you?’

‘I should hope not,’ said the girl, the plumminess bleeding through a bit more into her voice. ‘Sherlock Holmes,’ she said, holding out her hand and tilting her head. ‘And I’m not afraid of a bit of engine grease.’

Johnnie looked ruefully down at her grimy hands, but reached out with the right to take long, slender fingers in her own. She hated to smudge them, they were so pale and delicate-looking, but Sherlock’s handshake was firm enough to belie any impression of fragility.

‘Johnnie Watson,’ she said, and took her hand back, massaging it absently with her left as she contemplated the strange girl. Thinking about the things Sherlock had known. Johnnie’s family? Her
military service? Was the girl old enough to remember the war? Johnnie looked at Sherlock’s nails, which were rough-bitten, and her hairline, which had the roughness and spots of the recently pubescent. Damned if Johnnie could reckon it.

‘How did you—’ she began, but Sherlock cut in with a more formal air than before, sounding slightly bored.

‘I’m owed a favour by Max Ewing of Sloane Street,’ she said, ‘and I believe Mr. Ewing is owed a favour by one Mickey Stamford. All debts are cancelled if Mrs. Stamford consents to—’ she gestured at the bicycle.

‘Yeah,’ said Johnnie vaguely, still raking her gaze over Sherlock. Then, ‘yes,’ she said, snapping her mind back to the bicycle. ‘Well, I told you we can get you fixed easy enough. Just,’ with a gesture of her head toward the storage room, ‘let me gather up a few things.’

Minutes later Johnnie, her head bandaged, was crouching on the gear side of the bike, a piece of wire wrapped around the front fork next to the bent disk and clipped to a centimetre’s length. She was spinning the wheel and watching the disk’s rotation, and feeling Sherlock’s eyes on her kneeling back.

‘You going to say, then? How you knew all that about me?’ Johnnie asked, adjusting the spanner in her hand and flicking a glance back at the strange kid, who looked like she was considering the question.

‘Maybe I should wait until you fix my brakes,’ Sherlock said. ‘Sometimes people don’t like hearing about it.’

‘I’ve got to fix your bike,’ Johnnie pointed out. ‘My guv’ll have my head otherwise.’

‘All right then,’ said Sherlock. Johnnie glanced over again to where she was standing, and saw Sherlock’s grey eyes narrow. Christ, they were unnerving. Slanted and almond-shaped and x-raying Johnnie with that cold heat. Johnnie looked back at the bike, and Sherlock started talking.

‘Ambulance driver is surely obvious from your profession,’ she said. ‘A female mechanic in her early thirties; the odds are astronomical you learned those skills in the War. I was watching for a few minutes before you hit your head; you were working on a German car but you never hesitated when reaching into the engine, as a mechanic would whose primary experience was with British-made machines. Spent time in one of the Germanic countries then, probably helping with clean-up after liberation.’

Johnnie let out a low whistle. She was working slowly, methodically, using the spanner to adjust the disk gradually closer to true. Tweak the disk, spin the wheel, watch the disk. Tweak the disk, spin the wheel, watch the disk. Sherlock’s surprisingly deep voice, in combination with the repetitive work, was almost hypnotic.

‘But nearly all the land girls who dedicated themselves to ambulance-driving and still needed to make a living, went into nursing after the War,’ Sherlock went on. ‘Either that, or stayed in the service. You’re presumably not the nursing type, since here you are in a garage, making lower wages than you might. Likely, then, that you spent time on other assignments as well during the war.’

Sherlock paused; Johnnie was still spinning the wheel; she realised her mouth was open again. ‘Er,’ she said, ‘yeah, you—you’re right so far,’ and Sherlock made an ‘Mmm’ing noise.

‘Not to mention your shoulder,’ the girl went on. ‘You’ve been rolling it as if it aches close to your
neck, but just before you hit your head you also clutched your upper arm on the other side, as if in sudden pain. The two kinds of pain could conceivably follow from the same injury, but more likely you suffered both a sudden trauma and a repetitive injury over time. Possibly, the latter exacerbated the initial injury from the former.’

‘Oh come on, you—really?’ said Johnnie, sliding her eyes for a moment from the wheel, to Sherlock’s face. She had brought the disk nearly back to true by now; it only kissed the cut end of the wire for the briefest span of the wheel’s rotation. Sherlock was unreadable. ‘What about where I live?’ Johnnie demanded, as the wheel spun unseen under her fingers.

‘Tube ticket sticking out of your coverall pocket,’ said Sherlock, dismissive. She obviously considered that a freebie. Johnnie snorted and turned back to the wheel, shaking her head to get the grin off her face.

‘And given the housing shortage, and the common expectation that unmarried daughters will stay at home to care for aging mothers and fathers, it’s obvious you don’t have any living family.’

‘Maybe m’mum lives in Kensington,’ said Johnnie, straightening up, the rotor disk restored to itself. She turned to find ice-grey eyes still trained on her shoulders, and felt vaguely guilty for the heat in her gut. Probably not even of age, she reminded herself. Probably all agog over boys. Eighteen-year-old boys. Johnnie gripped the handlebars of Sherlock’s bike with what may have been unnecessary force.

‘Speaking the way you do?’ scoffed Sherlock, recalling Johnnie to herself. Ah yes, Kensington. ‘Not likely. Besides, you would never wear your hair like that if you had parents still living.’ Johnnie’s hand went up to her hair, automatically, and the extra grease in the short, already-stiffening spikes could only have proved Sherlock’s point.

‘But considering your chosen profession,’ Sherlock went on, ‘it’s extremely unlikely you can afford to live alone, especially in Kensington. So: a, er, a friend.’ Sherlock looked up at the ceiling for the briefest moment before spreading her hands, then reaching them over and laying them half on top of Johnnie’s, reclaiming the handlebars of her bike. Her eyes bored into Johnnie’s, and she didn’t smile. Johnnie didn’t look away.

‘That’s…bloody amazing,’ breathed Johnnie, and the corner of Sherlock’s lip—full, thought Johnnie, full and pink—quirked up, her head tilting a tiny bit as if in surprise. But she kept looking into Johnnie’s eyes, and: Shit, Johnnie thought. Maybe Mickey’s right about me. Maybe I should get back on the scene.

Mickey had appeared in the door from the back, sipping another cup of coffee and smiling at Sherlock. ‘Right you are, Miss,’ she said, nodding. ‘And Miss Watson’s ‘er, friend’ will be right livid if she finds Miss Watson still in residence on her return. So if Mr. Ewing knows of any available flat-shares going for under forty pounds a month, you can tell him I would still owe him.’

Johnnie blinked at last, and looked away from Sherlock’s ice-burnt eyes. ‘Mickey,’ she said over her shoulder, ‘it’s not on to harass the customers with my personal troubles.’

Mickey was unconcerned. ‘Huddled behind dust bins,’ she reminded Johnnie, with a wave of her coffee cup.

Johnnie turned back to Sherlock, hand ruffling her own hair, and smiled ruefully. ‘Never mind her,’ she said.

But Sherlock Holmes said nothing in response. She cocked her head and pursed her lips, and looked
merely thoughtful as she wheeled her bicycle through the open garage door, flexing her fingers now and then over the newly-repaired handbrakes.

***

Five days later Mickey was out for dinner, and Johnnie was finishing up switching out a fuel pump on an Austin-Healey. She liked the quiet of the shop when she had it to herself. Unselfconscious, she’d put the hi-fi on loud, and was singing along to ‘Mess Around.’ She was tightening the last bolt, jitterbugging her feet and exaggerating the rhotic r’s in a parody of Ray Charles’s accent, when a grey-haired crone staggered into the garage.

The woman was clutching at her side, bleeding all over her light-blue gloves, through a rent in the waistband of her tweed skirt. She shuffled along the floor, the flesh of her feet and ankles swollen over the tops of her brogues, her lined face screwed up in pain. Johnnie glanced up, frozen in her ridiculous position for a moment before dropping the bolt and rushing over to the door.

‘Ma’am!’ Johnnie said, grasping the dowager’s elbow and guiding her toward a seat. ‘You’re hurt; sit down and I’ll call you an ambulance.’ The woman’s back was hunched and she bared her yellowed teeth a bit, clutching at her side.

‘Oh heavens no, no ambulance,’ the woman croaked, as Johnnie lowered her into the straight-backed chair. ‘You can fix me up, dearie, I’m sure.’

‘Ma’am?’ said Johnnie. Perhaps the woman was hard of hearing, or a bit dim. She raised her voice. ‘This is only an auto-repair shop, ma’am. You’ll be needing a doctor.’ She gave a reassuring elbow pat as the woman settled on the seat.

‘Gracious, there’s no need to shout, my dear,’ said the old woman placidly, though her crabbed hands in their gloves were clenched on the wooden seat. She was obviously in pain. ‘You’ve training enough, I can tell by looking at you. No doctors today.’

Johnnie wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, but bit it back out of respect. ‘I don’t think you understand, ma’am,’ she said instead, enunciating each word. ‘Only, I’m a mechanic, and you’ll be needing—at least. A nurse, at least.’ From what she could tell it seemed unlikely the woman was seriously hurt, but even a relatively minor injury, at her age—

‘Miss Watson,’ the woman snapped. Johnnie started at her own name, even as she noticed vaguely that some of the thready croak had gone out of the woman’s voice. ‘I loathe repeating myself, and I am sure you are more than capable. It’s hardly more than a scratch. I wish to avoid—’ she grunted slightly as she closed her eyes, ‘—awkward questions.’

Johnnie was entirely nonplussed. ‘I don’t—have we—’ she said, and then, ‘do I know you, ma’am?’

The woman didn’t speak immediately, but opened her eyes again just as she turned her head to look straight at Johnnie. Odd, intense, slanted grey eyes sought out hers, and Johnnie’s hand came up to cover her mouth. ‘You’re—are you related to Miss Holmes, then?’

The woman smiled a slow, lazy smile, utterly at odds with both the blood at her ribs, and her dithering of a few moments previous. Johnnie felt like a rodent, hypnotised by a snake.

‘Closely,’ the woman said, her voice gone deep and vibrant, her odd eyes still trained on Johnnie’s. ‘Care to fetch the bandages now?’

Johnnie started, suddenly guilty. What was she on about? She couldn’t simply let this elderly woman sit bleeding on Mickey’s waiting room chair. She turned toward the office, speaking over her
‘Yes, of course, sorry, ma’am, Mrs.—is it Mrs. Holmes, then? I do have a bit of medical training, only it’s been so long since I’ve made any use of it, I was surprised you would, er—’ ferreting around for the first aid kit, in amongst Mickey’s papers, ‘—Miss Holmes must have told you about my ambulance-driving days, then?’

Johnnie heard a surprisingly deep laugh from the other room, and turned to look through the office door just in time to see the woman rock back in laughter, then clutch her side in pain at the motion. She grimaced, then smiled again, wryly, and looked back up to where Johnnie stood, clutching the first aid kid in one hand.

‘Something like that,’ she said. ‘Come here, come and patch me up. I think you’ll be surprised.’

Johnnie walked back toward the chair, slowly, looking hard at the old woman. Mrs. Holmes had been stooped, with a decided hump to her back when she had staggered into the garage; but Johnnie noticed, with a creeping feeling up her neck, that her spine was now perfectly straight.

It was that creeping feeling, gooseflesh down the skin of her back, that made Johnnie hesitate. She stood above the woman for a few charged moments, just looking, and for some unaccountable reason Mrs. Holmes’s shrivelled mouth looked poised for laughter. Johnnie crouched by her side, unbuttoned her tweed suit jacket, lifted up the hem of the white blouse underneath it, and—

‘What in—’ she gasped, falling backward off her heels and landing hard on her tailbone. Above her, the injured woman was shaking with silent laughter. ‘I did warn you,’ she said.

‘That’s impossible,’ breathed Johnnie, scrambling back up into her crouch for another look. The wound wasn’t much: a long, shallow gash from what looked to be a knife blade. Plenty of open skin from which to bleed, but no damage to anything vital.

But around the wound. Around the wound—despite the papery, spotted texture of the skin on the woman’s face—was the taut, unblemished torso of a young woman. Johnnie stared at this impossible skin for a solid five seconds before shaking herself out of her reverie, opening a prepackaged moist flannel from the kit, and beginning to clean the wound. While she worked she glanced up occasionally at the odd eyes, the smirking mouth. Even now, with this creamy midriff for comparison, the texture and spotting on the woman’s face looked absolutely convincing. Only, if Johnnie looked very carefully at the skin around her eyes, could she detect the smooth plump texture of youth.

‘You…are Miss Holmes,’ said Johnnie, and although it wasn’t exactly a question, she felt she would still welcome the confirmation.

‘Sherlock, please,’ said Sherlock. ‘And you can see now that hospital staff may have asked some very awkward questions, had I turned up like this demanding treatment.’

‘How did you—no, hold on, why are you got up like somebody’s dowager aunt?’ said Johnnie, throwing aside the flannel and tearing open a bandage. ‘And how did you come to be slashed across the ribs?’

‘Occupational hazard,’ said Sherlock. ‘I was recovering a bit of—misappropriated property, for a client. I thought this,’ she gestured at her ensemble, ‘would be an inconspicuous persona for the job. It worked, too, but they—they caught on at the end.’ She chuckled, then winced.

‘So you’re—what? You work for the Met?’ asked Johnnie. ‘I know a few of the MWPP girls. Have
you ever worked with Sally—’

‘I do not work for the police,’ interrupted Sherlock. ‘I’m a—that is, I’m building a practice as a private investigator.’

‘Really?’ said Johnnie, taping the bandage to the flawless white skin covering Sherlock’s ribs. Her fingertips smoothed the join between skin and fabric tape. ‘That does sound more interesting than rousting the working girls on Piccadilly.’

When Sherlock snickered, Johnnie could see, for a moment, the face of the young girl she had first met, behind Sherlock’s mask of age. ‘Exactly how old are you, anyway?’ Johnnie said, at the same moment Sherlock waved her hand and muttered ‘It does, theoretically.’

Then Sherlock smiled, teasing. When she smiled like that it was hard to imagine how she’d fooled Johnnie at all. Even with all the makeup and prosthetics—Johnnie assumed, at least, that’s what they were—it was a dazzling smile.

‘Old enough,’ Sherlock announced, full of youthful energy, ‘to have found and rented us a flat. All your housing difficulties are solved.’

Johnnie spluttered up at her patient. ‘Pardon?’ she said. ‘I barely know you. Anyway, how do you know I haven’t found a flat, since last Thursday?’

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. ‘Have you?’ she asked, as if in no doubt about the answer, and Johnnie was just about to lie out of spite, to tell this stranger that she had indeed, thanks awfully, but a voice from the garage door cut across her indignant thoughts.

‘She hasn’t even looked, don’t let her tell you different.’ Mickey Stamford was leaning against the garage-door tracks, grinning all across her ruddy face.

‘Mickey, dammit, stay out of my personal business,’ snapped Johnnie, colouring up.

‘Dustbins,’ said Mickey, placidly. ‘In the East End,’ she added.

Sherlock was looking at Johnnie intently, eyes narrowed. ‘Interesting that you remember so exactly which day we met,’ she said, almost under her breath, and emphasising the final t with relish.

Johnnie, exasperated, threw the tape and bandages back in the first aid kit and rose to her feet. ‘You’re impossible, both of you,’ she said, looking from one to the other before she stormed back into the office to put the kit away.

‘Bloody impossible,’ she repeated, moving piles of paper back into their original locations. She didn’t know why she was bothering, except to buy a little time. Outside, she could hear Sherlock explaining her identity to an impressed Mickey.

The truth is that Johnnie’s flat situation was getting desperate. Margrit would be back in three days, and Johnnie did not fancy the row that would ensue if they met again. Johnnie wasn’t even sure why she had put off so long the search for a new place, except that she fully expected it to be demoralising. Nearly all her mates had had their turns moaning about the flat shortage, about the way the housing boards favoured families and young men over single women. On her wages she truly dreaded the flatmates she might end up with. And Sherlock Holmes seemed mad, indeed, but mad in a way that was—different.

Johnnie cleared her throat, staring down at Mickey’s piles of paper. In any case Sherlock could hardly be worse than some of the alternatives, even leaving aside Johnnie’s unlooked-for thoughts
about the girl’s hipbones under her shifting knife-scarred skin. Johnnie sighed, steeled herself, and turned to leave the office.

‘Right,’ she said, ignoring Mickey’s smirking face and walking right up to Sherlock, still seated on the straight-backed chair. ‘Where is this flat you’ve picked out for us?’

‘Central location,’ said Sherlock, with a straight face that looked like it was costing her. ‘Baker Street, not a ten minutes’ walk from here.’

‘Convenient,’ piped up Mickey. ‘It’d get you away from those, what was it, John? “Kensington and Chelsea bints”?’

Johnnie glared at her, then turned back to Sherlock. ‘Does this convenient, centrally-located flat have any covered parking nearby?’ she asked, and was perversely pleased to see a look of surprise flash across Sherlock’s weirdly age-ambiguous face.

‘I’m—not sure,’ she said, looking thoughtful.

‘Johnnie has her baby to think about,’ said Mickey, gesturing toward the back corner of the shop. Sherlock’s look of bemusement turned to outright alarm for a split-second, until she realised Mickey was referring, not to a human infant, but to a tarpaulin-covered mass against the far wall. Johnnie saw the relief on her face, and chuckled.

Sherlock got up, nimble now and light-limbed despite the trappings of age, and moved toward the corner. Johnnie rushed ahead of her. She removed the tarpaulin herself, careful and precise.

Underneath was a motorbike. Johnnie saw it again with fresh eyes whenever she showed it off to someone for the first time: black and shining, its chrome polished clean. The line of the thing was low, sleek. Powerful. Johnnie ran a hand over the seat and the gas tank with a reverent familiarity, and thought she heard Sherlock make a noise in her throat.

‘Vincent Black Lightning,’ said Johnnie, and she could feel the proud grin spreading across her face. ‘It’s a ’49. Bike like this set the Land Speed Record this year. I’d never’ve been able to afford it, but this bastard bought it new and damn near wrecked it. Would have sold it for scrap. Still cost most of my discharge money.’

Mickey stood with crossed arms, looking at Johnnie like a proud parent. ‘John’s rebuilt that bike from the ground up,’ she said, when Johnnie showed no signs of singing her own praises. ‘Wouldn’t have thought it was possible, the shape it was in when she picked it up. Told her she was crazy. But, three years later and it runs like a dream.’

Johnnie hmm’ed in her throat, feeling the weight of Sherlock’s eyes on the bike as if on Johnnie’s own body. She rubbed her hands up and down the sides of her coveralls. ‘Still needs a few tweaks,’ she said, looking at the bike rather than either Mickey or Sherlock. ‘But she goes all right.’

Mickey snorted. ‘She goes all right,’ she parroted. ‘John Watson, you’ve picked up half the girls in Chelsea on that motorbike, and don’t you deny it.’

Johnnie felt gut-punched. Not how she’d have chosen to suss out this strange girl’s feelings; but what if Sherlock—? Johnnie’s eyes slid sideways; her breath held.

Sherlock was watching closely, looking between Mickey and Johnnie as if piecing something together. Mickey seemed to remember her presence, and said ‘She’ll let you on the back of it if you ask nicely, I don’t doubt.’
‘Stamford!’ Johnnie growled, at the same moment Sherlock shook herself, taking her eyes off Johnnie and looking back at the bike.

‘I, um,’ she said. ‘I appreciate the thought but I know I’m not—’ She took a deep breath, drew herself up. Looked steadily over at Johnnie. Johnnie felt her chest clench.

‘I think you should know I consider myself married to my work,’ Sherlock said, her tones plummy again. ‘And this idea of rooming together, you mustn’t think—it’s only that we share an urgent need for a flat-share. And you seem less tiresome than most of the idiots I come across. So.’ Johnnie could see the girl’s jaw working, underneath the artificial wrinkles and age spots.

So much for dreams of creamy white skin, thought Johnnie. But really, what had she expected? Things were probably better this way. She knew (thinking of Margrit and her sneering pink lips) about moving in with girlfriends from bitter experience. At the very least Sherlock, thanks to Mickey Stamford’s perpetual allergy to the concept of discretion, already knew what she was getting into. She didn’t seem disgusted by the idea of living with an invert; that would simplify things, anyway.

Johnnie coughed, and swung the tarpaulin back over the bike. ‘Point taken,’ she said. ‘So. Covered car park?’

Mickey clapped a hand on her shoulder. ‘You know you can leave it here for as long as you need, Johnnie. Just get yourself out of Kensington and I’ll sleep easier.’

Johnnie looked back at Sherlock, sheepish and resigned, her hands in her coverall pockets. ‘Tell me when,’ she said. ‘When and where.’ And Sherlock beamed.

Chapter End Notes

1. Huge thanks to Katya for the beautiful art at the beginning of this chapter!
2. I tried to do my research here, but I am really, really not a car person. Please forgive any ridiculous mistakes on the car-repair sections.
3. Johnnie is lucky, given the time period, to be in a situation where she’s pretty much 100% out to her employer and larger social circle. From what I can gather, this was unusual but not unheard-of. It was more common among working-class butches, who, like Johnnie, did manual labor. Many middle-class women who presented as butch on the nights and weekends, were forced by their office jobs to be closeted and present as feminine at work. (Again, lesbianism was never outlawed in Britain like sodomy/male homosexuality was, but social stigma and loss of livelihood were real threats.)
4. New Town Bugger-All: “New Town” was the prefix of the names of the new suburbs constructed from the ground up in the wake of WWII. There was a mass exodus from the scarce, blitzed-out accommodations in London proper, to these brand new towns. In many cases they were dirty, unfinished and lonely at first, but people still flocked to them for their modern conveniences - like running water and indoor plumbing - which many flats in London still didn’t have in the 1950s.
5. Kensington at mid-century was a haven for middle-class and upper-middle-class lesbians. Chelsea (more so between the Wars but also post-WWII) was a generally permissive, artistic, “bohemian” neighborhood, and a destination for queer folks for both housing and entertainment. Social mores were more relaxed, although, as Jill Gardiner writes in From the Closet to the Screen: Women at the
Gateways:

This famous broad-mindedness had its limits as Quentin Crisp recalled: ‘In Chelsea eating houses I was there on sufferance and was warned not to sit near the window.' Sheila and her girlfriend ‘would walk arm in arm, but we wouldn’t walk hand in hand, even in Chelsea.’

6. Sherlock’s look in this and a few other scenes is based on this photoshoot of the working-class “teddy girl” youth culture in 1950s London, by Ken Russell.

7. On Diana Dors: Jill Gardiner writes, in From the Closet to the Screen: Women at the Gateways Club 1945-85: “Diana Dors, an actress famous for her blonde and busty sex appeal, had gravitated to Chelsea in 1948 when she first moved away from home.” Dors became a regular at the Gateways, the most famous lesbian club in London at that time.

8. Women in the British armed forces in WWII were not allowed to fire guns or serve in actual battle, but members of the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service, which was the women’s division of the forces), also known as land girls, did serve as radar operators, ambulance drivers, dispatch drivers, and so on. It would have been very common, if not universal, for ATS members to be trained in basic vehicle repair. Those driving ambulances or working as messengers or mechanics would have had more in-depth training.

9. The expectation that unmarried daughters would stay at home to care for ageing relatives was a BIG theme in the oral histories of London lesbians from this era. It was an obstacle for many couples who would otherwise have set up house together (officially as “flatmates” since marriage was obviously impossible for same-sex couples). An unmarried woman with a living parent would be seen as scandalous if she chose not to live with that parent.

10. Ray Charles’s “Mess Around” came out in 1953; British radio was still dominated by American acts at this point.

11. MWPP: Metropolitan Women’s Police Patrol. The female division of the Met, which was generally restricted to cases pertaining to women and children. From Rebecca Jennings’s Tomboys and Bachelor Girls:

   Women police were still largely expected to specialise in areas involving women and children. They arrested or moved on prostitutes, picked up missing girls and approved school absconders, as well as occasionally intervening in domestic disputes.

   The services and the MWPP attracted a relatively large percentage of lesbians, although there was a strong push, during the 50s, to re-“feminize” the MWPP’s image - which entailed making sure queer members of the force were fully closeted.

12. A visual aid for Johnnie’s motorbike, the 1948 Vincent Black Lightning:
Chapter 6

August, 1954
221B Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

The next few months felt to Johnnie like the battlefield she’d forgotten she loved.

Everything sped up; everything brightened. That lukewarm sameness she had known since the War’s end—the drab London of butter rations, and cold-water flats, and forced optimism over future playgrounds in future suburbs—was all forgotten. Instead there was urgency. Motion. A shock to the system that Johnnie hadn’t felt since she’d gone against orders in 1944, loading heavy artillery in the Margate night while doodlebugs detonated overhead.

And the odd thing was, that it wasn’t even dire or life-threatening. Not at first. It was just…Sherlock, and so strange and fast and giddy that it beat Johnnie’s heart.

She thought, looking back, that in the last static moment she was alone at the flat.

221B Baker Street was, as promised, conveniently located. It was also tiny, and sweltering, and smelled of fish from the cafe downstairs. Its every available surface, from doorway to washroom, was heaped with clothing and laboratory equipment, and the muck caked on to the one stovetop burner was an inexplicable blue-green colour. The elderly landlady hadn’t been able to suppress a startled wince as she’d led Johnnie through, and Johnnie discovered soon enough that the burner had nothing on the state of the washbasin in the WC.

Miraculously, though, 221B was also equipped with functional indoor plumbing. Johnnie would put up with stranger than Sherlock Holmes, she thought; would in fact cheerfully strip to her skivvies and do a full-scale decontamination of the flat, if it meant not having to traipse outside for a piss come the frigid nights of January. Poisonous as Margrit had been toward the end, heated WCs were an aspect of Kensington life to which Johnnie had become accustomed.

And so she had out her pocket knife, and was chipping away determinedly at the blue-green residue. The door creaked. She started: a thin, pale man in a charcoal suit stepped neatly through the door. All his looks were fastidious: trimmed moustache, polished spectacles; shined shoes. Like he commuted from the suburbs; like he supervised his children’s dental hygiene. Like he was here in this filthy flat to assess and measure, and probably, thought Johnnie, to penalise.

She straightened up, starting to explain herself. But the man raised his eyebrow and opened his mouth, and out came ‘Really, Miss Watson, I’d have thought the third time would be lucky,’ in Sherlock’s contralto drawl, and the world whirled into another gear.

The next thing she knew, Johnnie was shoving Sherlock’s suited shoulder, and Sherlock was smirking. And then Johnnie was gesturing at the blue-green gunk, and Sherlock was shrugging. And then a tiny, rat-faced woman was barging in, breathless, at the top of the stairs, and Sherlock was chivvying her to a seat and asking her to tell all about her son, and this girl with whom he had been seen. And then Johnnie and Sherlock were running through neighbourhood alleys, dodging into shops and behind parked cabs as Johnnie panted ‘This is normal for you, then, is it?’; and then they
were crouching together behind some bins in St. Pancras Station, watching a young girl throw a
bundle of ten-pound notes in the face of a young man; and it wasn’t until late that night, or more
accurately early the next morning, as they were sitting together in Mrs. Fitzpatrick’s parlour, eating
mutton stew and listening to her fret about the arrival of her first (and bastard) grandchild, that
Johnnie realised Sherlock had spent the whole mad evening disguised as a City banker, and had
never offered the smallest explanation as to why.

Johnnie was punchy and sleep-starved. She had to fight back the giggles. Sherlock’s alter-ego now
looked like he’d been through a very rough budget meeting indeed: suit stained with street grime and
engine grease, trousers rumpled and creased. Nothing could be more out of place. When he
suggested to Mrs. Fitzpatrick, grave and authoritative as he picked at his stew, that the best layette
prices in the neighbourhood were to be found in a little shop at the far end of Wyndham Mews,
Johnnie couldn’t help it: she burst into open laughter, apologising with upheld hand. The look of
consternation on Sherlock’s face was oddly dear.

And later they were laughing still, back in 221B in the pale light of dawn, both backed against the
wall with their payment at their feet in the form of more mutton stew than they could possibly fit in
the ice-box.

‘Sherlock,’ Johnnie gasped, and Sherlock looked up at the ceiling, grinning, and said, ‘Johnnie.’

‘What on earth were—why were you—’ Johnnie still couldn’t get enough breath through her
laughter, so was gesturing at Sherlock’s ruined suit, ‘—why were you dressed like this, in the first
place?’

‘Hm,’ said Sherlock, looking down at the smears and creases, ‘well.’ And then, looking straight at
Johnnie, ‘Perhaps I thought it might make you feel more comfortable.’ She held her serious face for a
second and a half before they were both doubled up, sinking to the floor with laughter.

‘You ridiculous—why would you think it—might make me—’ gasped Johnnie, but she couldn’t
finish, and Sherlock said, ‘Yes, you know, doing business with a bloke,’ and Johnnie pounded the
floor with the flat of her hand as tears ran down her face. When they were both sprawled panting on
the floor Sherlock said, rueful, lifting her head to glance at the suit, ‘I suppose I can always use it in
future to infiltrate the bread line.’ Johnnie said, ‘We’ll need the bread to soak up all this stew,’ and
they giggled weakly and shook their heads as the sun rose over London.

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Four hours later, Johnnie was due at the garage. When she got off work that afternoon she toted her
few possessions from Margrit’s place to Baker Street. It only needed two trips on the Vincent, there
was so little to take.

Even so, she hadn’t time to find places for all of it before a newly bohemian Sherlock was whirling
in, got up in a striped knit top, capris and espadrilles, with her hair in a false shingle and brightly-
coloured scarves knotted at her neck and her wrists.

She banged into Johnnie’s room; sat on the bed. Lit a cigarette, and unloosed a torrent of words.
Johnnie glanced up from organising her dresser drawer, annoyed, ready to tell Sherlock off for being
about to burn a hole in the coverlet, and—there. There was one of those rare moments of stillness.

Sherlock had knotted a blue kerchief at her throat, and it thawed the icy grey of her eyes; her face
was alive with excitement. She was saying something about embezzlement, and painting, and
American-style speakeasies, but Johnnie heard none of it because Sherlock’s vicious crooked teeth
showed behind her naked lips, and her hands danced around each other in her lap, and Christ was
And not interested, Johnnie remembered, as she shook herself back into time.

Everything sped up again, then, and didn’t hitch until two in the morning. Johnnie had slept three hours in the past forty. Sherlock was smoking clove cigarettes and chatting up a pair of painters in an unlicensed garret bar, while Johnnie watched the door for either: a man of a certain description, or the Met officers who might any minute be by to shut the place down. The younger painter shifted closer to Sherlock: one hand on her knee, the other hovering worryingly above her gin and tonic. And was there something held close in the palm of his hand? Johnnie’s gut clenched; she thought she saw his fingers move. Her hand twitched toward the knife hidden in her jacket lining, but Sherlock caught her eye, warning her off.

A few minutes later Johnnie got to work out her aggression via her fist to the face and her knee to the kidney of the reedy man she’d been waiting for. She turned from his prone body, which lay unconscious on the floor, to find the painters gaping at her and Sherlock, supremely unruffled, tipping the last of her cocktail down her long white throat.

‘Be a bit less obvious next time, can’t you?’ Sherlock had muttered, hopping off the barstool. She’d plucked the man’s wallet out of his jacket before slipping down the side stairs, Johnnie following.

Another two hours—unnecessary amount of time, Johnnie thought, but Sherlock had flatly refused to ride out on the bike, and they couldn’t afford a cab—saw them back at Baker Street, still un-slept and unwashed, with their payment in face-paint and future favours and the thief’s identity revealed.

‘What “favours” could a couple of avant-garde painters possibly do us?’ grumbled Johnnie, rubbing at her own shoulder as Sherlock filed the paints into their proper compartments in the disguise kit.

Sherlock smiled to herself. It was a private, pleased little smile. But all she said was, ‘It never hurts to cultivate a wide range of investments.’

‘Hm,’ said Johnnie. ‘What are you so pleased about, then?’

Sherlock started a bit, as if caught out. ‘I,’ she said. ‘Er.’ Then her expression became something more like a smirk. ‘I switched out the cocktails while you were distracting our client.’

‘You—’ said Johnnie, smiling slow. ‘I thought he might try something.’

‘Yes, you nearly gave us away, you thought it so loudly. Does it give you peace of mind? Knowing he’ll be unconscious for another six hours? Barbital, I believe. Not very original but what can you expect? He can hardly complain; it was his own to begin with.’

Johnnie snorted. ‘Investing widely?’ she asked.

‘He ought to feel indebted,’ said Sherlock. ‘I’ll neither blackmail nor prosecute.’

‘Well,’ Johnnie said, rubbing her eyes, ‘believe me when I say that right now I am cultivating the spirit of choking down another bowl of stew, and turning in for a good—’ she looked at her watch, and groaned, ‘—two hours of sleep.’

When she finally made it upstairs, she found three separate cigarette burns in her coverlet. She couldn’t bring herself to care.
The last few months had felt, to Sherlock, like drowning in an ocean she refused to chart on the map.

Even at the time, as she had searched out the Baker Street flat and made her plans, there had been a niggling voice at the back of her mind. But she’d been caught in a paradox. Johnnie Watson was in rather desperate need of a flatshare. And she, Sherlock, did require some amount of cash income to make up her rent. And it was undeniable that Johnnie’s responses to Sherlock were unusually positive, unusually receptive. Had anyone challenged Sherlock on that point, she could have presented quantifiable data, charted or graphed. (This, even before the months of accompaniment—almost collaboration—on Sherlock’s cases.) So that when her brain had sent up small, persistent pulses of doubt about the logic of her own motivations, it seemed illogical to credit them.

She was better, Sherlock thought, her jaw clenched tight at two o’clock one stormy February morning, than those fools who repeated old mistakes.

Thunder and lightning exploded in tandem, and above her head, from Johnnie’s room, came a most un-Johnnie-like squeal. Then a low, sleepy murmur; a chuckle. Then a silence, and the faintest suggestion of a moan. Behind Sherlock’s eyes flashed memories of a pink lace party dress; glossed lips; a mass of chestnut curls. Now, alone in her room, her hand clenched around her letter-opener.

She crossed to the dresser, quick and jerky, her legs poorly aligned pistons. Pulled out the bottom drawer. At the back, behind her bedroom slippers and extending halfway across the width of the dresser, sat a neat row of metal cylinders. There were indentations in Sherlock’s socks and empty space cleared behind, where the rest of the tubes had been removed.

Sherlock sat and looked at the cylinders. She thought about Johnnie, now on her second round with the girl upstairs. Siobhan, was it? She’d been from Ballyshannon, whoever she was, near Lough Gill and the famous Lake Isle. Sherlock had known it from her voice when they’d stumbled in. Had known that Johnnie, like every other person the girl had ever met, would try to quote that awful poem at her if Sherlock mentioned Innisfree. Mentioned it.

They’d gone to bed together anyway. Tedious.

Sherlock shifted on her heels, closed her eyes.

An afternoon months previous; one of the last fine autumn days. She’d walked to the garage, still in her karate whites. Grease-smeared Johnnie, in khakis and a man’s white undershirt, had been stretched on her side next to the Vincent, propped up on one bare shoulder, reaching into the open housing of the gearbox. Her legs had tangled together on the packed dirt.

Sherlock had watched, and Johnnie had reached out for a different-sized spanner. She hadn’t taken her eyes off her work. Her fingers had been broad, and sure; had moved on the inner surfaces of the gearbox with a kind of utilitarian grace.

Johnnie’s hands weren’t precious, like those of a watchmaker; or precise in the way of Sherlock’s when she played her violin. But they were frank. Familiar. Johnnie touched the Vincent, Sherlock had thought, with the same rough, tender carelessness she showed her own skin. And Johnnie trusted so casually to her body, even after—after the war.

A silverfish had scuttled over Johnnie’s ankle then. Johnnie’s leg had twitched. Sherlock had shuddered, oddly disturbed.
Her eyes blinked open. Her mouth was painfully dry and her jaw clenched convulsively.

Sherlock pulled out two cylinders and straightened up. Screwed them open. One, and two: precise knocks against the top of the dresser, then agile twists of her fingers and thumb. She probed in an open tube with the blade of the letter opener. Brought the soaked paper up to her mouth, licking it off on the delicate silver point. She liked to do it without her fingers touching. She chewed and swallowed and scowled.

She was being stubborn. But this was the ritual, after all; she’d always enjoyed staying up late nights when it stormed. Hard rain and benzedrine smoothed out everything extra. She would be light and empty, floating behind her own hands as they moved, measured, recorded. That direct line, clean and simple, from fingers to conclusions. She’d spent winters this way since the Armistice.

Tonight, she insisted to herself, was just the same.

‘You’re down amongst the groundlings now, Holmes,’ Johnnie had said that day, when Sherlock had commented on the silverfish. ‘We poor sods haven’t maids to air out the damp.’

‘You think I come from money?’ Sherlock had asked, and ‘No,’ Johnnie had said, casually, neither hesitating nor turning around. ‘I know you come from money.’

Sherlock had raised an eyebrow, unaccountably nervous. ‘I’m—no longer in touch with my family,’ she had said in a rush. Johnnie hadn’t looked surprised.

Lightning laid open the room. The glass gleamed on Sherlock’s shelves. The thunder rumbled in. Sherlock’s heart kicked, a full-body shiver; and upstairs Johnnie’s headboard hit—hit hit—hit the wall. Sherlock skewered her fourth amphetamine strip of the evening on the tip of her silver knife, and set it to soak in her tea.

Sometimes, when the drug was just kicking in, sounds would distort around her, as if heard through waves of water. But now, coming down off the first round, it felt raw in her head. Enhanced. The scrape of metal against wood (headboard), wood against wood (foot of the bed), wood against glass (window), metal against—ah.

The sound had changed, muffled: someone had stuffed a cushion of fabric between the headboard and the wall. Sherlock pictured Siobhan’s pink party dress, wadded up like rubbish, streaked with grime from the iron supports.

And yet Siobhan would probably leave smiling tomorrow, thought Sherlock. Even laughing. Sherlock caught herself thinking about that, though it could hardly be of interest: the strange good humour of Johnnie Watson’s lace-clad women. It must be so easy in their little minds. As if they were made for this. As if nothing were at risk.

‘…I’ve known how for ages,’ Sherlock had said, ‘and I hardly learnt that at—’ Then, too late, she had shut her mouth.

‘At where?’ Johnnie had asked, sharp and delighted, swinging her legs around to face Sherlock. Sherlock had bitten out ‘Nowhere,’ which was idiotic.

Johnnie’s grin had widened. ‘Where did you go to school, Sherlock,’ she had asked, her voice teasing and sing-song and fond. She’d been leaning back on her palms then, freckled shoulders jutting forward. Deltoid muscles sharp under burnished gold skin. There were fewer freckles, Sherlock had thought, than at the height of summer.
‘Come on, tell me,’ Johnnie had wheedled. ‘Tell you what, we can both go, we’ll take the bike. A regular ride down memory lane.’ Sherlock had glanced over at the motorbike, covetous, but her stomach had churned. ‘Where was it, then?’ Johnnie had said. ‘Hill Brow School? Westminster? Queen Mar—’

‘I’ll not ride anywhere on that thing,’ Sherlock had snapped. ‘I’m not one of your—I’ve no wish for an early death.’ And they had stared at each other as the teasing grin slid from Johnnie’s face.

Sherlock’s jaw was spasming again; she made an effort to relax the muscles. Well, she thought, it was true. Sherlock was nothing so prosaic. It was different for the others.

Five minutes with this Siobhan, and Sherlock could recite the catechism of her mediocrity. Siobhan lived in Croydon. She wrote to her Irish aunts about the weather. She went into the city on Fridays, in a pink lace dress. She listened to Mrs Dale’s Diary, and hated Mrs. Mountbank. She was apprenticed in the hosiery department of a women’s clothing store. She had a secret life, yet was idiot enough to wish she hadn’t. She rode on the back of Johnnie Watson’s motorbike. She had failed out of secondary school after algebra. She visited her Gran on Sunday mornings, and when she smiled at the old lady it would be the same smile she would use on Johnnie at breakfast tomorrow. The same smile, even after Johnnie had knelt over her and pushed a knee between her legs and rocked her down into the mattress, hard, so hard that Sherlock could hear it downstairs in her—.

Pedestrian.

Sherlock took a deep breath, unclenched her jaw.

But Sherlock—Sherlock had a stable of selves. Only a fool would give up the choice among them, would agree to be whittled down, in exchange for a few involuntary muscle contractions in a rented bed. She slid three fingers under the neckline of her dressing gown; trailed the tips over her own collarbone and couldn’t hardly breathe.

Sherlock had said something ridiculous, something like—‘How did you know about my family? Do you find my Cockney unconvincing?’ It was one of the few accents Johnnie could also put on; they’d spent a frigid few days in November, camped out as beggars in the churchyard of St. Ethelreda’s.

Johnnie had laughed.

‘Do I “find your Cockney unconvincing”?’ she had mimicked. ‘No, idiot, I’m not insulting any of your—characters, or disguises, or whatever you want to call them. It’s just your sense of bloody entitlement, isn’t it? Screams “public school” a mile off.’

A sudden rush of fondness, Sherlock remembered. ‘I—are you using my own methods against me?’ she had asked. Trying not to smile.

Johnnie had given an amused little shake of her head, eyes lingering a moment on Sherlock’s. ‘Don’t need to, do I?’ Johnnie had said. ‘I know a posh git when I see one. The things you know how to wear, for Christ’s sake.’

The things you know how to.

(So when Johnnie Watson had said to her, weeks later, that night before they’d infiltrated the Carruthers’s ball, ‘You don’t reckon it would be less suspicious to go as a couple? I think Jeanette is about your size,’ holding out a swathe of lace-trimmed, bias-cut black silk, Sherlock had torn the dress to shreds, teeth bared and snarling like a hunted thing.

Johnnie had been frightened. Sherlock told herself that was good, and necessary. Sherlock was not to
be confused with one of those.)

There were panting cries from upstairs now. The foot of the bed was dragging again over the floor. Sherlock threw her cooling tea down her throat, along with its sodden paper garnish.

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Next morning the storm had blown itself out. Sherlock hadn’t slept; her focus was crystalline. She eased another drop of titrate into the flask. Siobhan and Johnnie came downstairs. Johnnie was saying ‘Mrs. Mountbank, really? But she’s impossible,’ and Siobhan protesting, giggling: ‘No, she’s saucy. I’d be a bit snappish, too, if I had to put up with that lot.’ They shut the door, quietly laughing; nothing seemed so irrelevant.

A few hours later Sherlock and Johnnie were perched on top of an omnibus, huddled together against the icy fog as they trailed Mr. Butler’s niece to her service job in Mayfair. Johnnie bent her sandy head and breathed on her hands, and in the flowerbeds she rolled her bad shoulder. But she gave Sherlock a look like revelation when Sherlock laid out the cause and effect of the case, and rolled her eyes back in her head when she tasted the French cheese Mr. Butler gave them in payment, and Sherlock couldn’t help but forget about the Siobhans of the world.

So it wasn’t until days later, as Sherlock was stuffing her butcher’s smock into the hamper for the wash, that she noticed the stains on Johnnie’s work coveralls: rusty smudges where the fabric had been stuffed behind an iron headboard.

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April, 1955
221B Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

And that, Johnnie found, was simply life with Sherlock Holmes. Mad; baffling; always in motion. Never sensical. Never dull.

In some ways, she thought, standing at the kitchen sink and finishing off the dregs of the lasagne from Mrs. Del Ponte down the street, it was a bit like being part of a secret society. Sherlock’s ‘investments’ had been cultivated very thoroughly indeed; while she had, as far as Johnnie had ever been able to ascertain, no source of cash income whatsoever, there was a constant stream of heterogeneous food and consumer goods filtering into Baker Street, augmented by standing favours.

So that, while she had little money for pubs, and scarcely ate in the first place, Sherlock did have a monthly stipend at Mr. Butler the greengrocer’s adequate to keep them in tea, bread, milk, and beans. And though, NHS be damned, she’d made Johnnie stitch up five deep cuts, bandage a sprained ankle, and relocate Sherlock’s shoulder in the first three months of their acquaintance, she was supplied with a steady stream of bronchial inhalers from Mr. Phipps the chemist down the road. And after their first row, over Sherlock’s casual appropriation of Johnnie’s work coveralls for an experiment with acids, Sherlock was able to secure a serviceable replacement from Mr. Hutchinson at the Army Surplus shop two corners down—although she complained for days after that it cut into her trade budget for disguises.

But oh, the disguises. They continued to be—what? thought Johnnie, relieved to be rinsing the last of the lasagne out of her bowl. Disconcerting? Confusing? Oddly compelling, at times?

By the end of the first three months Johnnie was almost always able to recognise Sherlock, as long as they met in the flat. Not that that made everything comfortable. She still had the bruise from the night
Sherlock had burst into her bedroom in the guise of a prison warden, while Johnnie had had her head between the thighs of a lovely dark-haired French girl. Thérèse had screamed and screamed, and kneed Johnnie hard in her bad shoulder, and Johnnie’s attempts to explain that Thérèse could quiet down, this was Johnnie’s flatmate, proved woefully inadequate. The girl had grabbed her dress and edged out of the room, wide eyes on the gaping warden.

‘Jesus wept, Sherlock,’ Johnnie had groaned, rolling her shoulder and wincing as she re-buttoned her shirt. ‘You couldn’t have waited ten minutes? That was bloody locked.’ But she had followed an oddly quiet Sherlock into the chilly March night.

Out in the wilds of London, on the other hand, Sherlock could still trick Johnnie, and seemed to delight in it. Last Saturday Johnnie had spent fifteen minutes in heated debate with a corpulent Castilian ticket vendor, only to realise, as her intended train left the station and the cursed old witch grinned at her gap-toothed, that this was Sherlock. Wanting company on a case, and amusing herself getting it.

‘Goddammit,’ Johnnie had muttered, slapping her palm on the ticket counter and watching her train steam away from the station. But she hadn’t been able to quell a twinge of relief. She’d have spent the day in the suburbs, with her dolt of a brother.

‘Ah,’ the ticket vendor had said, ducking out of her ticket booth with alarming speed. ‘Ahh, por fin, dath cuento. Entonthes, ¿vámonos?’ and Johnnie had muttered ‘Sí, mocosa,’ mouth quirking up and hand going compulsively to check her jacket lining for her knife.

‘What?’ she had said, in response to the woman’s surprised look, but Sherlock had just turned, eyebrows raised, and inquired ‘Castilian “er friend”?’ over her shoulder. Johnnie hadn’t responded. Ana had been Chilean.

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But it wasn’t so much the surprise revelations that threw her. Those were familiar, chaste: the spike of adrenaline; the shock of recognition; the slide into brotherly, shoulder-punching annoyance. No, it was what happened afterward. What happened once Johnnie knew that the young slicked-back Teddy boy, or the frowzy middle-aged shopkeeper, or the young boy in sweat-soaked karate whites, was actually Sherlock.

Johnnie mulled over the problem in pubs; in lulls at the garage; while doing the washing up. She tried desperately to avoid thinking about it at night, when she was alone or—god forbid—not alone, in her bed.

That she was drawn to Sherlock was no great surprise, and no great problem either. Johnnie Watson had loved, and lived with, enough women to respect a clear disavowal of interest. But this was—with Sherlock she felt, constantly, on the wrong foot. As if she were resisting an entire army, instead of just one person.

For one thing, Johnnie had never (they joked about gold stars down at the Gates) had the remotest desire to go to bed with a man. But when she and Sherlock spent the week undercover as Evan and Michael, out-of-town executives at Mrs. Fitzpatrick’s brother’s advertising firm, she could hardly think for staring at the tailored navy wool suiting taut across Sherlock’s backside. Couldn’t stop herself picturing Sherlock, waking up in the morning and binding her breasts close to her body. Was she rough about it, impatient of her own flesh? Or gentle and clumsy with sleep? Did she—and hell, Johnnie cut off that train of thought five, ten times a day.

In any case, Sherlock was utterly convincing as a man; Johnnie expected the job to be a respite. But
all that week her lips were dry from constant licking, and she had to ask Sherlock to repeat herself on three separate occasions.

The odd thing was, that at least one of those times, Sherlock had seemed almost pleased.

It was hell to puzzle out, thought Johnnie, two nights after the ad job wrapped up. She was sitting at the Boar and Badger behind her third pint, taking a strange satisfaction in ordering whatever she liked, and in paying the barkeep in cash. Why the appeal of Evan, at whom Johnnie might have sneered in the street had she not known his real identity? What was the appeal of Michelle the Hackney housewife, or old Mrs. Holmes? Was it their unreality that appealed? Or precisely how real they seemed? Or simply the childish satisfaction of knowing a secret?

Even when Sherlock went out as a man, it wasn’t as if she were like Johnnie herself, or the other butches down at the Robin Hood or the Gateways. Sherlock’s disguises were all—pragmatic, Johnnie supposed. Suited to the purposes of the case, and Sherlock turned them on and off like breathing.

(Though—there had been the incident before they infiltrated the Carruthers’s ball, when Johnnie had suggested—.

And Sherlock had been so angry. White-lipped and frightening, ripping the seams out of the black lace dress Jeanette had left at the flat. Johnnie didn’t understand; didn’t like to think about it.)

But it didn’t matter, really, whether Sherlock was got up as a fishmonger, or a fortune-teller, or an Oxford don. At the oddest moments she would glance at Johnnie, and a look would flash out in her eyes, and—there she would be. Something essentially Sherlock beneath it all.

And every time it happened, all Johnnie wanted in the world was to see that look again.

Chapter End Notes

1. Doodlebugs were rocket bombs, the precursor of cruise missiles. They were developed by the German Luftwaffe during WWII, and were used heavily in the bombardment of south-east England during the latter half of the war.
2. Even in London, a shockingly large percentage of housing in 1945 was still without “conveniences” like indoor toilets. That, combined with the housing shortage created by the Blitz, made the soulless, newly-constructed suburbs more attractive, especially to young families.
3. Army and Navy Surplus shops were actually one of the only sources of casual butch clothing for women after the war—a number of the oral histories quoted in Jennings mention buying clothes there.
5. “That awful poem”: Not actually awful! But very sentimental for Sherlock’s taste: Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” Also very famous at the time; quoting it at poor Siobhan might be like meeting a woman from the Ipanema neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, and singing “The Girl from Ipanema” at her.
6. Mrs. Dale’s Diary was a BBC radio show beloved of British housewives at the time, and epitomising mainstream, middle-class values. Mrs. Mountbank was the token villain of the piece; hatred toward her would be the expected reaction and
would, to Sherlock’s mind, show a lack of originality. A modern equivalent might be reading JK Rowling’s Harry Potter books and feeling no sympathy whatsoever for Severus Snape.

7. Recreational Benzedrine use, either in pill form or via modified inhaler as depicted here, was big among the Beats, and in pill form even spread to polite suburban society in the 50s and 60s. It’s an amphetamine, similar to Dexedrine in modern parlance. It was more readily available and less socially stigmatised during this period than cocaine, morphine and heroin, which were all very taboo indeed (much more so than in Victorian or even WWI-era England, and more so than they are today). So bennies seemed like a likely equivalent for Sherlock Holmes’s canonical drug use.

Effects of stimulant use varies a lot depending on the extant brain chemistry of the user. Sherlock’s experience of it as smoothing, focusing, and somewhat calming, as well as damping down her thoughts somewhat, might indicate that she’s somewhere on the ADHD/autism spectrum. The depictions of both her experiences on the high of the drug, as well as coming down off one dose and waiting for the next to kick in, are informed by an amalgam of personal testimonies on Erowid.org. In particular, the convulsive jaw clenching, dry mouth, sensitised sound perceptions (and muted/“underwater” sound perceptions); and the feelings of being empty/mechanical, and floating above whatever task you are accomplishing, are all sensations mentioned by ADHD-spectrum users of di-amphetamine.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 8, 1955
11:30pm
King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

The thing was, first of all, that they had to make sure everyone was out of Mr. Rivers’s brother’s office for the night. Then there were the complications involved in picking the lock; and in locating Mrs. Rivers’s necklace (so awkward, a thief in the family, the Riverses hadn’t wanted the police involved); and in putting the office back to rights before they left. What with all of that, it was half eleven before Sherlock and Johnnie were finally making their way, grinning and jostling against each other, down King’s Street, another case resolved.

Sherlock was especially giddy over the Rivers case because Mrs. Rivers had agreed to pay them in actual cash, rather than in trade. Thus Sherlock and Johnnie were now embroiled in a discussion of how best to spend their unlooked-for windfall. Should it go, as Sherlock suggested, to the selection of new acids, beakers and reagents she’d been wanting in order to finish her formula for inducing temporary fever? Or might it be better spent, as Johnnie insisted, on branching out from the dull foodstuffs available at Mr. Butler’s?

Sherlock was bent over, tying her laces: she’d on black-on-black saddle shoes to go with her black trousers and old-fashioned black ladies’ blouse. She was rolling her eyes, saying ‘You would fly directly to food, you’re so predictable,’ and Johnnie was speaking over her, crooning ‘quiche and pastry, Sherlock. Fettucini alfredo and a bottle of real claret.’ Sherlock was just thinking that the cream sauce sounded ghastly but perhaps the claret, in any case, was decent idea, when she stood up into a world that wobbled dangerously and tipped to the side.

Then there was a firm arm holding her up. Johnnie’s voice, as if from a great distance and down a metal tube, called ‘Sherlock! Are you all right? Sherlock!’ Sherlock’s vision had restricted, suddenly, to a fuzzy circle surrounded by black. Her arm was flung out against the building to steady herself, but her fingertips tingled and she couldn’t feel it where they touched the dirty stone.

‘A’right,’ she said, her tongue thick in her mouth. ‘Might…pass out.’

‘Sherlock, Christ. Warbledoofle?’ said Johnnie, but no, that couldn’t be right.

‘Hng?’ said Sherlock, shaking her head experimentally.

“When did you last eat, Sherlock,’ Johnnie repeated, the sense making it through this time to Sherlock’s brain.

‘Nnn,’ Sherlock said, her vision clearing a bit but her limbs still shaky. ‘Er. I’m sure it was— yesterday? Or—Wednesday?’

‘Jesus.’ Sherlock felt her arm being hoisted over Johnnie’s shoulders, her weight supported by Johnnie’s warm solidity as Johnnie moved her off down the street. Strong shoulders, Sherlock thought. Compact, strong—and Johnnie’s hair smelt almost overwhelmingly sweet, and Sherlock— Sherlock shook her head again, trying to clear it.
‘Where’re we going?’ she heard herself slur into the back of Johnnie’s head. An empty taxi had just crawled by, and she remembered: they were still all the way out in Chelsea. ‘We can get a cab home, pay for it out of the Rivers money.’

‘We’ve nothing in the kitchen at home,’ Johnnie said. ‘Besides, I know a place. Just around this corner.’

***

It was a green door, unmarked, on a side street just off King’s Road. Johnnie leaned Sherlock against the wall before reaching out to open it. Sherlock tried to protest that she was fine now, she was perfectly able to stand up on her own, but her head was suddenly pounding and she still felt nauseated from almost fainting.

Then Johnnie was supporting her again. They were descending a long flight of stairs into a basement room. The air looked hazy to Sherlock, and dim. She wondered if it were cigarette smoke, or her own blurred vision, or a combination of the two. Everything felt a bit surreal. She put out her foot into the smoky darkness, leaning on Johnnie. She put out the other one.

And so they clattered through the smoke haze to the bottom of the stairs. Sherlock squinted ahead. Perched on a stool by the entrance to the larger room was—well, the woman seemed an apparition. Her dark hair was arranged into a perfect chignon at her nape and she was smoking out of an old-fashioned cigarette holder, her full scarlet lips pursing around the black bone and her eyes narrowing over rounded cheeks. Her skin was a dark, Mediterranean olive; against it a single strand of pearls glowed at her throat. Her black cocktail dress was couture-long and wasp-waisted, and her black patent pumps had four-inch heels. The woman looked like a film star. She struck Sherlock as utterly unlikely to inhabit any basement bar that Johnnie Watson would frequent.

Sherlock realised suddenly that her eyes were dry from not blinking. And she registered, at a delay, that the woman was speaking to Johnnie in a deep, lightly accented voice, gesturing toward Sherlock with her lengthened cigarette.

‘Of course I am glad to see you again, John!’ she said. ‘Always, you know, always! But I am surprised you would—it is Saturday evening, after all, and you know we have requirements regarding dress…’

‘Listen Gina,’ Johnnie said, hitching Sherlock’s arm across her shoulders again as Sherlock blinked her eyes, hard, ‘I know it’s unusual, but my friend here is having a medical problem. I just need to get her some orange juice, maybe a sandwich, and then we’ll be on our way, all right?’

Gina raised one perfectly-penciled eyebrow, sliding her eyes toward Sherlock. ‘You are sure she is not simply drunk?’

Gina’s accent thickened along with her bluntness. Sherlock deduced a childhood in Milan, or possibly Turin, and an adolescence in Wales. She felt Johnnie’s arm tighten around her waist; realised that her body had sagged.

‘No. Look,’ said Johnnie, ‘we’ve been on a case. Sherlock here, she’s a private detective.’ Gina looked, if anything, even more skeptical at this. ‘She is,’ insisted Johnnie, licking her lips, ‘and we’ve been working on a stakeout all day today and haven’t been able to leave our posts to eat.’

‘Johnnie,’ chided Gina, rolling her eyes, ‘I go to the films. Is this not why there are two of you? So that she—’ gesturing to Sherlock, ‘can stay, and you can run and fetch the coffee and biscuits?’
Johnnie shook her head in mock disappointment; pasted on a secret-telling grin. ‘Gina Ware, you believe everything you see at the cinema? You telling me Andie Levinson never comes in here ready to eat you out of house and home? Yeah?’

Gina laughed, throwing her head back, pearls at her throat and the smoke curling out from between her lacquered lips. Then, at last, she nodded, gesturing them both through. ‘For no one else, John Watson, would I allow such a thing,’ she said. And then, her voice raised, as an afterthought: ‘And you will deal, yourself, with the femmes!’

Sherlock spared a moment of puzzlement for this last statement, and caught a glimpse of Johnnie’s eye-roll as she steered Sherlock through the doorway. ‘I owe you, Gina,’ she called back over her shoulder.

The explosion of noise as they turned the corner into the club proper did nothing to alleviate Sherlock’s pounding headache. A wall of sound at first, which only gradually broke apart into its component parts as Johnnie steered her through the crush. The din of shouted conversation crested as they passed the bar. Women in mens’ suits, hair slicked back and money in hand, stood four deep awaiting drinks. Some of them had their arms around other women got up like Gina, in cocktail dresses and stilettos.

Johnnie and Sherlock inched between the crowd at the bar and that on the small, packed dance floor, where couples writhed against each other front-to-front and front-to-back, unusually close. The static thrum of many conversations was layered over with the strains of a three-piece orchestra.

Pain beat in Sherlock’s head against impressionistic images. The ordered chaos of moving bodies. Pinstripes glimpsed through the slit of a satin skirt. A red gash against the sea of dark limbs as a suited dancer bent her partner backwards into a deep dip and the others moved around them. Cigarettes and lipstickched lips. Smiles and glares directed toward Johnnie, and herself.

For they were stopped often, on the way across the room, by exclamations, hands outreached to shake Johnnie’s, delighted smiles of recognition. The suited, slicked-back women reached for Johnnie’s hand and slapped her back, yelling hearty queries about repairs on the Vincent, and venturing surprised glances at Sherlock.

Johnnie shook them off with grins and nods. They were easily dislodged, unlike the others: the buxom women in cashmere pullovers, and the willowy women in plunging silk, the tiny Frenchwomen with painted-on faces, who emerged out of the dark, one after the other, curling their lips at Sherlock and their bodies toward Johnnie, asking to be introduced and looking as if they wanted nothing less.

‘This is Sherlock Holmes,’ shouted Johnnie, over and over again as they inched across the crowded space. ‘Sherlock, this is…’


Johnnie had reached out and grabbed the sleeve of a tall woman with night-dark skin, who was wearing a blazer and a loosened tie and carrying a drinks tray. Johnnie spoke into her ear, pointing at an empty booth against the wall. The woman nodded seriously, her shorn head austere, her hand gripping Johnnie’s shoulder. And then Astrid—Sherlock thought it was Astrid, or maybe it was Sam—leansed over with a look like they’d all had, cat-eye liner and dark pink lips, and said into her ear ‘What are you?’ sounding disgusted.

_Pulse_ against Sherlock’s skull and down her back. ‘Private detective,’ she said, as if from a distance,
looking around for Johnnie.

Astrid blew smoke in her face. Paradoxically, it settled Sherlock’s nerves; she breathed deep. ‘Butch or femme?’ said Astrid, and when Sherlock looked blank: ‘You’re not dressed. You’re what—trying to have it both ways? That doesn’t fly in here.’

*Pulse* high and sharp at the back of Sherlock’s head. She looked down at her tatty black trousers and lacy black blouse. Astrid sneered. Sherlock drew herself up, trying to look haughty.

‘We *some* of us—’ Sherlock began, ‘have better—’ and felt the ground sway, and a hand come out of the darkness at her side to hold her up. Johnnie’s voice cut Astrid’s smirking expression off her face.

‘My friend needs to sit down,’ Sherlock heard, in firm, almost angry tones.

But Johnnie’s voice was back in the long metal pipe and Sherlock’s vision was starting to narrow again. She let herself cling a bit as Johnnie shouldered through the last few feet and lowered Sherlock onto the upholstery of a booth. Then Johnnie’s hands were in her hair and cradling her forehead, pushing gently downward until Sherlock’s head was resting on her own arms on the tabletop. The dizziness retreated a fraction.

‘Just breathe, Sherlock,’ said Johnnie, her voice slightly lower now, soft against Sherlock’s ear. ‘Breathe, all right?’

Sherlock nodded. Johnnie’s hand was still petting her hair and her neck. Sherlock thought the nausea and dizziness might be worthwhile for a few minutes of this: no questions, no demands, just Johnnie’s blunt, calloused fingers raking through Sherlock’s curls, her thumb at the nape of Sherlock’s neck.

Then Johnnie’s hand was reaching up, and Johnnie’s voice was thanking someone. A cool, smooth surface pressed against the side of Sherlock’s face. Johnnie said ‘Orange juice, Sherlock, drink up. Your blood sugar got too low; this will—’

‘I’m *aware,*’ Sherlock snapped. But she raised her head, took the glass and sipped at it, the bright liquid impossibly tart against the dull tobacco flavour in the air. Johnnie’s hand was still rubbing lightly along Sherlock’s upper back.

‘I’m sorry it’s so mobbed,’ Johnnie said into Sherlock’s ear. ‘I forgot it was Saturday, that’s the most crowded day. Most formal, too; I like Wednesdays better. Everybody comes on Saturdays.’

Sherlock sipped her orange juice. It felt good on her head; rough on her stomach. She took it slow and it brought her brain back into focus.

She looked out over the crowd, now even denser than when they’d arrived. The orchestra was moving on to faster, more modern material, and the dance floor was so packed that it was a wonder anyone could move. Astrid-or-possibly-Sam was draped against a dark-haired woman in a black suit, her back curved to show off her décolletage.

Sherlock looked away; spotted Gina exchanging a businesslike word with the tall dark woman in the blazer and tie, who was now moving to and fro behind the bar. The woman nodded, no-nonsense but pleasant. Gina gave her a quick, glowing smile as she turned back to the door.

Sherlock thought vaguely, sipping her orange juice, that there was something hypnotic about the precision of the bartender’s movements. Nothing was hurried, and nothing was wasted; she moved with utter economy. Now her long, purpled hand reached out to gather up two martini glasses. Her
shoulders and hips twisted through; she deposited the glasses in the sink for washing-up. Her other hand reached above her to pick up a pint glass. Half a turn of her feet and hips and she was balancing it at forty-five degrees, tipping foam off the top of the beer as her left hand reached into the cupboard for serviettes. Another half-turn and the beer was on the bar on top of the first serviette, next to the second. Her loosened tie flying, her collar bright-white against the rich dark of her neck, her precise hands pouring the shaken shots over the lemon twist—it was like some mixture of ballet and clockwork.

It was like the feeling, thought Sherlock, of timing a pursuit just right, of arriving ahead of her quarry. Or like coming into the garage to find Johnnie on her back next to the raised Vincent, her knees bent and her legs straddling the back wheel, her tools spread out around her and her grease-smeared hands knowing exactly where to reach in order to—but no. Mustn’t think about that.

Sherlock jumped, guilty, as lips brushed the hair next to her ear. Johnnie had apparently followed her gaze. She said ‘That’s Smithy. American, ex-Airforce. She lives above the bar, with Gina and Ted. They—the Wares, I mean—they own this place, and Smithy manages it. Don’t see Ted around tonight.’

Sherlock tore her eyes from Smithy’s quick, measured movements and looked back around at Johnnie, who motioned to Sherlock’s forgotten orange juice. She took another sip.

‘You, er,’ she said, cringing at the line before she said it, ‘you come here often, then.’

Johnnie smiled, pained. ‘I have spent—unhealthy amounts of time here, yes.’

Sherlock remembered something Mickey Stamford had said. Her stomach dropped; she was almost sure she didn’t show it. ‘Half the girls in Chelsea?’ she asked, raising an eyebrow, and Johnnie chuckled. ‘Can’t say nobody warned you.’

It was true, thought Sherlock, which made this hot flash of—what?—of anger? jealousy? even more ridiculous. It was all too apparent exactly which half of the girls present had departed the club on the back of Johnnie Watson’s sleek black motorbike. The same half who had scoffed at Sherlock’s nude face and indeterminate clothing. The same half who looked as if they wanted to rip her from Johnnie’s side. Astrid, in her low-cut green wiggle dress; Mireille, tiny bones and pursed red lips and huge, liquid black-lashed eyes. Mindy, with her curls and her peasant blouse. Not graceful blue-dark Smithy, or awkward Andie with her slaps on the shoulder—certainly nobody like Sherlock, aggressively odd and unclassifiable.

And aggressively, yes, she was—because all that had been decided years ago, she told herself sternly. It was good, what they had now, she and Johnnie. They worked well together; they protected each other. And Sherlock’s body and mind remained her own.

So it was utterly irrational to feel like—like snarling at the idea of Johnnie riding off with Astrid or Mireille or any of them. Utterly irrational to imagine Sherlock herself, snugged up behind Johnnie on the bike, when it wasn’t on offer—not like that—and when Sherlock would refuse it in any case. Pointless to picture her own legs spread on either side of Johnnie’s hips, hugging the growling engine, her arms round Johnnie’s waist, her nose in Johnnie’s hair and how it would feel to press her hips forward in little—little thrusting movements against Johnnie’s—

Sherlock cleared her throat, hard, and looked back over at the bar. Smithy moved back and forth, pouring and shaking, and looking severe except when she flashed an occasional brilliant bright-white smile. ‘Smithy and Gina, then?’ Sherlock said, gesturing with her orange juice. It seemed the obvious conclusion. And as good a distraction as any.
Johnnie chuckled again. ‘Wouldn’t everyone here like to know,’ she said. ‘The gossip in this place, it’s—’

‘Mmm, I can imagine,’ said Sherlock, with a wry smile.

‘Well, Gina’s married to Ted, they’ve got a little daughter together. Though Ted’s a lot older and, er, not glamorous at all, like you might expect looking at Gina. Bit pudgy, you know, and one leg shorter than the other. But Ted’s a solid bloke. He and Smithy seem to honestly like each other. Most people assume there’s something between Smithy and Gina, but…’ Johnnie shrugged. ‘Might just be the butches’ wishful thinking, Gina’s so good-looking.’

‘Smithy’s nothing to complain about, either.’ The words left Sherlock’s mouth before she realised what she was saying; she snapped her jaw shut, but too late.

‘You—are you serious?’ said Johnnie, her voice suddenly sharp.

Sherlock shrugged, flushing, making herself meet Johnnie’s eyes and glad for the dark of the bar. She put her chin up. ‘Hypothetically.’

Johnnie’s eyebrows went up and stayed up; Johnnie was staring at her unabashed, almost fierce. ‘I thought you didn’t…’

Sherlock looked away, feigning unconcern. ‘Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate it,’ she said.

There was a long silence, in which Johnnie stared at Sherlock and Sherlock stared stubbornly at the wall.

It wasn’t as ridiculous a pretence as it could have been, staring at the wall. An elaborate mural stretched along the tops of the booths. It looked unplanned, she thought, layered as it was with hundreds of separate portraits, at different angles and on different scales, in shades of red and sepia.

Sherlock could feel Johnnie’s gaze on the side of her face. She craned her neck, focusing ostentatiously on the portraits.

Most of them were women; some were men. Their poses were casual, candid: arms around one another; dancing by the piano; one woman asleep, head down on the bar. Some of the portraits looked fresh, with scribbled names and dates still legible next to them, but many were covered over with so much smoke residue that Sherlock could barely make them out. Larger than the rest and freshly painted, across from the bar, Sherlock recognised a likeness of Gina.

‘Wellll,’ said Johnnie, eventually, into the charged silence, ‘None of my business, what Smithy and the Wares get up to. Works out fine for the three of them.’

Sherlock nodded, finishing off her orange juice, relieved. She looked around and gave Johnnie a weak smile; Johnnie smiled back.

‘You feeling a bit better?’ asked Johnnie. ‘Think you could eat?’ Sherlock shrugged, so Johnnie said ‘Wait here,’ and threaded her way through the crowd toward the bar to put in the order with Smithy.

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The crowd was starting to thin now. Sherlock could catch glimpses, through the gaps between couples on the dance floor, of the orchestra, set up against the far wall. A snare, bass drum and hi-hat were wedged into the corner, and behind them a gawky ginger man, head tilted to one side, was dragging a whisk across the snare like he was meditating on the merits of an argument. On the right a
curvaceous, oak-skinned woman in a neat blue tweed skirt suit plucked an upright bass, and to the left was an upright piano. Sherlock couldn’t see the pianist properly, because a ring of butches was standing around the instrument, clutching pints of beer and wailing the lyrics as if they were entrants in a shouting competition. *Like a lazy ocean hugs the shore*, wailed the would-be singers. It was a mambo tune, something American. The unseen pianoplayer, thought Sherlock, was certainly much more accomplished than his motley vocalists. *Stay with me, sway with me.*

Johnnie slid back into the booth, grinning and holding a pint. She pushed a cold ham and cheese sandwich across the table. ‘Would’ve had her heat it up, but I thought I remembered you preferred cold.’

Sherlock nodded, picked up the sandwich. The women at the piano were howling something about the sound of violins. Sherlock took a bite. The firm textures of the sandwich felt good between her teeth; she was suddenly encouraged. She chewed; swallowed; took another bite and felt she was getting somewhere.

Johnnie was looking absently out at the dance floor as Sherlock ate. She gestured suddenly at the ring of women standing around the piano, who had moved on to an attempt at ‘In the Still of the Night,’ complete with botched harmonies. Sherlock, seeing her movement, snapped her head around as well.

‘See the one femme standing with all the butches at the piano?’ Johnnie asked. ‘Sally Donovan. She’s the one, when I first met you I thought—’

Sherlock grabbed Johnnie’s wrist, startling her into silence. ‘Let me,’ she said. She could feel her own smile.

Johnnie grinned. She sat back and turned her palms out, inviting Sherlock’s deductions.

Sherlock took another bite of her ham and cheese, turning back around to take in her subject. The woman was partially obscured by the dancers (now sparse on the floor) and the other singers at the piano, but Sherlock could make out her flat-footed, hip-cocked stance, and a simple blouse and skirt that looked oddly utilitarian next to the wiggle dresses and satin trains on most of the femmes. She was standing next to the butch Johnnie had introduced earlier as Andie; as Sherlock watched, Andie leaned over to say something into her ear, and the woman put up a hand to maintain distance between their bodies.

Sherlock turned back around and smirked at Johnnie’s expectant look. ‘Met officer, not a recent recruit despite her feminine appearance and the Met’s concerted effort to de-masculinise the MWPP, but nor has she been promoted beyond the standard—’ she curled her lip, ‘—ladies’ beat: returning delinquent children to their mothers’ waiting arms and breaking up the occasional domestic. Your friend Andie is her partner and her sometimes… partner, though it looks to be off-again tonight.’

One side of Johnnie’s mouth was quirking up, and she was shaking her head. ‘As always,’ she said, raising her beer in mock-salute. ‘Though I wouldn’t say friend, exactly.’

Sherlock narrowed her eyes, taking another bite of her ham and cheese. She was surprised to note that the sandwich was nearly gone. ‘You were saying that when you first met me…you thought she and I would know each other? Because of my work?’ She snorted, rolled her eyes. ‘Really, John. The Met? The MWPP? Dull.’

Johnnie’s mouth was still quirked at the side. Sherlock had the sudden urge to lick that curling corner of lip, and only belatedly heard that she’d used the shortened form of Johnnie’s name: uncomfortable. She stuffed the rest of her sandwich into her mouth. Johnnie looked a little taken
‘Uwhelf?’ said Sherlock, around the mouthful of sandwich, then swallowed with a great effort.
‘Who else?’ She made an expansive gesture around the bar. Johnnie gave a reluctant grin, looking over her shoulder.

‘Mmm…femme in the peasant blouse, dancing by the piano.’

Sherlock looked over, making a show of how desultory her glance could be. She turned back.
‘Secretary in the City. Chronic pain in her left hip, likely from a childhood fever, but she’s stubborn about not letting it slow her down. Lives with her mother; that hair style can look very different while she’s on the clock. Uncomfortable situation with her boss; he’s wooing her with expensive gifts and she doesn’t know how to turn him down.’

‘Jesus,’ said Johnnie, looking a little unnerved.

Sherlock grinned. ‘I could’ve just made all that up,’ she pointed out.

‘You couldn’t,’ said Johnnie, shaking her head. Sliding her eyes to the side; swigging her beer.

Oh. Sherlock’s stomach dropped again, hard. Johnnie knew Sherlock was right because Johnnie knew the woman in the peasant blouse. Sherlock couldn’t stop something swooping in her chest, hard and aggressive.

‘I’ll have something, too,’ she said, nodding toward Johnnie’s beer and peeling herself out of the booth, not looking back.

Ridiculous. She was being ridiculous. It would be a bad trade, she reminded herself sternly, catching Smithy’s eye. Johnnie could have any femme in this club, and apparently had had most, and Sherlock was, most decidedly, not in competition. Not even playing the same game.

She approached the bar and leaned over to yell over the noise. Smithy nodded; pivoted in her fluid way, and lined up two shots and a pint. Sherlock downed the first shot in one.

Smithy had, for once, halted her constant articulated motion to watch Sherlock through narrowed eyes. ‘You’re here with Johnnie,’ she said, in a voice like something in a cowboy film, melted and served in a bowl.

It wasn’t a question, but Sherlock nodded.

‘She’s a class act,’ Smithy said, picking up the empty shot glass. She raised her chin, eyes locked onto Sherlock over high cheekbones, stern under her unadorned brow. ‘I have a great fondness for John Watson.’

Sherlock drew herself up in turn, wrongfooted and defensive against what sounded like a warning. But surely there was ample evidence—Sherlock glanced back at the table to see Sam-or-Astrid chatting to Johnnie, rubbing her hip against the table—that Johnnie could take care of herself. If anyone needed to be be warned off, it certainly wasn’t Sherlock.

So she nodded at Smithy; said only ‘As do I.’ Then she picked up the other two glasses to carry them back to her seat, whisky prickling under her skin.

Astrid was tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, and Sherlock ducked under her up-raised arm, dislodging the strand again. She sipped her beer into Astrid’s disgruntled face, smiling up at her.
‘You know those are dipped,’ she said, taking out a cigarette and gesturing with her lighter to Astrid’s pearls. ‘Her interest—or is it his—seems to be on the wane.’

Astrid looked affronted, and Johnnie turned a bark of laughter into a cough. For a split second Astrid’s eyes got huge, and her hand went to her throat before she mustered a sneer. Sherlock sipped her beer, unperturbed, until Astrid had turned on her heel and strode off, at which point Sherlock turned to Johnnie with a bright, unabashed smile.

Johnnie was trying to hide amusement with a scowl. ‘That’s not on, Sherlock,’ she said, but Sherlock only smiled wider, then tipped up her chin to exhale smoke toward the ceiling.

‘Who else?’ she asked, genuinely warming to the game.

Johnnie was staring at the table. ‘You’re supposed to drop the shot into the pint,’ she pointed out.

‘Rubbish,’ said Sherlock. ‘Who else? Which of your many conquests? The femme near the door in the pink pullover has chlamydia, did you know?’

‘Sherlock, I don’t think…no. No, I didn’t,’ Johnnie said, taking another sip.

‘The butch in the green suit has a twin brother,’ said Sherlock.

‘Mm, she does,’ Johnnie agreed, that curving smile back on her lips. Delicious.

‘And the bass player will go home with the woman who’s been cleaning tables, though they’re not living together.’

‘How can you possibly—’

‘Am I right?’ interrupted Sherlock, downing her second shot. It burned on the way down. She felt giddy.

‘Yeah, but how—’ said Johnnie, openly laughing now—oh! glorious—and Sherlock cut her off again.

‘And the older butch nearly passed out at the bar—’

‘Don’t,’ said Johnnie, her tone suddenly flat. But Sherlock pressed on, wanting more of Johnnie’s laughter, sure she could impress.

‘She’s intriguing. Ex-military but didn’t serve during the war—’

‘Leave it, Sherlock,’ Johnnie said, more forceful. Still Sherlock ignored her.

‘She’s been coming here for ages, there’s an ancient portrait of her on the wall above the booth—’

Johnnie slammed her empty pint glass back on the table. ‘She’s a bloody fascist traitor, all right?’ she said, low and venomous, and Sherlock’s elation evaporated at once. She sat touching her beer, staring at Johnnie, shocked into silence. Johnnie scrubbed at her own forehead with the heel of her hand.

‘Look,’ Johnnie said, ‘she just—that’s Mary Allen. She founded the Women’s Police Service before the Met allowed women in. Fought for suffrage, the whole nine yards, but when the MWPP edged out the WPS in Britain and Mussolini took over in Italy, she just—I fucking hate talking about it.’

‘Why?’ Sherlock asked. She had never seen Johnnie so affected. Suddenly, here before her was
Johnnie Watson the soldier. Johnnie Watson the patriot. She was equal parts surprised and enthralled.

‘Because,’ said Johnnie, almost shouting now, ‘I can’t believe Gina and Smithy and Ted still allow her in here. I put my life on the line, and so did half the women in here, and so did Smithy, and now she just stands there,’ Johnny gestured, breathing hard, ‘serving Allen drinks.’

Sherlock narrowed her eyes, forced a shrug. ‘Politics,’ she said, dismissive, and watched for the effect. Sure enough.

‘How can you be so—the woman met and idolised Adolph Hitler, Sherlock. Jesus.’ Johnnie drained her glass, turned away. A muscle in her neck was twitching. Sherlock’s mouth watered.

‘And you believe that means she should be banned from this club?’ Sherlock asked. ‘For—for feelings she had over ten years ago?’

That muscle in Johnnie’s neck jumped faster. ‘Yes, I bloody well—’ she said, but at that moment there was a commotion from the dance floor, and their heads both jerked around.

The crowd parted as they watched. Into the breach staggered the butch in the green suit—the one with the twin brother, thought Sherlock—with her elbow around the neck of another butch, choking her, dragging her toward the floor. The woman in the headlock was older than her opponent, in her late 50s as compared to early 30s for the butch in green, but she was putting up a good fight, kicking out with her feet and tangling up the feet of the other woman. The green-suited woman looked to be yelling in her ear, although they were too far away for Sherlock to make out words.

Sherlock settled in with interest, calculating odds on the outcome. It was all rather thrilling, she thought, a welcome distraction from Johnnie’s fury. But then she heard a soft ‘Oh b loody hell’ exhaled in her ear.

The next moment Johnnie was leaping out from behind the table and running flat-out toward the fight, and Sherlock was following.

Chapter End Notes

1. The Gateways Club, at 239 King’s Road, was the most famous lesbian club in London during the 40s, 50s and 60s. All information about it is taken from Jill Gardiner’s From the Closet to the Screen: Women at the Gateways Club 1945-85. Gina and Ted Ware were the real owners; their characterisations here are historically based, although they do fictional things. Gina was born in Turino, Italy and moved to Cardiff, Wales as an adolescent. She worked as an actress before marrying the un-glamourous, but apparently politically awesome, Ted Ware. Ted was a lapsed Catholic and a patron of the arts, and just seems like a legitimately stand-up guy. Here’s one story about him:

   After Ted Ware took over the club in 1943 — he told one woman that he won the club from two Jewish businessmen in a poker game at the Dorchester hotel — it was always welcoming to lesbians. Ted’s daughter explains: His story of how the women came to be at the Gateways was that two girls were sitting at the bar. This guy was hassling them, getting nowhere. He came to father and said, ‘Those two women, you know they’re lesbians.’ Father said, ‘I’ll have a
club full if I want. Now, out!’ and had him slung. So the girls felt it was a place where they weren’t just tolerated, they were welcome. It was difficult for women to find a place where they could drink without being asked to leave, because the landlord could be done for keeping an immoral house to have women drinking alone. That was the reason for the Gateways having a club license, because a members’ club could do practically anything.”

Smithy is based on a real person as well, although I changed more about her than about the Wares (including her race; historically, she was white). Everything included here about her personal history will be fictional. I also monkeyed with the chronology of the Wares’ marriage and Smithy’s arrival; she didn’t actually move in and start working at the Gates until the 1960s. However, the rampant speculation about a relationship between Gina and Smithy is very much historical. One Gateways patron said:

I assumed Gina and Smithy were together. Partly because they [looked] butch and femme, and they worked together and they seemed to communicate very well. You didn’t have the feeling that Smithy was Gina’s employee. I don’t remember Gina giving her orders. You knew Gina was the boss but you assumed that was because Ted owned it. We all assumed they were a duo though we knew they denied it if they were actually asked. We knew Gina had a daughter and we assumed that she didn’t want anyone to know.

The Wares’ daughter was raised thinking of Smithy as a third parent, equally important as Ted and Gina. Smithy would even don a dress, makeup and stockings to attend little Luigina’s school functions, which was the only time she ever remembers seeing Smithy in femme attire.

2. Butch/femme dynamics at the Gateways were very rigid. Several respondents interviewed in Jennings and Gardiner were (initially or permanently) turned off of the club by the expectation of conformity to one side or the other of the butch/femme divide. Others found it liberating, or simply an easy short-hand. Gardiner quotes one woman:

I identified as a hippy at the time. I had long hair, jeans and purple boots with Cuban heels: slightly more ‘unisex’ than most people there. […] Someone came up to me and said that blonde Archie had sent her over. Archie was very good-looking, but a bit frightening. She’d sent over to find out if I was butch or femme. I said I didn’t know and I got a message back saying, that I ought to make up my mind soon or I might find myself in a bit of trouble.

Several women also talked about the expectation that, if one butch wanted to dance with a femme who was there with someone else, she was expected to ask the butch, not the femme, for permission.

3. Ted Ware was reluctant to purchase a juke box for the club, so well into the rock & roll era there were still live musicians, usually a three-piece orchestra, playing a mix of contemporary American music and jazz standards. Dean Martin’s ‘Sway’ and the Five Satins’s ‘In the Still of the Night’ are from the former category: both came out in 1954.

4. Mary Allen was also a real person, although again in this story she will do fictional things. Her history is much as Johnnie describes: she founded a women-
only police force (the WPS) before the Met allowed women, and (independently of the WPS) campaigned for women’s rights throughout the 1920s. The WPS was edged out of prominence when the Met started a women’s corps in the 1930s, and Allen was seduced by the allure of fascism. She really did meet and admire Hitler, and there was talk of confining her to an internment camp during WWII.
Chapter 8

May 9, 1955
1:30am
The Gateways Club, 239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

Johnnie should have realised she needn’t rush into the fray. By the time she made it to the dance floor, four other butches and Sally Donovan had also hurled themselves toward the fight, and two of the others soon wrenched the combatants apart. After all, nobody wanted Gina to—ah. Here she was, after all.

And, as always, she was thunderous.

Gina’s penciled brows drew together, her shoulders went back, and her whole sleek frame vibrated with rage. She jabbed a manicured fingernail into the chest of the butch in green and gestured with her other hand toward the club’s door as she hissed low vitriol into the woman’s face: ‘—will not listen to any of your nonsense, Leslie Matthews’ and ‘I should ban you from setting foot again—’

Johnnie edged back from the confrontation, looking around the room for Sherlock and seeing—bloody hell, Johnnie thought. Look who it was.

Husky-blue eyes twinkled back at her when she made eye contact over Gina’s shoulder. Johnnie grinned.

Meanwhile, nobody was standing up for the fighters, and nobody was going to. Gina kept hissing and crowding into Leslie’s space, while Smithy scowled down at them from in front of the bar.

Johnnie inched around the periphery, angling for the other side of the room. By the time she’d made it halfway around, Leslie was muttering ‘Sorry, Gina’ at her own feet. Johnnie paused to watch.

Gina glared for another few seconds; then she stepped back and stuck out her lovely hand. Leslie shot her cuffs and shook it.

There was a round of whistling, jeering and applause from the gathered bystanders. Johnnie wolf whistled, and turned, and broke into an open stride.

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‘Cass Thorsson you dog,’ said Johnnie, descending on the tall blonde for a crushing hug. ‘Were you going to mention you were in town? All you three, Haley, Lou,’ shaking hands all around, grinning. ‘I can’t—but hold on, I want you to meet—’

She pulled back, away from Cass’s too-pale eyes and her goofy grin, scanning the crowd for Sherlock.

Tiny old Chester Davies, wizened like a brown nut, had launched into another stride number at the piano. Some of the butches were returning to their singing posts, while other bar patrons gathered up their things to leave. Through the thinning crowd Johnnie spotted Sherlock, already looking right at them with her eyes like iron. Seeing her in the midst of the Gates, surrounded by the Saturday-night
crowd: it was strange, but somehow warming. Sally Donovan was next to her, curling her lip as she leaned up to shout something into Sherlock’s ear. Sherlock tossed her head, brushed her off. Headed over toward Cass and the rest.

Johnnie had the vertiginous sensation, as Sherlock approached, of seeing four of her intimates—mutual strangers—as they must appear to each other. Sherlock, who normally loomed so large in her mind’s eye, looked oddly fragile compared to Johnnie’s old army mates, all dressed to the nines for a night at the Gates. She could see Sherlock standing up straighter as she approached; blanking her face; drawing her hauteur around her like a winter coat. So Johnnie grinned at her, welcoming, and rushed forward to steer her into the group.

‘Sherlock, you’ll never believe—’ she said.

Sherlock hummed, disbelieving.

‘Don’t be a prat,’ said Johnnie. ‘What do you reckon? I was in the Service with these bastards. Haven’t seen them since we were all demobbed. Everyone, this is my flatmate, Sherlock Holmes.’

‘Ah, flatmate,’ said Haley, freckles bunching around brown eyes. ‘Have the mighty fallen? John Watson finally settling down?’

Johnnie felt herself colour up.

‘No, she’s just—Sherlock really is my flatmate,’ she said, glancing over nervously. Sherlock had her inscrutable mask in place. Haley made an mmm’ing noise in the back of her throat, and Cass rolled her eyes.

‘We’d have written ahead,’ said Lou, ‘but we had a little flutter on how quick we’d find you if we just looked in at the Gates.’

‘Did you now?’ Johnnie said. ‘And who won?’

‘That’d be Cass,’ said Lou, with a suave little bow to the white-blond butch to her side.

Johnnie laughed; mimed clapping in Cass’s direction. ‘Sherlock,’ she said, ‘meet Cass Thorsson, former height-finder in the 568 HAA Battery, Margate.’ Cass stuck out a hand; Sherlock shook it.

Sherlock looked unaccustomed to tilting her head upward to shake hands. But Cass had always been a giant. Skinnier than she was slender, even after all these years, and so pale she made Sherlock look tan. Her skin appeared tender, like it offered no protection to the dark-pink veins pulsing beneath its surface. The blue of her eyes was so washed out that they looked almost white. Johnnie had always wondered if it was painful, opening them into the sun.

‘Height-finder and perpetual thorn in the side of Johnnie, here,’ Cass said, in her shockingly hearty voice. Warmth spread in Johnnie’s stomach, hearing that voice again. Thinking how Cass had spooned porridge into Johnnie’s bed for a prank, and laughed at Johnnie’s curses; how Haley had plotted for weeks to get revenge for that incident with the stinging nettles. The constant practical jokes might have become obnoxious, except that during those months when morale was so low Cass had been…something dependable, Johnnie supposed. Something to rely on.

‘My congratulations on the inheritance, Miss Thorsson,’ Sherlock said, her lip quirking up at Cass’s dumfounded expression. ‘Ah…thanks,’ said Cass, looking to Johnnie, and Johnnie grimaced and said ‘Sherlock’ s a private detective.’

Cass looked impressed, her hand forgotten in Sherlock’s grasp. ‘Yeah?’ she said. ‘Like in the
'I—suppose,' said Sherlock, but Cass was already speaking over her, saying 'You’re just the one I want, then, mate, fancy running into a private eye here at the Gates. I’ve got a cousin, right? Always said he was—'

Johnnie looked at them together, and her chest filled with something bright, and uncomplicated. Cass was still rattling off questions in her scatterbrained way, and Sherlock was looking mildly amused. Probably compiling Cass’s life history from the way she elided her vowels. Without thinking, Johnnie put her hand on Sherlock’s back, at the waist.

Sherlock’s smile stayed.

Johnnie’s fingers flexed a bit, without her thinking about it, and Sherlock took it as a signal to move down the line. Johnnie drew a breath. She had almost forgotten about Lou.

‘Lou McGuire, range-finder extraordinaire,’ Johnnie said, voice only a little tight. Lou glided forward, bloody distinguished as she’d always been, to take Sherlock’s outstretched hand in both of hers. She raised it to her mouth in one fluid motion and kissed it. Johnnie’s hand tightened, involuntary, on Sherlock’s waist. Sherlock made a tiny gasping noise, and Lou smirked.

It was strange, thought Johnnie, what a person forgot with time. Lou heavier than she had been in ’45, but she had that same oddly monochromatic quality. Her hair and skin were so close to the same shade of warm light-brown, that it was as if she’d been dyed in one piece. Removed from the horrible ATS-issue kit Johnnie remembered, Lou appeared to belong in her pinstriped suit in a way Johnnie never had. Her tailoring was impeccable, the lines sharp and the drape rich. Lou’s eyes crinkled at the corners, looking up at Sherlock as she kissed her hand. Johnnie had forgotten how very green they were.

Preoccupied, Johnnie was startled to hear Sherlock’s scornful drawl. ‘I’m honoured, Miss McGuire,’ she said. ‘Always interested to meet Johnnie’s competition.’

‘Er,’ said Lou and Johnnie in unison. Sherlock smirked. Haley threw back her curly head, and spilled over with laughter.

‘Oh love,’ she said, holding out a bangled wrist to shake Sherlock’s hand, ‘We’ll all have to watch out for you.’ Looking on the happy side of uncomfortable, Sherlock shook it.

Laughing with Haley was always the easy part of anything, Johnnie thought, with a quick flash of crouching underground as the doodlebugs sounded, Haley all gallows humour. ‘I can’t face another morning hauling shells, chaps,’ she’d said. ‘I’m headed upstairs. With any luck the Boche will get me before the morning.’ She’d been slender then, and girlish, with that same cascade of ginger curls down her back when she’d let it down. Ten years had put three times as many pounds on her; it was like they’d flocked to her in droves for the opportunity to be poured into that chocolate silk dress.

‘Haley Murray,’ Haley was saying, still smiling wide at Sherlock. ‘I was the transmitter in our little gang, though I don’t suppose that means much to you. I never could leave it to these clods to—’

The lights came up then, sudden and glaring.

‘Just like the old days,’ said Lou. ‘We’ve shut them down.’

‘Oh, but we can’t say goodnight now, we’ve just started catching up,’ said Cass, looking at her watch. ‘Listen, I don’t want to keep you up if you need to get to bed, but—’
‘Oh nonsense you don’t,’ said Haley, and Johnnie said, ‘Sherlock and I don’t exactly make a point of—regular sleep,’ and could feel the giddy hopefulness on her face when she looked over at Sherlock, and saw her roll her eyes and nod.

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May 10, 1955
2:30am
Sutton Lodge, Flood Street, Chelsea
London, England

‘And then Johnnie here—’

‘Pass the gin, won’t you, Lou?’

‘—Johnnie here, she’d buddied up with this gunner, yeah? She’s over on the range every day, and he’s teaching her how the guns are loaded, where the shells are kept, the chain of command once orders come through, none of this she’s supposed to know, right? And she wasn’t fussed, she just—

‘That rule was rubbish, though,’ said Johnnie, drawing on her cigarette. ‘It only made sense to know what happened after our signals were received. Helped us do our jobs.’

‘What’ve you got in return?’ said Lou, tipping her chin at Haley.

‘You want me to come over there and convince you?’

‘By all means, Haley,’ said Lou. ‘Come on, love, whisper in my ear.’

‘Ooh, Lou never turned you down, Haley,’ teased Cass, distracted from her story, as Lou handed over the gin. But Johnnie said, ‘Haley’s not offering what Lou thinks she is.’

‘I’m usually not, no,’ said Haley, grinning, swigging from the bottle. ‘She’ll keep trying, though.’

‘Were ATS recruits generally obligated to follow only those regulations they agreed with?’ asked Sherlock, laconically. Johnnie snorted.

‘I like this one, Watson!’ yelled Haley; then remembered the time and clapped a hand over her own mouth. She threw herself on the couch next to Sherlock, clutching the bottle of gin, and leaned in, conspiratorial. ‘You sure you’re just flatmates, love?’ she said. ‘You can tell me.’

‘Just flatmates,’ Sherlock confirmed, with an odd tensing of her jaw. Johnnie let her eyes linger a moment on that tensing muscle, until she sensed Lou watching her, watching Sherlock.

‘Well I only think,’ said Haley, listing toward Sherlock, ‘I think you de-deserve each other, I mean,’ laying a manicured hand on Sherlock’s thigh, ‘you seem like a peach. And she is just fantastic in bed, you know, from one girl to—’

Johnnie choked loudly on her gin.

‘I knew it, I bloody knew you two—’ shouted Lou, at the same moment Sherlock said ‘I had gathered as much,’ between gritted teeth.

‘Think you’re overstepping, Hales,’ laughed Cass. ‘Now come over here and give me that bottle.’

‘I just want people to be happy,’ Haley said, sorrowfully, taking her hand off Sherlock’s leg and
slumping over to Cass on the loveseat. ‘Are you happy, Cassie?’

‘I am now,’ said Cass, an arm around Haley’s waist, tipping the bottle up.

‘Well anyway,’ said Haley, still pouting a bit and looking earnestly over at Sherlock, ‘it wasn’t as bad as you’re making out, Johnnie going against orders. She was used to being right in the line of fire, you know; being an ambulance driver.’

‘No need to dredge up ancient history, Haley,’ Johnnie said, with a glance in Sherlock’s direction.

‘Your, er, flatmate here might like to hear about it,’ said Cass. ‘Sherlock, d’you know Johnnie’s missions had one of the lowest mortality rates going, in the three years before she got shot and sent to Margate?’

‘Did they indeed,’ murmured Sherlock, taking a sip of her gin. She glanced up over the rim. Johnnie’s face felt hot. She brazened it out, not looking away.

‘Yeah,’ said Cass, ‘and she was right in the heart of the action, too. The French retreat, and then London in the heaviest part of the Blitz.’

‘Come on Cass,’ Johnnie said, looking into her empty glass and feeling oddly exposed. ‘Sherlock deduced my whole life history within five minutes of meeting me, just from the way I replaced an engine cylinder. You’ll bore her with all this—’

‘Nonsense,’ said Sherlock, with a tsking noise. ‘Not your whole history, don’t exaggerate.’

‘Bloody well felt like that,’ said Johnnie, forgetting for a moment and looking up into probing sea-grey eyes. ‘Felt like you’d—like you’d seen right through me.’

Johnnie gave an awkward laugh, not looking away. She was suddenly a trifle dizzy from the gin and the pints at the bar. Sherlock’s eyes were liquid, the way they sometimes got on a case. Seconds passed.

Cass whistled low: under her breath, but only just. ‘Remind me to sleep over at your flat if that’s what you call just mates,’ she muttered. Lou laughed aloud.

Sherlock looked away, flushing; drained the rest of her gin. Johnnie felt a stab of unease.

‘Er, so,’ said Cass, clearing her throat, ‘so. So, Hales interrupted me before the best part of the story.’ Lou groaned, but Cass hurried on. ‘I was saying, Johnnie here, she’s out at the gunners’ posts all the time, right, and waved us off when we tried to tell her she’d be disciplined. No women supposed to go anywhere near the guns. Somehow nobody ever did catch on.’

‘Because Johnnie pilfered a mens’ uniform from the laundry,’ chipped in Lou, taking a silver case from her inside jacket-pocket, and extracting a hand-rolled cigarette.

‘Lou should know,’ said Johnnie, unable to resist getting some of her own back. ‘She pilfered it back from me at least twice.’

‘Suited me better,’ said Lou, lighting up. ‘I’d have made a more convincing infantryman any day.’ She inhaled deep and held the sweet, resinous smoke in her lungs. Not tobacco; Johnnie had thought as much.

‘Too bad you didn’t have the balls to try it, then,’ retorted Haley, reaching out to take the joint from Lou’s outstretched fingers. There was a round of ‘ooooh’s from Cass and Johnnie.
‘Don’t believe her,’ Haley said to Sherlock. ‘Johnnie made a dashing young gunner.’

‘I. Hm. Can imagine,’ said Sherlock faintly. Haley raised her eyebrows, inhaling, then blew smoke at the ceiling.

‘I’m sure you can,’ grinned Cass. Haley elbowed her in the ribs, and she wiped her smile.

‘Er. Anyway,’ Cass went on, ‘this gunner friend of Johnnie’s, he drinks on the sly, yeah? Sneaking off base and so on, lots of them did. But this one, he starts getting the shakes. And of course he can’t set shells with the DT’s, and it’ll be bad for him if anyone finds out. So what I was saying is, Johnnie here, she sneaks him into the radar cabin in her place, and she goes and sets the shells herself. All that winter. Probably the only woman in the whole war who fired the heavy guns, our John.’

Cass shook her head, impressed with her own story. She took a long drag on the joint for emphasis, still shaking her head, and passed it to Sherlock, who passed it on to Johnnie without comment. There was a faint brush of her cold fingers as Johnnie took it from her and sat back, feeling too sober by half.

‘They make it out more thrilling than it was,’ said Johnnie, looking down at her hands.

Cass spluttered. ‘That was God’s truth, Johnnie, I—’

‘I just’, said Johnnie, ‘the poor kid. Sixteen years old and lost his parents in the Blitz. Bellyful was the only way he could sleep at night, it was all—pathetic, to tell the truth.’

She dragged on the joint, and closed her eyes, and waited. All around the room there was a solemn lull.

‘You can’t say there weren’t good times, though,’ said Cass, getting up and filling glasses from the gin bottle, passing them around. ‘Least none of us were stuck away in an office somewhere, not like now.’ She chuckled. ‘Remember Mary MacElhaney? Up on the table, singing that song about the camel?’

‘Tha carnal desirres of tha camel,’ sang Haley, putting on a scowl and a thick Scottish accent, and Cass joined in: ‘arrre grrrreatrer than anyone thinks!’

Johnnie burst out laughing, coughing the smoke out of her lungs. Her eyes watered.

‘Ahnd when tha feeling steals o’errr him,’ Cass and Haley crooned, ‘he makes at once ta tha Sphinx!’

From her seat near the door Lou was grinning, pretending to conduct the song. Her hands seemed occupied, so Johnnie took another drag.

‘—But tha Sphinx’s posteriorrrr prrropporrtrrions,’ Cass shouted, waving her glass in the air like the lord of a hunting party, and bringing home the rolled r’s egregiously, ‘arrre burred in tha sand of tha Niiiiile!’

Haley was still trying to sing along, but she was laughing too hard to breathe. Johnnie’s throat was on fire from reefer smoke, coughing and laughter. Even Sherlock was giggling.

Cass, however, didn’t even crack a smile as she sang, grave and pedantic, with a long retard at the end, ‘Which ac-counts forr the camel’s perrrrpetual ‘ump…ahnd the Sphinx’s incrrrrrutable smiiiilie!’
Johnnie finally stopped coughing. It had been years: it hit her hard, all her muscles gone suddenly softer. Cassie and Haley, now giggling in a heap with their arms round each others’ shoulders, seemed almost the dearest sight she could imagine.

‘Christ, I thought we’d never talk her down from that,’ Johnnie said, wiping her eyes. ‘Or the time we all snuck off base, and Lou left her stockings in the washroom of the Four Ducks?’

‘Oh lord!’ squealed Haley, detaching herself from Cass’s arms. ‘You were in such trouble for that, Lou. They searched all our things,’ she told Sherlock, ‘and Lou’s stockings were the only ones missing.’

‘The pride of Britain,’ murmured Sherlock, but when Johnnie looked over her smile was warm behind her gin glass.

Johnnie grinned back at her, stupidly. She was flooded, in that moment, with such gratitude to Sherlock. For being here, smiling at her like that. She wanted so bloody much to touch her.

‘Or the time they had us on call for forty-eight hours straight and nothing happened,’ came Lou’s voice. ‘And by the end we were playing parlour games, finishing each other’s limericks to stay awake.’

‘Or that little Ana with the motorcycle,’ said Haley. ‘She was a gas.’ Johnnie’s stomach chest restricted.

‘Who was Ana?’ said Sherlock, still smiling. Johnnie dragged her eyes from Sherlock’s curious face.

‘She, uh, was the one who taught me to ride,’ she said, gathering her wits before Lou could speak. ‘She worked as a motorcycle dispatch rider. You know, because the bikes were more manoeuvrable, quicker than armoured cars. Better chance of getting messages through enemy territory.’ Johnnie cleared her throat.

‘Johnnie was head over heels for her,’ said Lou, with a teasing smile. ‘You should’ve seen her swoon.’

Sherlock tipped her glass up of a sudden, ice clacking against her teeth.

‘But there was no knowing when Ana’d be through our camp,’ said Haley. ‘Or how long she’d stay.’

‘Made her visits all feel like surprise holidays, didn’t it, John?’ said Cass. ‘Sometimes she’d have to turn right around, only time for a quick meal in the mess. Other times she’d have two, even five days.’

‘Mmm,’ said Johnnie, her drink to her mouth. She glanced surreptitiously over at Sherlock, whose face was once again impassive.

‘When Ana could stay,’ said Haley, exhaling at the ceiling again and handing the joint to Sherlock, ‘there was this empty field about a mile from our camp. We’d all walk out there together, we’d—how did we?—I suppose we took turns pushing the bike.’

‘Ana and Johnnie and I took turns at it,’ Lou said. ‘I don’t recall you two helping.’

Haley stuck out her tongue. Sherlock took a long drag off the joint, held it in and tipped her head back against the back of the couch, regarding Johnnie through long black lashes. Her cheekbones made Johnnie’s stomach ache.
‘Well,’ said Haley, ‘that was only fair, since you three were the only ones who rode it.’ She looked at Sherlock, struggling a bit to focus. ‘I couldn’t even watch some of the stunts they pulled,’ she told her. ‘I would—I would cover my eyes,’ she covered her eyes, ‘and Cassie would tell me when it was over.’

Sherlock raised one eyebrow, exhaling in Haley’s direction without lifting her head.

‘To be fair,’ said Cass, peeling Haley’s hands away from her face and holding one between her own, ‘you could usually tell when it was over by when the screeches and crashes stopped.’

Johnnie sighed, watching Sherlock roll the joint over in her fingers. She heard her own voice as if from far away. ‘Yeah, that little Royal Enfield of hers could take abuse and keep right on going,’ it said. ‘Course it weighed almost nothing. That was a help on rough terrain.’

‘It weighed enough,’ said Cass. ‘You were the only one who could lift it out of the gully, that time Lou dared you and you tried to launch over it.’

‘Oh come on,’ said Lou, looking grumpy, ‘Ana herself almost certainly could’ve done it. She just refused, on principle.’

‘She was right to,’ said Johnnie, vaguely. ‘I’m the one who dropped it.’ Sherlock rolled her head on the couch back, took another drag and held it.

‘Give me that,’ said Johnnie, pushing herself up and taking the last of the joint from Sherlock’s long, white fingers.

‘Johnnie was always so strong,’ said Haley dreamily, to nobody in particular. ‘Getting the bike back, and—and I’d’ve died if I had to spend twelve hours moving the radar cabin around. Predictor, you know?’

This last was directed to Sherlock, who looked as if she’d been thinking about other things, and was nonplussed to be dragged back into the conversation. ‘Pardon?’ she said to Haley, sounding bored, her head still resting on the back of the couch.

‘Predictor,’ said Lou, with narrowed eyes. Sherlock looked blank. ‘Johnnie never explain to you what she did in the war?’

‘No,’ drawled Sherlock, rolling her head back to look at Johnnie. ‘She never has.’

‘You never asked!’ protested Johnnie, wrongfooted, but Lou was unfolding herself from her chair and making her way across the room. Sherlock sat up at her approach and Lou sat down next to her, very close.

‘There were four of us, right?’ she told Sherlock. Sherlock nodded. ‘And we were all together in this tiny little cabin, right? And it was our job to let the boys in the field know where to point the heavy guns.’

‘Sherlock is, you know, a certifiable genius,’ cut in Johnnie, unaccountably angry at Lou’s condescension. And that Sherlock hadn’t pointed that out herself. She hadn’t even rolled her eyes.

Johnnie took the last drag off the reefer cigarette. She ground out the stub in the ashtray by her elbow, feeling livid.

Lou, however, continued unfazed. ‘Now imagine I’m where Haley is sitting, so Cass and I are together.’
Sherlock twisted to look at Cass and Haley, and Lou moved so she was flush against Sherlock’s back, speaking right into Sherlock’s ear. ‘We’ve got these special instruments, Cass and me. I’m calculating how high the bombs are in the sky, and Cass there is figuring their position side to side.’ Sherlock made an interested humming noise, as if enthralled.

‘Sherlock understands the term “range,”’ Johnnie bit out. Everyone ignored her.

‘And Haley’s sitting over where Johnnie is—’ Lou put an arm around Sherlock’s waist, lifting her hand under Sherlock’s arm to point toward Johnnie’s chair, and Johnnie felt herself springing to her feet.

‘Fuck off, Lou,’ she heard herself yell, standing over them both, no smile in her voice at all. ‘She’s not just some femme you can sweet-talk into bed.’

‘Oi!’ yelled Haley, suddenly on her feet as well. ‘What the hell are you trying to say?’

‘I—’ said Johnnie. She took a deep breath, still staring at Lou and at Sherlock, whose face was illegible as ever. She could feel Haley crowding up on one side. She tried to relax her hands out of fists.

‘Just—leave her alone,’ said Johnnie to Lou. ‘She’s—not like—most. Have some respect.’

‘And what’re all the other femmes you’ve ever taken to bed?’ demanded Haley. ‘Pet labradors? We don’t rate respect?’

‘You know she didn’t mean it like that,’ said Cass, tugging on Haley’s hand. Haley shook it off, crowded closer to Johnnie. Johnnie breathed deep. She couldn’t quite stop staring at Sherlock and Lou.

‘No,’ she mumbled, ‘she’s right, I shouldn’t—I’m sorry, Haley, I just—I’m really sorry,’ which barely made sense. Her head was reeling with anger and reefer, gin and twisted tenderness. She dragged her gaze away from Sherlock to meet Haley’s eyes. ‘Really, I am.’

Haley nodded, stiffly. The silence was awkward indeed.

Then Sherlock spoke, and for a moment Johnnie couldn’t process the words.

‘Why don’t you show me?’ Sherlock said, or at least it sounded like that. Johnnie swung her head back around.

Sherlock was standing up. Disengaging herself from Lou and stepping forward, which put her close to where Johnnie was still standing.

_Pardon?_ thought Johnnie. _What?_ Her skin felt tingly and tight.

‘P-pardon?’ she said, raising her eyes to Sherlock’s face.

‘You could show me what you all used to do,’ Sherlock said.

Johnnie noted, in some obscure area of her brain dedicated to cursing Sherlock Holmes, that despite lack of sleep, an evening of heavy drinking, and two strong drags on a reefer cigarette, Sherlock seemed as sober and collected as usual.

‘You don’t—you don’t care about any of that,’ mumbled Johnnie.

‘Nonsense,’ said Sherlock, looking down at Johnnie’s face with her maddening smirk. ‘I’m finding
this whole evening most illuminating.’

And then—there it was. That flash of something genuine, something Sherlock. A curtain drawn aside on the wire-taut heart of her. Johnnie almost cried out with it. And it was like every single bloody time: all she wanted on earth was to share that look, over and over and over.

‘Right, yeah,’ Johnnie gasped, trying not to seem too breathless. She ran a hand through her hair to clear her head.

Sherlock stood in front of her, looking pleasantly expectant, her mouth curling as if at an inside joke.

‘Okay.’ Johnnie said. ‘Right.’ She stood still. She could feel four sets of eyes fastened onto her.

Sherlock smirked.

‘Well,’ said Johnnie, stepping forward, ‘er. Haley would’ve been sitting there, where I just was, like Lou said, ready to transmit the coordinates to the gunners on the field.’

‘By telegraph, was it?’ asked Sherlock. Johnnie gave her a puzzled look, not quite understanding the game they were playing.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Long-range cable.’

‘Mmm,’ said Sherlock, stepping further forward. ‘And what were you doing?’ They were less than a foot from each other now. Johnnie could swear she felt the heat coming off Sherlock through her own sensitised skin.

‘Er. I was, er, over here,’ she said, moving away from Sherlock to the wall near the door, ‘moving the cabin, right? So Cass and Lou could get a proper reading.’

‘Moving the cabin,’ repeated Sherlock. She slid in front of Johnnie and peered out the window, as if envisioning the long-ago scene. ‘And what did that involve?’

‘Well, it’s like—like moving your television aerial around, you know, to get the best signal,’ said Johnnie. God, she could see the trail of sweat down the back of Sherlock’s black blouse, where the fabric was sticking to the delicate line of her spine.

‘It’s a damn sight harder than moving a bloody TV aerial about,’ put in Cass. Johnnie jumped at the interruption.

‘It, er, it wasn’t much, really,’ she said. Sherlock turned to raise an eyebrow at her, like she did when Johnnie wasn’t pulling her weight on a case. There was a tiny raised birthmark halfway up her long neck.

‘It was definitely the hardest job of the four,’ said Haley, grudgingly.

‘Show me,’ said Sherlock, and Christ.

Christ.

Johnnie reached out, sliding her arms under Sherlock’s arms to circle Sherlock’s waist on either side. She tilted her head so she was looking around Sherlock’s shoulder, through the imaginary window of the imaginary radar cabin. She shook her head slightly. She tried not to think about everyone watching.

Her arms caged the narrow span of Sherlock’s ribs. Thin, too thin, but maddening; the curve of her
lovely little arse pressed into Johnnie’s stomach. One of Johnnie’s bare upper arms just brushed the swelling of Sherlock’s breast through the light cotton fabric, and the give of it—how it would feel against her face, her palm—how Sherlock’s sweat would taste, skin under her lips—.

Johnnie bit down hard on her own tongue. Sherlock started, and Johnnie realised that a grunting noise had left her throat. She cleared it. There was a snicker from behind them.

‘Ah,’ she said, ‘er. There was a control here,’ laying her hand over Sherlock’s hand, ‘and one—this way, and when I moved them like—like this—’

‘Mmm,’ said Sherlock, her voice sounding unnaturally deep, vibrating against Johnnie’s chest.

Johnnie couldn’t track on what she was saying. She breathed in the smell of smoke and sweat and skin, and god but she wanted.

‘—the whole cabin would, er, shift about, you know, and we could—’

‘Get a reading on the position of the bombs,’ agreed Sherlock, low and breathy.

‘Humng,’ said Johnnie, or something like it. ‘It was all, er, mechanical, er, of course, so, that’s what, why Haley said just now that it was, er—difficult—’

Sherlock’s wrist shifted, impossibly fine and complex under Johnnie’s hand. The pads of Johnnie’s fingertips were so sensitised that she thought she could feel every bone, every tendon; every pore of Sherlock’s white, stretched-tight skin. She looked down around Sherlock’s shoulder and realised she was rubbing, index and middle fingers together, rubbing compulsive, shivery little circles onto the underside of Sherlock’s right wrist, like she would do if—

Christ. Stop. Had to—fuck. Had to stop. Behind them the room had gone preternaturally quiet.

Johnnie looked down at her rubbing hand, willing it to stop. It kept on. Sherlock turned her head a fraction toward Johnnie’s, where Johnnie was watching their nested hands. Then Johnnie saw Sherlock’s right-hand fingers curl, and tremble so minutely. Barely perceptible; a tiny uncontrolled spasm. The sight made Johnnie ache between her legs, which was—she mustn’t—she couldn’t.

It was impossible, but she had to. She bit down on the string of curses in her throat and wrenched herself backward, away from from Sherlock, letting go Sherlock’s wrists and stumbling when she backed up against the armchair. She fell into the chair, breathing like she’d run a race, and Sherlock turned slowly, her back propped against the window. Johnnie realised, dimly, that Sherlock was silhouetted: the sun was well up.

‘I—we need to,’ Johnnie heard her voice say, and Sherlock said ‘Yes, hm, back at the flat,’ gesturing distractedly at the door.

Johnnie snuck a look at the other three. Lou looked sour, and half-asleep; Cass and Haley were staring, incredulous, obviously trying not to laugh.

A few minutes later and all three were standing at the door, waving, as Johnnie and Sherlock slid at last into the back seat of a cab.

Chapter End Notes
1. Gina Ware really did rule the Gates with an iron fist, and wielded the dreaded power of expulsion from the club for those who acted poorly. It was generally understood that butches had to take their fights (which happened frequently) outside, on pain of being banned - which, given the Gates’s centrality to the lesbian social scene, was a heavy punishment indeed.

2. ATS Remembered was tremendously helpful in researching the teams of radar operators on ack-ack sites in WWII. In particular, the descriptions in this chapter were drawn from the recorded histories of Esther May Girdlestone and Jane Hard (for the operations of the radar cabin and the fact that Johnnie had the most physically demanding job), and Marjorie Allebone (for a descriptions of Ana’s work as a motorcycle dispatch rider). The camel song was remembered by ATS predictor Dorothy Birchall.

3. It’s true that ATS radar operators would have been kept away from the sites of the heavy guns, and forbidden to fire guns in combat (though their training did include instruction on how to fire rifles). The stories of sneaking off-base and going to bars are based on oral histories quoted in Rebecca Jennings’s Tomboys and Bachelor Girls.
All the girls in the Gateways, and Johnnie had to fall for Sherlock Holmes.

It had been six in the morning by the time they’d got home. Johnnie had spent the whole cab ride biting the inside of her cheek, cursing herself and avoiding Sherlock’s eyes. She couldn’t even remember now, locked in her room on her back on her bed, how they had taken their leave of Cass and the rest; or who had paid the cabbie; or what she had said to Sherlock or Sherlock to her, before Sherlock had disappeared behind her own door and Johnnie had bolted up the stairs.

She was shifting on the coverlet now, each touch of her clothes against her skin incendiary. This fixation on Sherlock, it had to be—had to be put away, locked down. But Johnnie felt split apart. She almost moaned, just undoing her own trousers and shucking them to the floor. In the frigid room, she was sweating.

It might have been the gin; or the reefer; or having pressed the entire long length of Sherlock’s body against hers; but she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt like this. Desperate. Flayed open.

Unbuttoning her button-down, the cool air slipped against her and she had to stop to touch her own skin. Again, and—fuck, again. She couldn’t stop the barrage of sense-memory. The smoky, salty smell of Sherlock’s nape. Johnnie’s face, buried in the weight of Sherlock’s curls.

The guilt of it, because Sherlock had asked but she hadn’t meant it like that, and this would never, never happen. But Johnnie had pulled back, she had got them home, and that was all she could, all she could—

Sense-memory: the span of Sherlock’s ribcage cradled between Johnnie’s arms. Rail-thin, but so—god, so strong. She imagined Sherlock in karate whites, pinning Johnnie to the floor, her face over Johnnie’s face, her hair all tumbled down.

A hot wash of shame; for thinking that. Butches didn’t; shouldn’t. But she was leaking like a faucet between her legs. She turned onto her stomach, shirt still half-undone.

Against the bare skin of her thighs the scratchy green coverlet; just under her hips, the burns from Sherlock’s cigarettes. She gasped, grunted at the thought, pushed her hips down hard into the singed fabric. It was almost like touching, almost. Traces of Sherlock in this room, this room where Johnnie was rutting, was—

She shoved a hand down between herself and the mattress, curled her fingers against the top of her pubic bone and thrust her hips. Her briefs were still on and wet through, and she couldn’t even stop to get her hand under the waistband and inside before her whole body convulsed. Jackknifed into the mattress.

She was panting; dripping sweat; skin still humming. It had barely taken the edge off. Jesus.
She turned back on her back, an arm over her eyes. Breathing, shaky.

Something had to be enough. She had to take care of this herself, this insane, too-much thing. Johnnie thought again of Sherlock in whites, wiry limbs holding Johnnie to her—and then of the box under her bed.

Shame. Heat.

The things Johnnie sometimes wanted, she knew they weren’t—done. She thought of the look of disgust on Margrit’s face, the one time Johnnie had asked to reverse their positions. Margrit, curling her lip, saying ‘I didn’t realise, Johnnie. Shall I lend you my lipstick, as well?’

Johnnie tried not to think. (Shame, heat.)

She ran a hand up inside her own undershirt and the cotton pulled against her flat chest, her pebbled nipples. So tight they hurt. Sense-memory: her inner arm, brushing up against the giving curve of Sherlock’s breast. God it would feel lovely, overflowing her palm. Filling her mouth. A hard seed against her tongue, in a sea of curving flesh.

Sherlock was so thin, too thin; how could she still overflow Johnnie’s palms? Johnnie cupped her hollowed hands over her own nipples, her hips twitching. Thinking: it was lucky Sherlock had destroyed Jeanette’s black dress, when Johnnie had offered it. Johnnie imagined herself at the Carruthers’s ball, trying to stay focused while Sherlock moved through the crowd in black silk. Angular but for the mounded curves of her bust and her arse, nipples hard under black silk, arse under black silk pressed against Johnnie’s front in the vestibule where they’d awaited Mr. Mortimer, and then Sherlock kicking out with that joyful look in her eyes and Mortimer crumpling, his knee knocked sideways while Johnnie—

Johnnie groaned; cursed; slid off the bed. The box top left dust on her fingers. (Shame. Heat. Margrit’s mouth, snide like a snake.).

The thing inside was hard black rubber, bought off a working girl at the Gates. ‘You get a lot of use for gear like this?’ Johnnie had asked, and Mariah had rolled her eyes and said, ‘You wouldn’t believe.’ She tucked it against her side, warming the cool rubber.

Johnnie’d had to be careful, though. Some thought a thing like that was a kind of betrayal; that it went against the whole point of being with a woman. Others were all in favour. Smithy had been all in favour. Margrit had been all in favour, until Johnnie had wanted to switch.

There was petroleum jelly in the box, but it had never been more unnecessary. Whole inches of her inner thighs were soaked, and that was through her briefs. She moaned around her bitten lip when she eased them down her hips and thighs and kicked them off after her trousers.

She was breathing hard. It wasn’t just longing for Sherlock; she hadn’t done this since the row with Margrit, not even alone. But nobody would know, she reminded herself; nobody at the Gates, and certainly not Sherlock, never Sherlock. Johnnie just needed to—fuck. She needed to.

She closed her eyes, tried to slow her breath. Kicked her heel against the mattress.

Sherlock would never know. But if she did, said a voice in Johnnie’s head, as she lay back against the pillows. (Shame, heat.) If she found out, and maybe she would—maybe she would want to.

It was just imaginary, thought Johnnie, desperately, rubbing the tip of the warm rubber down against herself where she was swollen, and aching, and wet. The shaft brushed against the tongue of her and
she shivered through her whole skin.

She would do this, thought Johnnie, and then she would put it all away. Nothing like that damned demonstration tonight could happen again, it wasn’t—she teased at her opening with the blunt head of the thing—it wasn’t right, Sherlock didn’t mean it, Johnnie knew she didn’t. But just for now, for—for now—oh.

She closed her eyes and was two hours back in her mind’s eye, peering again around Sherlock’s shoulder and down at her own fingers rubbing compulsive little circles onto the underside of Sherlock’s wrist. And now that same hand was sunk between Johnnie’s legs, rubbing the same shivery circuits with the first two fingers of her left hand.

But what if it—what if it wasn’t her own body, she thought, gasping, right hand nudging the thick wet rubber against herself beneath her circling fingers, over and over, just nudging, not pushing inside. What if it were Sherlock laid out on her back on Johnnie’s bed, stripped and sweating, yes, with Johnnie’s hand burrowed in the curls between her pale legs—?

Yes, she thought (circling so lightly, trembling), yes, and Sherlock had hardly ever done this, she would be so—fuck, so touch-starved, god, and she would be staring up at Johnnie with her beautiful pink mouth open, making—yes, making ragged little sounds in her long throat, and Johnnie would—oh—have to help her, take care of her, yes, and Johnnie would do, she would; but she’d want to make sure that after all this time Sherlock felt it in her whole body like Johnnie felt it in hers, and so Sherlock would be—yes—she would have—yes—would have lost her words, and be jerking up with her hips where Johnnie’s fingers were (shuddering now, shaking) circling and circling against the hard wet centre of her, and all Sherlock would be able to do with the blunt black shaft in her hand would be to lock her fist hard around it, arm outstretched against the bed so it—yes—so the tip of it where it jutted out from the mattress by Sherlock’s hip would nudge—nudge—tease Johnnie when she shifted her hips, and then—oh—Sherlock’s chin would tip back when she started to shake, gasping open-mouthed, and Johnnie would feel the—yes—feel the shaking all along the length of her own frame and press in with her shuddering circling fingers, yes, and Sherlock was always so strange and beautiful and now she would be breaking apart around Johnnie’s hands and Johnnie would feel like sobbing because she wanted to be there with Sherlock, not distant or controlled but, yes, twinned and shaking in her own—fuck, in her own skin and she would shove forward with her hips onto, fuck, onto, fuck, and she’d be, yes, so full and, yes, split open, and keening and, yes, grinding herself—down—onto—Sherlock’s—quaking— — —fist—.

Minutes later, Johnnie’s hands and her breath were steady enough to sit back up. She drew the thing out of herself; wiped it down with the damp face-cloth from the washbasin. Back in the box; the box back under the bed. She sat naked on the mattress’s edge with her head in her hands, and thought: all right then, and now you have to leave it. Leave it, Watson. Leave it alone.

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May 15, 1955
10:05pm
221B Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

A truly challenging case, thought Sherlock, had never been more welcome. They were two days in, and she was arrow-focused and unencumbered in that way composed of hunger and adrenaline. It was almost like she knew herself again.

She’d thought she was going mad with it, circling round Johnnie inside her own head in the
aftermath of that night in Chelsea. She could hardly believe she’d allowed herself such a lapse; You could show me, she had said, and she hadn’t used that phrase in that voice since she’d heard it purred by Cecilia McIntosh one afternoon at Queen Mar—well.

She’d been softened around the edges by the chemicals, after all. And something had risen up in her when Johnnie had said Sherlock wasn’t like ordinary people. Johnnie had yelled it, really: furious, her hand clenching and unclenching. And Sherlock had suddenly wanted to feel that they were together, in that way they had when Johnnie said ‘brilliant’ and they ran off together into the London night.

But it had gotten—out of control, she recognised that now. She’d almost cried out, room full of strangers or no, when Johnnie had stepped back from her. She’d had to prop herself against the cool of the window just to stay standing. And every single night, since then, when she closed her eyes, there had been the feel of Johnnie’s blunt fingers on her wrist, making circles and soft circles on her skin. She’d felt adrift, panicky. Like she was losing her grasp of her own character.

But now she was forty hours into her first-ever blackmail investigation and her blood was her own again, swift and singing. She had tailed the Klein daughter to a lunch meeting and out to the pub after her office job, and Johnnie had gone to the hall of records and came back with pages of notes on certain of Mr. Klein’s business associates, and then they had met up on the street half by chance, and grinned at each other, and Johnnie had come with her to break into Miss Klein’s after-hours office block. And now here they were, back in Baker Street: Johnnie sprawled on the floor in her undershirt with pages of notes spread out all around her; Sherlock pacing, electrified, back and forth in front of the hearth.

She was still got up as Bill, the promising young Trinity College alumnus Mr. Klein had hired. But her jacket was off, her sleeves rolled up. She hooked her thumbs under the braces as she paced.

‘From ’46 to ’48,’ Johnnie was saying, rifling through papers, ‘almost all the records are devoted to this business with the Normandy beef.’

‘Irrelevant,’ Sherlock said, waving a hand, turning in her circuit back toward Johnnie. ‘It’s the period from ’50 to ’51 that intrigues me.’

Johnnie’s eyes flicked up to Sherlock’s, her brow creased. ‘There are barely any records at all for those years.’

‘Yes, exactly,’ said Sherlock.

‘You think that’s suspicious?’ Johnnie sounded dubious. ‘There’s a letter here, says his daughter had a series of surgeries during that time. Maybe he took time away from work, you know, to be with her.’

Sherlock snorted. ‘You’ll notice that his wife of twenty years actually died in ’48, and he seems to have conducted several transactions the same day as her funeral.’

‘Could’ve seen the error of his ways?’ said Johnnie.

‘No, no,’ said Sherlock. ‘It’s plain from the phrasing of the December ’51 letter, that he was arrested for something. Most probably spent those two years in prison. Thought it would be in his best interests to keep it a secret and rekindle old ties on his release, rather than having to explain to all his associates why he was incarcerated.’

‘You think?’ said Johnnie. Impressed, but unconvinced.
‘Obvious,’ said Sherlock. ‘Just look at the change in his penmanship from ’49 to ’52, not to mention that highly significant use of the word “away.” But…’

‘But?’ Johnnie was sitting forward now. The summer freckles were starting to return to her shoulders. Sherlock wheeled the other way.

‘I wish I knew what he was picked up for,’ she said, frustrated, kicking a toe at the hearth. ‘What I wouldn’t give for five minutes with his police file.’

There was a brief pause. ‘Does it matter?’ said Johnnie then. ‘I mean—do you think it’s important, knowing why he was picked up?’

Sherlock spun back around. ‘Well, let’s think,’ she said, biting. ‘If his conviction was for blackmail or theft, then we have a history of the type of crime currently being perpetrated against Mr. Klein. Not to mention, the identity of the victim would provide a starting point from which to extrapolate patterns in his method of locating and targeting his marks. I should say it would very probably take two days’ time off our investigation. Which, given that the blackmailer is scheduled to make contact with Mr. Klein in only twenty hours, could be quite significant, yes.’ She left off, breathing hard.

‘Yes,’ said Johnnie, pursing her lips. ‘I can see that.’

But Sherlock groaned. ‘Oh, it’s all academic,’ she sighed, sinking down into her armchair. ‘The only one of my contacts who might possibly help us is on holiday in Devon. Read me that Chronicle article from August ’53, again?’

She closed her eyes, fingers steepled, but Johnnie’s voice didn’t come. Instead, Sherlock felt the newspaper clipping brush her bare arm, and flutter into her lap.

‘Read it yourself,’ said Johnnie, in, however, a cheerful voice. ‘You can glean whatever hard information Townsend-Farquhar and his Tory yes-men might have to offer, and much good it’ll do us. Tell me all about it while I’m gone.’

Sherlock opened her eyes. Johnnie was slinging on her button-down, then her leather jacket.

‘Where are you—’ Sherlock said.

‘I’m just popping out for a bit,’ said Johnnie, still in that same pleasant voice.

‘But the case, the—’ Sherlock gestured at the papers strewn about the floor.

‘Yeah, this is actually—might be related,’ said Johnnie. ‘Don’t want to say too much. You never do, after all.’ She clapped Sherlock on the shoulder on the way to the door, which Sherlock realised, dimly, was the first physical contact they had had since that night in Chelsea.

‘Remember to eat something,’ said Johnnie, and then she was shutting the door behind her, her boots clomping down the stairs.

Sherlock, as she turned back to the clipping from the Chronicle, felt vaguely put out.

***

By three in the morning Johnnie hadn’t returned, and Sherlock was very put out indeed.

For four hours her focus had held. She’d sifted through the paltry records surrounding the suspect’s imprisonment, and the rather more overwhelming evidence of his return. She’d cleared the wall
across from the hearth and tacked up the key pieces, arranging and rearranging, looking for connections. Tunnelling down into causes and effects. Nudging with her mental spade against deep-dug roots; then rising, sudden, back to the surface, to surprise an old fact in a compromising new position.

Darting forward, crying out. Moving this bit across to there; standing, swaying for minutes on end, with a low stream of words falling from her mouth. Darting forward again, at last, to pluck from the wall a bill of sale—which was the key revealed, she saw now, hiding in plain sight, because if Johnnie would only consider the probable state of the man’s bed linens upon returning from—

And she turned, grinning—and the flat was empty. The silence had that resonating quality created by the sudden cessation of sound.

Well of course Johnnie wasn’t there, thought Sherlock, shutting her mouth with a click.

She looked down at the bill of sale, scowling, and sank back into her armchair. Johnnie had gone out—what? Three, four hours ago, now? And how long had Sherlock been speaking to her? Well, it hadn’t mattered, in the end. She’d connected up the chain of events in her own head. It was the belief in a listener, really, that helped her thoughts flow.

It was only that Johnnie had said This is actually—might be related. And so it was stupid, wasn’t it, that Johnnie was still gone.

Because Sherlock had solved it, had it all wrapped up, and knew what to tell Mr. Klein when she phoned him first thing in the morning.

And what could Johnnie possibly be doing, in any case, at three o’clock in the morning, that would be of more help to the case than sitting comfortably on the floor, listening to Sherlock’s deductions? Sherlock had said five minutes with his police file. But even Sherlock didn’t have access; it wasn’t as if Johnnie had some kind of personal ‘in’ to the—

Met officer, Sherlock’s memory supplied. That damnable night at Johnnie’s club, replaying in her head. Not a recent recruit, despite her feminine appearance and the Met’s concerted effort to de-masculinise the MWPP—

But, ‘feminine appearance,’ thought Sherlock, springing up and pacing again, restless. These things were relative. By Gateways standards this—what had her name been? Delaney? Donovan?—had hardly been dressed at all. She had hissed in Sherlock’s ear, ‘Think she’s a bit out of your league, little girl,’ and her shoes and skirt had both been almost practical.

And surely that glamour, that femininity was a marker of desirability for Johnnie. Johnnie had had Astrid, and Mireille, and Siobhan, and that little blonde woman in the peasant blouse who had danced by the piano. Surely her standards were higher than this Donovan, who was, Sherlock thought with an odd contempt, hardly more of a so-called ‘femme’ than the bohemian version of Sherlock herself.

And anyway, she remembered her own voice saying:

—nor has she been promoted beyond the standard ladies’ beat: returning delinquent children to their mothers’ waiting arms and breaking up the occasional domestic—

and so that couldn’t be where Johnnie had gone, since what good would it do them? Johnnie might lower her sexual standards as a favour to Sherlock—Sherlock’s gut twisted horribly at this thought, and she threw herself full length on the couch—but in this case that was decidedly not what had
happened, since there would be absolutely no point.

Johnnie’s cigarette packet and lighter were on the side-table. Sherlock felt a vindictive pleasure in the idea that Johnnie might be wanting one right now, having forgotten them in Baker Street. She grabbed the packet, drew out a fag, lit up.

No, she thought again, inhaling and glaring at the ceiling, there would be no point. Sherlock had asked for a file, not a third-hand account from a beat cop on the ladies’ squad.

Except, she remembered, that some of the women’s accommodations abutted the hall of records. Sherlock had seen them, while visiting her own police contact over a year ago. And for a person who sometimes worked late, someone with a key—or someone sleeping in the same room as someone with a key—Sherlock’s five minutes with the police file would be easy enough to obtain.

Sherlock shut her eyes and images swam to the surface of her mind: Johnnie standing behind Donovan as she’d stood behind Sherlock; her breath warm through Donovan’s curls as Johnnie had breathed warm on the back of Sherlock’s neck; Johnnie’s hand reaching around to circle Donovan’s wrist, and then Donovan would turn as Sherlock hadn’t turned, and press her laughing mouth to Johnnie’s—

No, Sherlock thought, her eyes flying back open. No, surely not, because Sherlock had said:

*Your friend Andie is her partner and her sometimes…partner,*

and Johnnie had nodded. She had agreed. Johnnie was promiscuous but unfailingly honourable, and she would never; she might abandon Sherlock and go seduce a piece of evidence out from under a member of the Metropolitan Women’s Police Patrol but she wouldn’t move in on the woman of a friend, and this Donovan was just that, but—

But then Johnnie had looked at Sherlock and replied: *I wouldn’t say friend, exactly.*

***

By five in the morning Sherlock had achieved a sick dizziness. When Johnnie was at home for these late-night sessions, she force-fed Sherlock odd spoonfuls of soup or savoury pie. Sherlock always scoffed; she thought now, in retrospect, that she might have been wrong.

Or perhaps it was only that, immediately upon solving the case, Sherlock was right back where she started: sprawled on the couch and thinking of Johnnie Watson. Thinking of whom Johnnie might be touching; and how that person might be touching her; and whether Johnnie might be touching Sherlock, if only Sherlock were willing to be a bit…different.

But no, she wasn’t. She wouldn’t. It was impossible, but—

But *why* impossible? She felt it was, yet: why should it be? She’d caught herself, trying to bargain: what if it was just for a night? Just for a little while?

She was woozy and disgusted now, spread out on the couch. The disgust should have been for Johnnie, but somehow it was for Sherlock herself. Why *not* put on a cocktail dress and a pair of stilettos, after all? It was no different from putting on Evan the accountant, or Lourdes the Galician ticket collector, or Betty Conway from the typing pool.

Why was it different? How *could* it be different? She ground out her cigarette angrily, into the ashtray on the floor.
Sherlock thought, predictably, of the Carruthers’s ball. These days she was furious every time she thought about the Carruthers’s ball: because Johnnie had been right. It would have attracted less attention to go as a couple, with Johnnie in her suit and Sherlock in Jeanette’s black lace dress.

And Sherlock had refused, and compromised them, and done a mediocre job when she could have been outstanding. Since when did Sherlock Holmes ever choose mediocrity?

She kicked the armrest on the couch; her foot slipped. It knocked the china lamp off the side table. The lamp hit the floor, and bounced, and the lack of a shattering sound was profoundly unsatisfying.

The most galling part was, that Sherlock hadn’t even seen the possibility, until Johnnie had held out Jeanette’s dress and suggested Sherlock put it on. Had she developed some kind of—of selective blindness, then? Was she so accustomed to thinking around the possibility of satin, and heels, and lace, that they no longer entered her mind? How else could a persona—the correct persona, she admitted to herself, with another kick of her heel—how could that possibility occur to Johnnie Watson of all people, but not to Sherlock herself?

It was humiliating.

She took a deep breath; cleared her mind. She would not think of hands of any kind. Nor Johnnie’s mouth, nor the solid line of her freckled shoulders. She closed her eyes and imagined, carefully, cautiously, herself at the Carruthers’s ball, in Jeanette’s black dress.

Sherlock and Johnnie could have impersonated a pair of invited guests, rather than sneaking in the back way. She thought of the charmed smiles on the faces of the host and hostess; imagined glancing through her eyelashes at the bartender, and his flushed face as he leaned over to tell her where Mr. Mortimer was. They could have located their quarry hours earlier.

She prodded at the edges of her own imagination. Nothing…nothing terrible, she thought. If anything, it could all have gone more smoothly. She breathed, slow and deep.

Gingerly, then, she imagined herself back in the vestibule. There was Johnnie, breathing short breaths on Sherlock’s neck, her hard knife pressed into Sherlock’s back. Even with Sherlock made up as Evan, it had been—distracting. Now Sherlock held her breath, and shifted her memory until she was clothed in black silk, and—waited.

All quiet. Johnnie breathing against her naked nape.

And then: Johnnie spinning her; pinning her to the wood-panelled wall. Sherlock keening, needing, and Johnnie’s teeth on her bare clavicle, oh—. In the vestibule Sherlock’s head fell back hard against the wall, and alone on the couch she gasped, and arched her back, and in the vestibule oh god Johnnie’s lips, mouthing through silk at the outward curve of Sherlock’s breast. And Johnnie rutting against Sherlock’s thigh, and her honeyed hands shoving aside the wrap of Sherlock’s black wrap skirt, grappling between Sherlock’s legs, pinning her with her hips and her hands and Sherlock fisting her fingers in Johnnie’s hair, drawing Johnnie’s mouth up toward Sherlock’s ear to hear Johnnie’s ragged voice saying

*disgust me such a silly ordinary girl never been so disappointed you’re just the kind of ridiculous pathetic dyke hope they laugh you out of London never want to speak to you and—* HUNH—

And her back hit the floor, the air pressed from her lungs.

Scrabbling hands; spasming throat; eyes stretched open; she was clutching the side of the couch, gasping for breath, and no, no, couldn’t think of that, mustn’t, wasn’t Johnnie, it hadn’t happened, it
wasn’t, it wasn’t, those weren’t even the right words.

She staggered up, one hand on the arm of the couch while her head spun and her vision prickled. The case, she thought, the case, things of interest: safe things, like danger. She thought of going out, of London. Gradually her breath returned. By the time she reached the door, she could feel her feet. She threw on Bill’s springtime blazer, and headed down the stairs.

There would be workingmen’s cafes opening now, stewed tea for the breakfast crowd. And Sherlock had nothing to say, anyway, when Johnnie got home.

***

She returned to the flat at eight-thirty, fed and watered, having given Mr. Klein her instructions in exchange for a sizeable credit with his dressmaker wife. Johnnie was out at the garage, but there was a note pinned to the ice-box.

*Blackmail*, it said. *Pentonville Prison, June 50 - Sept. 51. Victim Reginald Miller. I'm at the garage until 4. Hope this helps. JW*

Sherlock crumpled the note in her palm.

A confirmed hypothesis had always felt like acceleration: like shedding a burden, rather than shouldering a weight. She resolved, standing in the pale shafts of light filtering through the kitchen window, to hold it up.

***

May 23rd, 1955

221B Baker Street, Marylebone

London, England

But some structures, it turned out, are built to impress, and others are built to endure.

It was seeing Lou, finally, that broke her. Lou, Johnnie’s old friend, or—Sherlock saw Lou across the street and the word that sprang to mind was ‘nemesis,’ though Johnnie would laugh at her, would say real people didn’t have such things.

They were running an errand, that afternoon, for the Riverses, which put them in Chelsea for the first time since the Gateways club and the party afterward. They’d been making their way down the pavement, Johnnie scanning for street addresses while Sherlock talked. It was almost easy between them; close enough that she almost forgot to remark it. Then Johnnie’s jaw tightened, and Sherlock looked over, following Johnnie’s line of sight; and Lou McGuire, in Army Surplus khakis and a green pullover, was just across the way.

Johnnie pasted on a smile, though Sherlock could tell by her jaw and the set of her shoulders that she wasn’t pleased to see Lou any more than Sherlock was. Lou smiled her green-eyed smile; motioned for them to wait. The whole thing was exhausting.

Sherlock felt Johnnie’s fingers spasm, for just an instant, against the back of her wrist, too quick for Sherlock to react. Johnnie slowed, but refused to stop moving entirely. Sherlock took an obscure satisfaction from Lou’s windedness when she finally caught them up.

‘Johnnie!’ Lou cried, walking backward in front of them, and then forcing them to stop by stopping
herself. She shook Johnnie’s hand, hearty and smiling.

‘And the lovely Miss Holmes,’ she added. Sherlock stepped around Johnnie and stuck out her own hand, pointedly perpendicular rather than parallel to the ground. Lou hesitated a moment, then shook it as well.

‘All right, Lou?’ Johnnie said. Pleasant, but cool.

‘Oh, well, can’t complain,’ Lou said. The three of them looked at one another.

‘Cass and Haley still—’

‘Oh yes,’ said Lou.

Sherlock fidgeted. Her feet hurt, suddenly, and small talk made her skin itch.

‘How long are you all in London, then?’ said Johnnie.

‘Supposed to be two months,’ said Lou, ‘but I’ve my doubts. We’re having a ball, but it’s bloody expensive up here.’

Johnnie snickered. ‘It is, yeah, if you spend all four regular nights, out.’

Sherlock felt a swell of affection at the way, when Johnnie said out, anyone with a set of ears could hear: at the Gates, buying drinks for anyone who’ll let you. She smirked. Lou saw, but Sherlock couldn’t bring herself to stop.

‘Well,’ Lou said, voice like satin, ‘we can’t all have your connections, Johnnie.’

‘Sorry?’ said Johnnie, glancing at her watch. ‘Connections?’

‘Mmm,’ said Lou. ‘Who’s the lucky officer, then?’

‘What are you on about?’ Johnnie said, slightly impatient. ‘Officer?’

Sherlock fidgeted again. Her feet felt bruised from the weight of her motionless body. ‘We really need to be—’ she started, thrusting a shoulder forward, but Lou cut back in, and Sherlock subsided. She dropped back, heavy on her heels.

‘Don’t give me that,’ Lou said. ‘I saw you just the other morning. Four, five days ago, was it? Coming out of Peto House.’

‘Coming out of—’ Johnnie said. Sherlock shut her eyes.

‘Yeees,’ said Lou, drawing out the word, eyes narrowing. ‘Convenient accommodations they’ve got, the ladies of the Met. I seem to recall that Nancy Harrow had a room all to herself at Peto House. She can’t be the only one.’

Four, five days ago, thought Sherlock. She had flashes of balling up a scribbled note in her hand. Of her own voice: What I wouldn’t give for five minutes with his police file. She felt blank, heavy.

‘Still,’ said Lou, when Johnnie didn’t respond. ‘A roommate can be got round. I hear Sally Donovan was sharing with a girl who only just left the force to get married.’

Sherlock blinked, hard, then turned her head. Johnnie wouldn’t meet her eyes. Sherlock just kept staring at the side of Johnnie’s face.
She realised, dimly, that Johnnie was still talking, was curling her lip and saying, in a disgusted voice, ‘Didn’t your father ever tell you, McGuire, a gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell?’ But it was as if Sherlock were hearing it all from a great distance, through the heavy air compressing her head.

Inside her the weight tipped, sickening and vertiginous.

‘You weren’t so fastidious when it came to Ana Vilaseca,’ Lou was saying.

Sherlock stood on the pavement and felt it happen. The weight tipped, and slipped from her. Johnnie said something about ten years ago, and Sherlock stared at the side of Johnnie’s face, numb with thought.

She thought of continuing on as they were. Sherlock unresting, always vigilant over her inviolate citadel of selves, while Johnnie brought home Siobhan, and Sally, and Mireille, and Astrid, and all of them slept through the night: ordinary people, having nothing to defend.

‘…think you can tell me about Ana,’ Johnnie was saying. Sherlock stared at the side of Johnnie’s face, and was tired in her bones.

She thought of facing an endless string of Johnnie’s earnest queries, and of making herself insist, again and again, on the logic of claims she knew were flawed. Because Sherlock wasn’t being logical when she tore up a stranger’s dress at an innocent suggestion. The weight had become too much to support. Her foundations were shot through, already, with cracks.

And Johnnie was inside the gates. She worked with Sherlock; and between the work and the citadel there was nothing to distinguish.

Lou was sneering, murmuring something like ‘…living with, practically another butch, Johnnie, it’s disturbing,’ and it snaked its way into Sherlock’s brain. She felt a moment of sadness; a moment of anger; and another; and anger for one moment more. And then she felt herself just—giving up.

She would do what she had to, she thought, as Johnnie turned and strode off, leaving Lou sputtering on the pavement. She was compromised; she was crumbling. Defence had become impossible.

Silks, satins, smiling, stilettos: it had to be easier than this.

Chapter End Notes

1. Let me tell you, my friends: it is extremely difficult researching the appearance and availability of dildos circa 1954 in Britain. “Hard black rubber” is about all I could deduce from the one 50s-era (and endearingly silly) porn film I was able to find involving masturbation. As far as procurement, Jill Gardiner writes:

Lesley had a similar experience at a party given by a bisexual woman.

We went to her house at Islington, and her husband was cooking a huge curry, with three children running about. A party was going on
in one room, and she was dealing in a line we now call sex toys, which were difficult to locate in those days, dildos, photographs, books and whips. One of the tall girls took a dildo and did a disgusting dance with it. Quite a lot of lesbians of my era were disgusted by it. Their idea was that if you didn’t like men, you didn’t want that sort of thing around either. Whereas I’m all for them. Lesley (57)

So, they were around but very niche. An habituée of the Gateways, many of whose patrons were sex workers, would be in a better position than most to locate dildos or other sex toys if they so desired. As Lesley’s story implies, the opinion about them in the 50s lesbian community was split.

2. It’s, um, REALLY SHAMEFULLY OBVIOUS if you’ve read it, but a debt of gratitude is owed to Joyce’s Molly Bloom for the style and all the yeses in the penultimate paragraph of the first scene.

3. Given the housing shortage during these years, the stigma on single women living alone, and how recently both services had been opened to women, both female service members and female Met officers were provided with housing by their employers. Rebecca Jennings, in Tomboys and Bachelor Girls, writes:

   In the majority of women’s police section houses, the accommodation seems to have been based on two women sharing a room and as such provided an unintentionally favourable environment in which to conduct a lesbian relationship. One of the most popular London section houses, Peto House, in Pembridge Square, had formerly functioned as a hotel, and therefore comprised self-contained single or twin bedrooms, possibly with locking doors.

The detail about Peto House abutting the Hall of Records is fictional. But convenient!

4. Pentonville Prison is a shout-out to the BBC Sherlock series, but as far as I can tell it’s perfectly plausible that someone convicted for blackmail in 1950 would have been imprisoned there. Twelve to fifteen months hard labour seems to be about an average sentence from the time, as well.
Johnnie was vague and distracted, all that Saturday. She moved nervously, and moved a great deal; there were things about which she wasn’t thinking.

About not having seen Sherlock all week, for example. Or about Sherlock’s mad behaviour when she had seen her. Or about Sherlock’s bath-wet curls clinging down her back. Or about Sherlock.

In the end Johnnie needed so badly to get out of the flat that she went round the garage for some extra hours. Mickey was there, too, catching up on work, but somehow chatting with her was more
of an irritation than a reassurance. The third time she had to ask Mickey to repeat something, Johnnie
kicked the wall and held up a hand.

‘I know! Listen, don’t say it,’ she said. ‘I’m leaving. You should—just, send me home without pay.’

‘You’re already here on your day off,’ Mickey pointed out, mild, but with a crease between her
eyebrows.

‘Come off it, I’m completely useless today,’ said Johnnie. ‘I’m sorry, Mick.’ She jammed her
spanner back into the bundle of tools, and made to wash up.

‘What is it, then?’ Mickey asked, leaning up against the utility sink as Johnnie scrubbed the grease
off her hands. ‘No, wait, let me guess: something to do with Sherlock?’

Johnnie grunted.

‘Up all night again, were we?’ Mickey’s tone was elaborately casual. When Johnnie slid her eyes
sideways, Mickey was staring straight ahead, smirking.

‘You don’t know what you’re on about,’ Johnnie said, feeling a bit raw. She didn’t know either,
particularly.

‘Oh no?’ said Mickey. ‘I’ll eat my gran’s last Christmas jumper if you got any sleep before your
shifts this past Thursday. Or the Tuesday before.’

‘Those were for a case!’ said Johnnie, wheeling around so fast that she sprayed droplets on Mickey’s
coveralls.

‘And that’s never a look of more-than-professional interest you get whenever she comes around,’
said Mickey, waving off Johnnie’s offer of the towel.

Johnnie blew air out of her cheeks; ran her wet hands through her wet hair. She glared up at Mickey
through her lashes, and didn’t say anything. Mickey looked back at her, considering.

‘This current thing for a case?’ she asked. ‘When do you reckon Sherlock might have it solved?
Only Mr. Haroldson may want to know if his carburettor’s about to be delayed.’

‘Look, honestly I—I don’t even know myself,’ Johnnie said, hands still in her hair. ‘She doesn’t
always, er, volunteer as much information as I might —’

‘Oh, you noticed that, did you? I didn’t like to criticise your—’

‘Mick—’

‘Entirely professional business partner and flatmate, since you’ve occasionally been known to be
somewhat—’

‘Mickey, I know, I—’

‘—touchy about her, for reasons completely unrelated to anything—’

‘Mickey,’ Johnnie yelled, but she was also starting to laugh. ‘Let me get a bleeding word in
edgewise, yeah?’

Mickey made an extravagant gesture of permission, leaning back against the sink.
Johnnie rubbed her face with her newly-clean hands. 'This isn’t going to make you any easier to live with,’ she said, glaring out from between her own fingers, ‘but I’m telling you, it must be for a case. She sort of—of cornered me last night, and—’

‘I knew it!’ yelled Mickey. ‘You lying, avoiding—’

‘—and nothing happened! I mean, not nothing, she just—she asked to go back to Chelsea.’

Mickey leaned back again, trying not to smile, though her dimples gave her away. ‘Anywhere specific in Chelsea?’ she said.

‘Yeah, er. Actually,’ said Johnnie, cringing a bit. ‘The Gateways. She—she wants to go to the Gates. We were there once before, you know, as a kind of emergency. I reckoned she hated it, a bit. But yesterday she, er, demanded, really. That I, er, take her back there tonight.’

Mickey almost clapped her hands together. It was an oddly schoolgirlish gesture on such a large woman. ‘She said she wanted you to take her there?’

‘Yeah, but you’re making it sound—it was all a bit confused. I mean, she was—’

She’d had an odd flat grimness about her. It’d been unnerving. Johnnie had been just home from work, and Sherlock just out of the bath; and she had crowded Johnnie back against Johnnie’s bedroom door wearing nothing but her silky blue bathrobe, wet-black curls all down her back. She’d smelled of rose soap and sweet, secret skin.

Sherlock had said ‘you will’ and ‘Gateways’ and ‘tomorrow,’ and Johnnie had only been able to nod. She hadn’t asked about the case, hadn’t asked anything. She’d just kept nodding, too many times, an awkward number of times. And Sherlock had nodded once, and slid off downstairs without a backward glance.

Johnnie scowled now, remembering.

‘I’d have thought you’d be damn well overjoyed,’ said Mickey, taking in the scowl with narrowed eyes.

‘It’s not a date, Mick.’

‘Johnnie Watson, you are the stubbornest, most bloody-minded—’

‘She doesn’t have any interest!’

‘My left foot!’ exclaimed Mickey, very indignant.

‘Look,’ said Johnnie, her hands in the air, ‘I have no bloody idea what’s going on, but she’s made herself perfectly clear. We were all standing right here, weren’t we? “I’m married to my work,” and all that.’

Mickey made to wave the words away. ‘That was eight months ago at least, and I’ve never heard such a load of rot in all my—’ but Johnnie spoke over her: ‘I’m telling you, she must want to investigate someone, and she’s using this as cover.’

They looked at each other, Mickey shaking her head. Johnnie tried for a joke, saying ‘I only hope it’s not any friend of mine.’ She felt her grin come out as a grimace.

‘Mm,’ Mickey said, obviously unconvinced. She turned to the tool bench, straightening the shims
and spanners. Johnnie guessed she thought she was hiding her amusement.

‘I suppose,’ Mickey said, over her shoulder, ‘you’ve given no thought at all to what you might be wearing on this utterly unromantic trip to the Gateways with your uninterested flatmate.’

‘Well, I,’ said Johnnie, and couldn’t in all honesty continue.

‘Yes?’ Mickey’s tone was deliberately bland but her eyebrows were up, her dimples on full display when she turned her head.

‘Well, it’s—it’s Saturday night, isn’t it,’ said Johnnie, not looking at Mickey, crossing to pick up her bag where it hung on the wall. ‘Got to be suited and booted, Saturdays at the Gates.’

***

May 28, 1955
6:18pm
221B Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

Suited and booted, she thought, back home and out of the bath, pulling her suit from the back of her closet.

She generally stuck to Wednesdays and Fridays out: khakis and pullovers, less buttoned-up. Nonetheless, she could manage Saturdays without embarrassing herself. The suit was a little worn, and almost a decade out of date. But it had come complete with waistcoat for only ten pounds, and her friend Maureen had tailored it specially, in exchange for Johnnie fixing up Maureen’s old army Beetle.

Maureen had insisted, too, that the pinstriped navy brought out Johnnie’s eyes, and broadened her shoulders. Though standing in front of her mirror now, debating between a half and a full Windsor, she felt a bit ridiculous.

She cleared her throat; slicked her hair; made a face. She had cowlicks, she thought, groaning, that would endure when she was dust in the ground. She blew air out of her cheeks; turned to descend the stairs.

And what on earth, she thought, were they even doing tonight? She had hardly seen Sherlock since that fight with Lou, not even to talk to. And now this. Was she mad, agreeing to go back to the Gates with Sherlock when the last—

—time—

—Sherlock—

_Sherlock._

Johnnie stumbled; grabbed the bannister; stood and gaped on the bottom step. And Sherlock, her mass of dark curls twisted high up on her head, her eyes rimmed in black, stood by the unlit hearth and stared right back.

She was standing half-turned to the window. Sun glanced along her bare shoulder, and her throat, and the dip of her clavicle. Draped across the other shoulder, and floating and slipping over breasts and back and narrow hips, was a mass of shirred aubergine silk, shot through at the hip with a fall of black. The fabric was matte; each single layer transparent. It was the kind of thing that in a different
colour or style might look childish.

But Sherlock looked—Christ, she looked like some Greek goddess, come to life. Skin statue-white under gathers of purple silk; bones fine and long. Johnnie stared at the rise and the fall of Sherlock’s half-uncovered breastbone. She ached in her tongue, and her fingers, and her chest.

‘Er,’ she said, unhelpfully, from the stairs.

Grey eyes flicked up to Johnnie’s face from whatever they’d been looking at below it, and Johnnie almost stumbled again.

Sherlock’s gaze was utterly opaque, utterly cold: statue-like just as much as her clothes. Johnnie looked at her face, and told herself she was looking at Sherlock, and felt a cold trickle of dread.

‘Yes. So,’ Sherlock said, her voice clipped. ‘Ready, then? Will I do?’ She stepped away from the hearth, turning about.

Johnnie pushed down hard on the protest rising in her chest. What could she do?

‘I. Ah. Suppose,’ she said. ‘Are you—trying to get noticed?’

‘Obviously.’

Johnnie’s chest tightened further. ‘By, er, anyone in particular?’ she asked, finally leaving her perch on the stairs, walking toward the rack of coats and hats, not stumbling.

‘That,’ said Sherlock, flat-voiced as she swept out the front door, ‘remains to be seen.’

***

May 28, 1955
7:20pm
The Gateways Club, 239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

Sherlock went ahead of Johnnie down the Gateway stairs. At the bottom was Gina Ware—and Gina gasped, and stood up, and put out her hands.

Which was more of a reaction than Johnnie herself had ever merited in ten years of steady drinking at the Gates, not to mention that time she’d relocated Gina’s shoulder.

She shifted uncomfortably next to Sherlock, while Gina stared, then breathed something that sounded like ‘Madame Gray!’ Her manicured nails were outstretched, almost touching aubergine silk.

Johnnie glanced at Sherlock in time to catch her wide, foreign smile; in time to see her lean forward, and murmur ‘Not quite,’ as if she were imparting a secret with which Gina alone could be trusted.

Gina looked up, questioning. ‘But I have seen photographs,’ she said, ‘this exact dress—’ and Sherlock said, ‘To tell you the truth, there’s a local woman I use.’

Gina caught her shiny cherry bottom lip in straight white teeth, and her eyes went dark. Johnnie almost choked on her own tongue thinking about how any of the regular butches would react to seeing that look on Gina Ware’s face. She wondered if even Smithy had ever seen it. She wondered if Ted had.
‘Her workmanship is quite fine,’ went on Sherlock, in her new, falsely intimate voice, running a hand below the fall at her hip and holding it out to Gina, black against her pale white arm. ‘And silks straight from Paris, feel. One simply can’t find the like in London.’

Gina slid the backs of her fingers up and up the black piece, until her palm pressed against purple at Sherlock’s hip. Johnnie blinked hard, braced against the bannister. Unattainable Gina Ware, and untouchable Sherlock Holmes. It should have been a fantasy come to life. Somehow, she thought, it wasn’t.

Sherlock leaned even closer to Gina, and Gina leaned to meet her.

‘I’ll give you her name, shall I?’ Sherlock purred in Gina’s ear, and Gina breathed ‘Would you?’ and left her mouth slightly open, and Sherlock’s hand slid along Gina’s arm as she drew away, smiling with her mouth alone.

‘Well of course,’ Sherlock said, warm and strange. ‘I haven’t forgotten, you know, the way you came to my assistance that evening when I was…indisposed.’

She gave Gina’s hand a squeeze, and then looked around at Johnnie while Johnnie was still watching Gina piece together who Sherlock must be: the underdressed, apparently dead-drunk young girl she had almost expelled from the bar. Gina’s expression hovered between offence and amazement, and then amusement snuck up on her and she grinned. The smile was so genuine that Johnnie kept looking at Gina, rather than at Sherlock.

‘Yes, well done, well played,’ Gina said from behind Sherlock, still grinning, almost laughing. ‘I believe it now, that you are a detective.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock drawled, without turning. ‘I thought you might appreciate that.’ She spoke in something closer to her normal tone. Johnnie tried to feel reassured.

‘I played a similar joke once myself,’ mused Gina, taking a drag from her cigarette holder. ‘On a society woman in Cardiff. She had called me a Dago.’

‘She wouldn’t have done so again, I think,’ said Sherlock, turning back to Gina, and smiling with her mouth again. ‘Would she?’

Gina exhaled smoke at the ceiling, shook her head, and extended her hand.

Sherlock shook it with her right, and with her left extended a calling card. ‘Mrs. Judith Klein,’ she said. ‘Fine dressmaker, Maiden Road. Compliments of Sherlock Holmes.’ Gina bowed her head, took the card, and waved them through together.

The noise from the bar and the band hit them in a wave. Johnnie could feel heads turning as they walked in: Sally Donovan caught her eye from her spot by the piano, where she stood next to Andie Levinson, and tipped her chin up. Johnnie nodded at her. Then she leaned up to shout in Sherlock’s ear, which excused her hand on the silky small of Sherlock’s back.

‘You had a three-hundred-pound dress made up in four days just to get your own back on Gina Ware?’ she yelled, and Sherlock raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

‘Don’t be absurd,’ she said, her face shuttered. ‘I got it made up for a social call. We’re here socially.’

‘We’re—’
‘Be a dear and get us some drinks?’ Sherlock said, cutting her off.

‘“Be a dear?” repeated Johnnie, disbelieving. ‘And what’ll you be having, then, a strawberry bloody daiquiri?’

Sherlock winced, then tried to cover it up with a false smile. It made a sick flame in the pit of Johnnie’s stomach.

‘Look, what are you—’ she started, but Sherlock smiled saccharine-sweet and said ‘You know best, I’m sure,’ and strode over to a table near the dance floor. Johnnie stared after her for two seconds, cursed, and hurried off toward the bar.

‘Who’s your new girl?’ Smithy asked in her deep voice, angling Johnnie’s pint under the tap.

‘She’s not my—she’s my flatmate,’ Johnnie said. She turned to check on Sherlock, who was sitting smoking at her table. ‘You’ve met her,’ she added, turning back. ‘We came in together a couple of weeks ago.’

Smithy thought for a moment, serious, then broke into her sudden smile. ‘Oh yeah,’ she said, reaching up for the whisky. ‘Odd kid, kind of rag-tag, right? Looks a hell of a lot sharper tonight.’

Johnnie shook off a stab of anger. ‘Mmm,’ she said. She turned to check again; Sherlock was still there.

‘I thought she seemed like she could take care of herself, though,’ said Smithy, with a pointed look up from the shots she was pouring.

‘Hm?’ said Johnnie. ‘Yeah, she—can, what do you—’

Smithy set the shots down on a tray in front of Johnnie with a decisive click. ‘Seeing you so nervous, man,’ she said, ‘gives me the creeps. What’re you worried about? We’re like your home here, you know that. Nothing’ll happen to your girl.’

‘Right,’ said Johnnie, fishing cash from her inside jacket pocket, ‘Well. She’s not been around as much lately. And she normally doesn’t like this kind of thing and I’m just—concerned.’

Smithy took Johnnie’s coins, raising her eyebrows and shutting her mouth.

When Johnnie got back to the table with pints and shots, Sherlock was smiling her soft, sickening new smile up at, of all people, Lou McGuire. Johnnie didn’t groan aloud, but it was a close thing.

‘Come on now, what’s your favourite?’ Lou wheedled. Johnnie shouldered past her to set the drinks on the table. ‘I’ve gotten right chummy with old Chester at the piano there,’ continued Lou. ‘I reckon I could get him to play whatever you wanted.’

‘Could you really?’ said Sherlock, leaning forward with her elbows together in front of her. Predictable Lou took the hint and looked down her dress. Johnnie waited for jealousy; felt only panicked disbelief.

‘No trouble at all,’ said Lou. ‘What’ll it be? You like old stuff? He plays stride like you won’t believe.’

‘Oh, I do love old music,’ said Sherlock, and she was actually fluttering her lashes now. ‘Do you think he knows Gaspard de la nuit?’
‘I, er,’ said Lou, taken aback for a moment, ‘I’m not sure I—’

‘Oh, no matter at all,’ Sherlock purred. Johnnie ground her teeth. ‘I’m sure I’ll adore whatever you choose.’

Lou looked about to burst from self-satisfaction. ‘I reckon you won’t mind if I have a dance with your flatmate, then, John?’ she said, hearty and perfunctory.

‘I don’t know, Louise,’ Johnnie gritted out. ‘Why don’t you ask her?’

Sherlock’s head whipped around to look at Johnnie, her mouth slightly open. Lou snickered. ‘I just did,’ she said. ‘Weren’t you listening, then?’

‘No,’ said Johnnie, still speaking slow through her teeth. ‘You didn’t ask her to dance. You asked her whether she likes stride piano. The one question has nothing to do with the other.’

Lou scoffed. ‘Don’t be like—’ she started, but Sherlock interrupted, still looking at Johnnie.

‘Isn’t that how dancing works, here?’ she asked. ‘If a butch wants to dance with someone else’s femme, she asks the butch for permission?’

Part of Johnnie wanted to scream, to throw something against the wall. But raw fury flipped a switch in her. It was sometimes steadying; had been, since the war.

She turned toward Sherlock, feeling herself straighten up. Shoulders back; breath even.

‘But that’s complete rot,’ she said, with a passable imitation of nonchalance, and a little smile. ‘I’ve never met a femme who didn’t know her own mind about when to dance and who to do it with. And Sherlock here,’ she added, turning from a frustrated-looking Sherlock back to Lou, ‘is even more capable than most. I suggest you take the matter up with her.’

Sherlock was still staring at Johnnie. Something stirred behind her blank eyes.

Lou made noise of disgust, but she turned to Sherlock. ‘Miss Holmes,’ she said, ‘would you honour me with the next dance?’ She extended her hand in a parody of courtliness.

Sherlock pressed her lips together. ‘No,’ she said, peevishly.

‘Pardon?’ said Lou and Johnnie, in unison. Which was fairly comical, but Sherlock didn’t smile.

‘No,’ she repeated, and threw a shot down her throat. ‘I will not dance with you, Miss McGuire.’

Sherlock glared up at Lou, and Lou, sputtering about ‘mad slags,’ stormed off to a table on the other side of the dance floor. It was just next to one where Mary Sophia Allen was slumped over, seemingly passed out drunk. Fascists, thought Johnnie. This evening just got better and better.

She looked back at Sherlock, who was gazing vaguely in the direction Lou had gone. Her pink mouth was twisted up. It would have been ugly if it weren’t the most sincere-seeming thing she’d done all night. It gave Johnnie courage and she leaned over the table, lowering her voice.

‘Would you mind,’ she hissed, ‘telling me what’s going on here, Sherlock?’

But by the time she’d finished, Sherlock had resumed her mask. ‘What do you mean?’ she said, dropping her second shot into her pint. ‘I told you, we’re here on a social engagement.’

‘All right, and what kind of social engagement needs you to flirt with, and then reject, Lou
‘Bit of amusement,’ said Sherlock, ostentatiously casual, with flint behind her eyes and a blank smile.

Johnnie had a flash, then, of being here weeks before; of Sherlock sitting across the bar from their current table, deducing all Johnnie’s former flames; of the look of wild genuineness in Sherlock’s expression. And she missed it, suddenly, with a wild mixture of impotence and desperation. Like the time on the Serpentine as a child, when she’d filled Harry’s toy boat with sticks, and it had bobbed and floated, gentle beneath her fingertips. She had turned away for a moment only, and a gust of wind had come, and she had watched it drifting, drifting away from her reaching arms.

She shut her eyes tight against the image, and drew herself up.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Good. You’re amusing yourself, then? Having fun?’

‘Mmm,’ said Sherlock, with another flash of her false smile.

‘I notice you sat us next to the dance floor.’

‘Mmm.’

‘Are you…planning to dance, then?’

‘Does it matter to you?’ asked Sherlock, sipping her boilermaker.

‘No,’ said Johnnie, lying through her teeth. ‘Only I reckon if you’re not going to, other girls might like this seat.’

Sherlock made an impatient tsking noise, looking away.

‘Anyone in particular you’d accept, if Lou’s not to your liking?’ Johnnie felt she’d prefer to peel off her own skin than continue this conversation, yet somehow her mouth kept moving. ‘Smithy gets a half-hour at ten-thirty, if I recall rightly.’

‘I didn’t come to dance with Smithy,’ said Sherlock, gazing out into the crowd.

‘Who then?’ snarled Johnnie, her voice rough. ‘Who’re you after? You could pull any—’ and she was horrified to hear her voice almost break on the words, ‘—any butch in this bar, looking like that.’ Her mouth tasted bitter.

Sherlock’s pint glass clattered hard down onto the glass tabletop. For a moment only, Johnnie saw her fully present behind her eyes. She turned them on Johnnie and spat out ‘Looking like what, exactly?’ and Johnnie’s nails dug into her palms.

‘Looking how, looking—good enough to fucking devour, Sherlock, you know exactly how. I don’t —’

‘Why don’t you ask me, then?’ said Sherlock.

‘—understand what you’re—what?’

‘You,’ repeated Sherlock, sitting back again, sounding almost resigned, almost—almost, thought Johnnie, disappointed. Johnnie’s mouth hung open.

‘Does the famous Johnnie Watson count herself apart from the other, as you say, “butches in the bar”?’ Sherlock was sneering, but oddly without heat.
‘Of course not, I just—’

‘Ah,’ said Sherlock, her tone blank and polite. ‘So perhaps the problem is that you’ve seen a bit too much of me? Suits and dressing gowns all a bit overwhelming for you? One night in black silk doesn’t count, you expect the whole—’

‘Sherlock, I have no idea what you’re—’

‘If it would help, I can tell you a few habits that might surprise you about the lovely Siobhan and S—’

‘Fine!’ yelled Johnnie, much too loud, and her chair crashed to the floor behind her as she stood. Couples around them were turning to look. Sherlock appeared utterly unimpressed. ‘Fine,’ Johnnie said again, making an effort to lower her voice. ‘You want to dance? Let’s go.’

She put out her hand. Sherlock, chin up and with a glaring grimacing smile, put out her own and took it. It was she who jerked on Johnnie’s arm to raise herself from her seat, and she who pulled Johnnie toward the dance floor. Johnnie stumbled on after.

Sherlock pulled Johnnie’s arm around her slim, silk-clad waist just as Chester was finishing up ‘Cry Me A River.’ The butches around the piano let out an approving roar when he upped the tempo and started in on ‘Ain’t Misbehavin’.’ In a final attempt at normalcy, Johnnie held Sherlock well out from her own body, like she was back in the school gymnasium learning an awkward fox-trot with Peg Miller. But Sherlock tightened her arms, angry, pulling Johnnie’s front against her own and undulating against her, and through the thin chiffon Johnnie’s hands were suddenly full of Sherlock’s warm, curving, writhing skin.

‘Oh my god,’ Johnnie heard herself say, keeping her feet fox-trotting with an effort, and then, in a strangled whisper: ‘bloody hell, what are you doing?’

‘I should think that would be obvious,’ said Sherlock, speaking at full volume, no intonation, long legs bracketed around one of Johnnie’s thighs. She draped one arm behind her and leant back into Johnnie’s encircling arm, so that the line of her chest and her throat were stretched out in a long backward arch. Johnnie couldn’t think; couldn’t breathe; couldn’t look away.

‘Where did you learn to—’ Johnnie panted, as Sherlock snaked herself back into an upright position, and leaned in to breathe into Johnnie’s ear.

‘Simple observation,’ murmured Sherlock, hitching herself against Johnnie’s hip, ‘of the typical behaviour at this club, followed by modification of my boarding school training—and yes,’ she said, voice pitched low and expressionless, pressing her wine-clad breasts up against Johnnie’s front until Johnnie could feel the soft warm weight of them through pinstriped wool, ‘I learned to dance at boarding school. Add it to your file.’

Johnnie groaned, almost panicked. Sherlock’s whipcord body was trying to fuck her thigh through layers of wool and gathered silk, and her voice and her face were a stranger’s, and it was like some grotesque parody of Johnnie’s favourite dreams.

Johnnie pulled back, far enough to look up into Sherlock’s face. It was masked with an imitation of voluptuousness, seeming to enjoy the dancing the way she’d seemed to enjoy the bacon samie Mrs. Patrick had given them after they solved the case on Thursday, and—and Johnnie gasped, and drew back in the middle of the dance floor, realising.

Thursday. The Patricks. The whole week.
Johnnie had been thinking—all night she’d been telling people—that she hadn’t seen Sherlock, that Sherlock hadn’t been around as much as usual. But it wasn’t true, she realised, as she stumbled back against a dancing couple, and the butch yelled for her to watch her step. It wasn’t true: she and Sherlock had been together all Monday, on the Fitzroy case, and Wednesday and Thursday tailing a suspect for Mr. Patrick.

It wasn’t that Sherlock had been physically elsewhere, away from Baker Street. She’d been with Johnnie, all the time, but only strange, and blank, and—and Johnnie hadn’t felt her there.

Sherlock was saying ‘Johnnie, what—what’s the matter?’ at first worried, and then angry, but it barely penetrated. Johnnie turned, stumbling, her hand to her mouth, and all she could think was to get out of the Gateways as fast as possible.

***

May 28, 1955
9:50pm
Back alley off 239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

Later, it would seem the pinnacle of clarity (action, reaction), overlaid with a furious haze.

All Sherlock could think was that she had done perfectly. She had done everything required; had given up years, and her citadel, and performed beyond any other femme at the Gates. And still, Johnnie Watson was walking away from her.

The side door swung to on Johnnie’s back. Sherlock’s vision tunnelled, and she was almost running, pushing aside bystanders to get there herself.

Johnnie’s back was to her when she burst through the side door into the alley; Johnnie was braced with one hand against the brick wall, the other holding her head. Sherlock didn’t even slow down. Her heels made a sharp, alien sound on the cement. She heard the plumminess in her own furious voice as she clicked across the yard.

‘I think you ought to tell me,’ it said, and a hand went out to grip Johnnie’s shoulder, ‘just for future reference,’ and Johnnie tried to shrug it off, ‘what exactly is so objectionable about me that you can’t even finish a dance.’

Johnnie wouldn’t look around. Sherlock tightened her grip, hard as her hand could grasp. She wanted to feel Johnnie’s bones creak together under her pinstriped jacket.

But Johnnie spun under her hand, Johnnie’s hand locked on Sherlock’s hand on her shoulder, and then she’d twisted Sherlock’s wrist and her arm so Sherlock was forced forward, bent in two. In a hundred sparring sessions her leg had swept sideways, and without thought it swept sideways now, and forward, and Johnnie’s legs were knocked out from under her. She landed on her tailbone on the concrete, and Sherlock fell forward onto her knees.

They sat panting in the dirty alley, glaring, gasping.

‘Too much to ask?’ spat Sherlock. ‘I’m very particular about my personae, you know. It’s somewhat mortifying to have done Gateways Femme below the standard of every other girl in Chelsea.’

Johnnie looked like she’d been slapped. The colour beat up on her cheeks; she fumbled up onto her feet.
‘You can fuck right off, Sherlock,’ she said, but it was quiet, defeated. Not at all the incandescence Sherlock wanted.

‘Can I?’ said Sherlock, shifting forward on her skinned knees. With her weight off her arse she toed off her heeled sandals behind her, under cover of her skirt. ‘And how do you recommend we arrive at that portion of the evening, given that a simple dance seems beyond our abilities?’

‘Jesus,’ Johnnie said. She rubbed her face with her hand, breathed deep behind it. ‘I don’t know what you’re on about, but you’re the worst tease in London, and a spoiled brat, and I’m bloody well done.’

‘Are you,’ said Sherlock.

‘I’ll kip tonight in Mickey’s back room,’ Johnnie said, which wasn’t anything like what she was meant to be saying.

Sherlock was composed of cold fury. All these months to have resisted as hard as she could; and now to be offering herself up a prize and to be left useless in a dirty alley, got up like a doll. Humiliation, a fist to her stomach. She wanted to use her own.

She put out her hand to be helped up, just as Johnnie made to move past her toward the club door.

Johnnie hesitated a moment. Then she reached to take it, and Sherlock lunged forward, locked her hands to Johnnie’s wrist and kneeled up, twisting on her knees and the balls of her feet and pulling, so that Johnnie was thrown off-balance.

Forearms pressed together, she wrenched Johnnie’s weight sideways and down. Johnnie’s back hit the ground, hard, and Sherlock was stretched over her, bloodied knee digging into Johnnie’s suit jacket, one hand pinning Johnnie’s wrist above her head. She felt it on her face when all Johnnie’s breath was knocked from her lungs.

‘Fuck off,’ Johnnie choked, gasping, coughing, finally looking livid like Sherlock wanted her.

Johnnie brought her knee up hard into Sherlock’s side, and Sherlock grunted, and they grappled on the ground. Johnnie struck out at Sherlock’s face and chest with her unpinned elbow, and Sherlock twisted so that Johnnie twisted and Sherlock’s skirt tore all up the side.

Triumph, she felt. Furious rage at the sound, and triumph; and savage satisfaction. She pulled back, and tore another swathe of it, staring down at Johnnie, and Johnnie rolled away and got up on her feet. Sherlock turned and got to hers, now bare on the cold cement of the alley.

‘I don’t know what you call teasing,’ said Sherlock, heaving breath, ‘but somehow I think my behaviour would’ve gone by a different name, on anyone else.’

‘It is different!’ Johnnie said, low, wiping at her dirty mouth with her sleeve. The sleeve was equally filthy; it only smeared the dirt around. ‘You know it’s different.’

Sherlock yelled, wordless, balling her fists.

‘I know absolutely no such thing,’ she said. She was stalking toward Johnnie, her toes gripping the ground.

‘It’s not—not natural on you,’ Johnnie said. She didn’t step back.

Sherlock came even with her, right in the centre of the alley. She leaned in toward Johnnie and
breathed, ‘It’s not natural on any—’ she circled Johnnie’s wrist with her fingers, ‘—bloody—’ she stepped back, ‘—one.’

And she pivoted sideways, kicking out, and tugging, then releasing Johnnie’s wrist. Johnnie stumbled back, knocked off balance. Sherlock stepped forward and struck her again: elbow to the chest; so that Johnnie’s shoulders hit the alley wall.

‘You’re wrong,’ Johnnie growled, swinging forward again from the hip and the shoulder. Her fist connected with Sherlock’s face just below her cheekbone; Sherlock felt the skin split.

‘That’s how some girls feel at home, Sherlock,’ Johnnie said, as Sherlock staggered back. ‘And Christ, you think I don’t know natural when I see it on you? I’ve seen it on you as almost—’ Sherlock stepped forward again, and Johnnie grabbed a folding chair propped against the bricks, held it out before her ‘—as almost everything else.’

Sherlock’s mouth made a grimace, the cut on her cheek stretched tight. ‘You’d like me to believe,’ she said, ‘that all the—I don’t know, possibly hundreds of girls you’ve been—’

‘You dramatic little—’ said Johnnie, feinting forward, the chair’s legs thrusting out from her body. Sherlock dodged her, bending back from the waist.

‘—that they all happened to find it natural dressing in garters and corsets and four-inch heels?’

‘They weren’t—all—femmes,’ said Johnnie, lunging forward with the chair, catching Sherlock’s torso between the two sets of folding legs. It was ridiculous; Sherlock almost laughed; but Johnnie pushed her back, and back, and was so fast that she stayed one step ahead of Sherlock as Sherlock stumbled further back, until Sherlock’s back slammed against the opposite wall.

‘Hung,’ said Sherlock, pinned between the sets of chair legs. Johnnie kicked the seat, and the joints dug into Sherlock’s solar plexus.

‘Liar,’ Sherlock grunted, kicking out at Johnnie’s knee, but Johnnie dodged to the side. ‘I’ve noticed how you solve problems.’

‘What the hell is that supposed to mean?’ said Johnnie, kicking the seat again so that Sherlock squirmed. ‘You don’t believe me? Ask your new friend Smithy.’

Sherlock mouthed for a second, suspended against the wall. And then: ‘Seducing police evidence,’ she grunted, sweeping and jabbing her bare foot toward the knee section of Johnnie’s ripped suit-trousers, ‘out from under the one single—’

‘Hold up, hold on a minute, I didn’t—’

‘—tarted up—’

‘Would you listen, I only called in a favour, I—’

‘—member of the MW—’

Johnnie kicked hard at the chair bottom. Sherlock felt the wood splinter, sudden, and the whole structure twist apart. For a split second Johnnie had half the seat in one fist, struts and legs in the other; but she must have opened both hands as her weight fell forward against Sherlock, because they were empty when she threw them up for balance. She stumbled and grabbed, and ripped the silk at Sherlock’s shoulder, and then the only thing holding up Sherlock’s dress was Johnnie pressed hard against her front, her forearms and her breath hard on Sherlock’s bare shoulders.
Sherlock’s hands had half-pushed up under Johnnie’s hands to free herself, but she looked down at Johnnie’s shoulder and faltered. All the layers were ripped right through: suit jacket, and button-down, and there was a spotted, speckled abrasion on the skin underneath. Flecks of red mixed with golden freckles and Sherlock was light-headed.

She heard the sound she made, low in her throat. Then her hands were on Johnnie’s waist and her mouth was hard on Johnnie’s skinned shoulder, and she was sucking and biting at bleeding skin, holding Johnnie to her like life.

Johnnie gasped ‘Jesus god,’ and wrenched back out of Sherlock’s grip. Sherlock’s mouth tried to follow Johnnie’s skin, teeth snapping together around the taste of copper, but Johnnie’s held her back by the shoulders. And though the top of Sherlock’s dress slipped down around her waist without Johnnie’s weight to keep it up, Johnnie kept looking desperately into her face.

Sherlock breathed, and felt like begging, and didn’t know what Johnnie saw. But she stared back into Johnnie’s eyes, naked and wanting, and Johnnie whispered ‘There,’ and the next moment was pushing forward again, pressing up against Sherlock against the wall.

Johnnie’s hair pomade smelt sharp, and herbal. Sherlock was dizzy with it. She was dizzy with it, and with Johnnie’s thigh pressed between her legs, and with Johnnie’s hands shaking on Sherlock’s shoulders.

Johnnie bit at Sherlock’s cheekbones and her mouth. She said ‘God I missed you, I missed you, Sherlock, stay with me, please, please—’

‘You—’ said Sherlock, and it sounded like a question. She moved her face like a blind bird toward Johnnie’s mouth. Johnnie made a helpless sound and then her tongue was wet and pleading in Sherlock’s mouth, hands still trembling on either side of Sherlock’s face.

‘You—’ Sherlock tried again, breaking away, gasping against the wall; and then just gasped against the wall and couldn’t speak.

‘Christ, I want you stripped,’ Johnnie growled. ‘Out of this—this goddamned thing;’ plucking at the dress, yanking at it. A ripping sound, and the black fall came away in her hand. Sherlock stared down at it. She was molten; and freezing; her heart kicked in her chest.

Johnnie had bent her sandy head and was mouthing at Sherlock’s collarbone and her neck, cupping Sherlock’s left breast, Sherlock’s nipple peaked against Johnnie’s calloused palm in the cold air.

‘I er—I wore it because of—of you,’ Sherlock stammered, her voice tinny as if from a long distance away.

‘God, don’t,’ said Johnnie. ‘Please, just. I don’t care if you’re dressed as Evan from accounting or, fuck—’ and she cut herself off, leaning in, her throat convulsing a moment with Sherlock’s nipple in her sucking mouth before pulling away panting, looking up with Sherlock’s hand in her hair, ‘or that ancient ticket collector crone, I don’t give a damn, just keep, keep looking at me like that, Sherlock, please.’

‘I,’ said Sherlock, ‘yes,’ because she could hardly stop looking at Johnnie however she was looking at Johnnie.

Not when Johnnie had slid to her knees with her hands up Sherlock’s torn skirt, rough shaking palms on the backs of Sherlock’s thighs, and was mouthing through the silk at Sherlock’s pubic bone, wetting the silk with her eyes closed, like she was starving.
Sherlock's breath moved rough in her throat and her thoughts were like icebox honey, and every time Johnnie's bottom teeth grazed between her legs the blood surged under her skin. So it was seconds—minutes, possibly, swathes of rough-breathed time—before she pieced together that when she had said *I wore it because of you* then Johnnie had said—

Johnnie pulled Sherlock’s hips against her own face. Johnnie moaned in her throat. The vibrations set Sherlock shaking and—and god, *leaking*, and Johnnie’s mouth was desperate, and sloppy, and hot. When Johnnie pulled back there was a patch of darker purple on the front of Sherlock’s dress. Johnnie’s lips were swollen and shining, her cheekbones smeared with dirt, and now Johnnie—

—Johnnie had said *I don’t care if you’re dressed as Evan from accounting*—

—Johnnie had said *I want you stripped*—

—and now Johnnie was panting on her knees at Sherlock’s feet, staring up at Sherlock saying ‘I—I can stop but Christ I can *taste* you through your dress, can I—’ and Sherlock said ‘Yes,’ though she couldn’t think, and Johnnie breathed out and steadied herself against the wall like she was dizzy.

Then she stared up at Sherlock and Sherlock stared down, and Johnnie said ‘Keep looking at me, god, keep—just like that, keep—’ as she shuffled forward on her knees, and—

—Johnnie had said *I missed you* though Sherlock had never left—

—and now Johnnie’s thighs were locked on either side of Sherlock’s calves. The whole front of her body pressed up against Sherlock’s legs, one hand working Sherlock’s knickers down around her knees.

Johnnie pushed purple silk up Sherlock’s stomach with her free arm. There were so many, too many layers. They floated around Johnnie’s head and her face. She tried to trap them; she balled them up in her fist, but one more layer escaped to cover her head. And Johnnie pulled back, and batted at her head and said ‘Bloody goddamn—Christ,’ and—

And some hard object inside Sherlock just seemed to liquify.

She was smiling, giggling suddenly, and then laughing, weightless, looking down at her bloody-minded dress. Johnnie looked up for a moment, surprised, uncertain. Then she was giggling too, her shoulders shaking, her forehead resting against Sherlock’s pubic bone through two layers of stubborn chiffon, until she raised her eyes to Sherlock’s laughing face and suddenly wasn’t laughing at all.

‘There you are,’ she breathed. ‘Let me see you.’

And she leaned in and put her mouth again between Sherlock’s legs, suckling, tender, through a double layer of purple silk, her eyes never leaving Sherlock’s. Sherlock’s giggles choked off into a moan.

The chiffon was so thin, and soaked through. Maybe it was better than nothing at all. She felt each flicker of Johnnie’s tongue, each exhaled breath. But she felt them through a veil, and it rubbed, and fretted at her so, so slightly: so light, god, maddening against her skin. Her hips moved into it—into it— and she could feel the silk shifting infinitesimally against the very tip of her, not quite—not quite, *oh*—almost enough, please, after so long, almost enough.

Johnnie made her mouth to be eloquent, and teasing. She was suckling at Sherlock in beating waves, lapping just above, just below, circling the centre of the sharp building ache between Sherlock’s legs. At each brush of Johnnie’s crooked bottom teeth, Sherlock swore she could count them. She wanted them to *bite*, to drag over her flesh. The thought made her cry out, wordless. But they only teased,
and brushed, and grazed, impossible.

‘Oh,’ said Sherlock, hands scrabbling against the brick wall. Those teeth again, and the barest rub of silk, and ‘oh.’ Her breath loud in her lungs. Light, sucking, swallowing pressure just there, just perfect, and then gone, and then back, and then gone and oh.

Somehow her eyes had slid shut. Johnnie’s hand squeezed her wrist; she got them open again. Johnnie smiled up at her with her eyes. Sherlock said again ‘oh,’ with her breathing a mess through her open mouth. And finally, finally Johnnie sucked hard at the heart of her, throat working in throbbing swallows, tongue still moving through the silk, pressed up hard against something blood-sharp and aching in her, and Sherlock said ‘oh…oh’ and pulsed, and pulsed, pressing herself into Johnnie’s teeth, hands fisted in Johnnie’s hair.

Then she was on her knees, kissing Johnnie. Limp. Listening to Johnnie whimper into Sherlock’s mouth. There was a faint salty flavour to the kiss. Sherlock pulled back to say ‘I can taste—’ at the same moment Johnnie said ‘Sherlock, please, I—’ at the same moment as a loud crash from the direction of the door.

Sherlock and Johnnie sprang apart. Sherlock bent to pick up the black fall from the ground, and made a passable bow, tying up the ripped shoulder of her dress. That done, still boneless and breathless, she looked across the alley.

A couple of empty bins had been hurled against the door during the fight. Now someone was shoving at it from inside, calling out muffled curses, scooting the bins a few screeching inches along the concrete with each shove.

Johnnie darted forward to clear them away. At the same moment, Smithy finally appeared, climbing over the stubborn bins and then kicking at them with her long legs, saying ‘What the—fuck is,’ which is when she actually caught sight of Sherlock and Johnnie: standing in the alley, their clothes half-torn off, covered in dirt and blood.

‘Johnnie,’ said Smithy. ‘What the hell is going—were you fighting with a femme?’

‘Er,’ Johnnie said.

Sherlock could still taste blood, and dirt, and herself as she’d tasted in Johnnie’s mouth. Johnnie scratched the back of her own neck, and didn’t answer.

‘Not in the least,’ said Sherlock, mustering as much dignity as she could. She straightened her spine.

‘Um,’ said Smithy. ‘Okay, well. Something’s happened.’

‘Does it have to be right now?’ came Johnnie’s voice, from behind Sherlock, and Sherlock said ‘Never mind, it’s all right’ at the same time as Smithy said ‘Yeah, actually,’ and everyone stopped and looked at each other.

Smithy turned to Sherlock and said, ‘Gina wants you, Miss Holmes. There’s been a—well. Someone’s turned up in the washroom, dead.’

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End Part 2

Chapter End Notes
1. Huge thanks to Dee-Light (DraloreShimare) for the illustration of suited-up Johnnie adjusting her tie! I love it!
2. Hopefully the meaning of “suited and booted” is pretty clear in context: it was the phrase used by the butches in the London scene to describe their full “dressed” look. Saturday nights as the busiest, most formal evenings at the Gateways is historically true; like Johnnie says, Wednesdays and Fridays were less formal. The other days of the week weren’t mentioned specifically in the materials I read - I’m not sure if this is because the Gateways was closed for late-night business on certain days.
3. Army-issue Beetle: The Kübelwagen factory in what is now Wolfsburg, Germany, was wrested from Nazi control and occupied by the British in April 1945. Existing Beetles were painted green and appropriated for use by the British Army. When the War was over, some British army personnel were allowed to bring their Beetles home with them. Johnnie’s friend Maureen was presumably one of these. Kübelwagen changed its name to Volkswagen in 1946.
4. Since this chapter was my blatantly selfish opportunity to indulge my clothing kink, here are some visual references for Johnnie’s suit. The coloration might be similar to this, but with the styling closer to the middle woman in this picture. For reference, I think of these ladies as a good approximation of Johnnie’s more casual, Wednesdays-and-Fridays style. Especially the one on the left! What a cutie.
5. Visual references for Sherlock’s dress, all 1950s evening dresses by French designer Madame Grès. Sherlock’s version is, as explained, a London-made, custom-fit knockoff, but if you imagine the first, two-tone dress in aubergine and black rather than beige and yellow, you’re pretty close. Damn, these imaginary clothes are so pretty I almost feel bad about what I’ve done to them. :-) 
6. Gaspard de la nuit is an extremely difficult, showy, and completely un-danceable 1908 composition by Maurice Ravel. And thanks to Emma de los Nardos for the classical music consult! “Cry Me a River” is a torch song that first came out in 1953, and “Ain’t Misbehavin’” is a 1929 tune first popularised by Fats Waller.
7. I was going to try to keep to karate moves for the fight scene, but this turned out to be a more hybrid martial-arts-and-street-fighting style deal. Reference videos here, here, and here.
Chapter 11

PART 3

May 28, 1955
The Gateways Club
239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

Johnnie could feel a difference as soon as they walked back through the door. The Gates on a Saturday night was always loud, always tumultuous, and she couldn’t have pointed to any one thing tonight out of the ordinary. But now, under the din of the dancing and drinking, there was a kind of anxious hum; a wildness in the eyes of the staff rushing past; that lent the whole scene an unreal cast.

Back in the alley, she’d slipped Sherlock her own suit jacket when it looked like there was no chance of getting away.

‘You don’t want to call the police?’ Johnnie had asked, trying to hold Sherlock back from running inside at the first mention of a death.

But Smithy had shrugged, and pointed at Sherlock, and said ‘Gina wants her,’ as if that were the end of the argument—which, for Smithy, it obviously was. So Johnnie had peeled out of her blazer, and Sherlock had shrugged it on over her ruined dress, and had almost run into Smithy in her rush to get to the door.

‘Why does she want me?’ Sherlock asked, stepping back, motioning for Smithy to lead the way.

Smithy gave Sherlock an eloquent up-and-down glance, and said, without intonation, ‘I really couldn’t say.’ And she led, through the outside door and down the back stairs.

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‘Mother of God,’ Gina said, as soon as they were inside. ‘Johnnie Watson, I think I’ve never come across worse timing than yours.’ Johnnie tried to interrupt, but the onslaught of Gina’s speech continued. ‘Smithy, you take my place at the washroom door. Nobody in or out, yes? Anyone with an emergency may use the mens’; it’s always empty in any case. You two,’ gesturing to Johnnie and Sherlock, ‘cannot examine a body like this. We must clean you up.’

So: back through the kitchen, skirting waitstaff who stared, and bustled, and whispered ‘that’s that Shirley Horne.’ Gina pushed aside a red curtain and charged up a narrow curving staircase only slightly wider than her shoulders, one hand on the ancient bannister.

In fact, between Gina’s famous hips shifting under her tight black skirt, and flashes of Sherlock’s impossibly long white legs through ripped purple chiffon, Johnnie reckoned it was best to keep her eyes on her own feet. She thought, stubbornly and with great effort, of the mysterious dead body in the women’s washroom; and of her surprise that Ted Ware, not a small man nor a young one, had to manage these creaking stairs on his bad leg every time he wanted to leave home.

She most resolutely did not think about eating out a bruised and Christ, keening Sherlock Holmes
through a £300 evening dress in the Gates alleyway. Nor about being interrupted before she could get off herself. Nor about the probable reactions of the other Gateways butches, should any of them realise that Johnnie was about to be invited into Gina Ware’s flat. Possibly into Gina Ware’s bedroom.

Under these conditions, Johnnie thought it was excusable that she took a minute to realise Gina and Sherlock were speaking.

‘…how you even thought to check,’ Sherlock was saying, when Johnnie came back to herself. Gina laughed, a little grim.

‘I was, ah, flustered,’ she admitted. Her tone implied some embarrassment at having met the discovery of a dead body in her washroom with less than complete equanimity. ‘And I don’t know why it came into my head. But Smithy: when she was a girl she liked to read, ah, the pulps, you know. Mr. Chandler, Mr. Himes. Mr. Hammett. You know them?”

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock. ‘I’ve read them, as well.’

It had, in fact, been one of the more surprising discoveries of Johnnie’s first few months in Baker Street: Sherlock’s collection of American pulp and Victorian sensation fiction was out of all proportion to the size of the tiny flat.

‘So, I don’t know,’ said Gina, ‘I suppose I thought of one of those books, and I was kneeling down already to feel her pulse, and so I, ah, I smelled her breath. Or, well, her mouth, since she, ah, wasn’t. Breathing.’

They had arrived at the top of the stairs. Johnnie squinted into the murk for a second or two; then Gina flipped a switch, and the flat flickered dimly to life.

It wasn’t much, not for three adults and a baby. The stairs opened out onto a short hallway, which gave on what Johnnie guessed were two bedrooms on the right, with a washroom and tiny kitchenette on the left. Sherlock disappeared into the washroom almost as soon as the lights came up. Johnnie stared around, blinking.

The kitchenette countertops were covered with books and papers, and there was a basket of blankets and toys propped up against the the door to the icebox. The only clear spot was the single gas burner, next to a neat row of mismatched mugs.

‘We eat downstairs in the bar,’ said Gina, a little out of breath, bustling across to the second bedroom door and pushing it open. ‘More room, and all the food out already for the members. Only, Ted uses this burner for a cup of tea in the mornings.’

Gina was banging around in the bedroom now. She’d left the door open, but Johnnie couldn’t quite move her feet. ‘I’m sorry,’ came Gina’s voice, ‘I—don’t know why I’m telling you all this about our meals, I—’

‘It’s all right,’ said Johnnie, raising her voice from the landing. ‘You’ve had a shock.’

The washroom door swung back open. Sherlock, her face clean of makeup and blood, flashed Johnnie a quick smile before following Gina, fearlessly, through the bedroom door. Johnnie was still shuffling at the floor.

‘Ah yes, that is better,’ came Gina’s voice, and then, in a lower tone: ‘Is it true, then? It was very clear, the smell of bitter almonds. Is it true what it means?’
‘It could be cyanide poisoning,’ said Sherlock, slowly. ‘Though it could also be something less dramatic. Almond liqueur, for example.’

There came a rummaging sound, and a dissatisfied noise from Gina. ‘But we do not serve almond liqueur,’ she said, her voice somehow muffled.

Johnnie’s curiosity got the better of her. She sidled to the doorway and looked in, just as Gina was holding up one of her black sheath dresses to Sherlock’s front. Johnnie’s mouth went a bit dry. Gina was so much shorter; it was obvious the hem wouldn’t reach even to Sherlock’s knees.

‘You are so very tall,’ Gina clucked, like a disappointed parent with a naughty child. ‘Like Smithy.’

‘To be frank,’ said Sherlock, letting out her breath a little too quickly, ‘Smithy’s clothes would be more suitable, in any case.’

Gina opened her mouth. She glanced from Sherlock to Johnnie, and shut her mouth again. It was, Johnnie thought, the first moment of indecision she’d shown all night.

‘Sherlock’s got a point,’ said Johnnie. ‘Trousers, you know, easier to bend down in.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Gina said, looking relieved at Johnnie’s attitude. ‘I suppose you’re right. And I am sure Smithy will forgive the loan.’ She ducked past them back out the door. Sherlock moved to follow, and shot Johnnie a brilliant smile over the top of Gina’s head.

‘Johnnie,’ came Gina’s voice, ‘I am afraid you are, ah, somewhat broader than Smithy in the shoulder and the chest. Take your pick of Ted’s suits, if you would like. Only, the brown wool is for special occasions.’

‘I’ll just keep my own, thanks,’ said Johnnie, wandering back out to the landing. She scowled a little. imagine the clown-like figure she would cut capering about in Ted’s baggy, oversized trousers and elbow-patched jackets.

She wasn’t sure Gina had heard her, however. Gina and Sherlock were discussing poison again.

‘…no liqueurs at all,’ Gina was saying. ‘Some of the artists ask for them, but Ted believes in keeping things simple. Fare for the working people, he says.’

‘What about…almond cakes, or marzipan candies?’ said Sherlock. ‘Or mixed nuts on the bar?’ Johnnie had thought Sherlock seemed a bit dazed, when they had first come back into the bar from the alley, but now her voice had that familiar cadence it got when she was warming to a puzzle.

‘No,’ said Gina. ‘None of it. And I don’t believe Sylvia would eat them, if we had offered. You can ask Smithy, but I only ever saw her drink, when she came in.’ She muttered something else, which Johnnie thought might have been, Only ever saw her drunk.

‘You knew the victim, then?’ came Sherlock’s voice, turned away now from Johnnie.

Gina came out of the bedroom, shutting the door behind her and looking thoughtful. ‘Not well,’ she said, raising her voice to be heard through the door. ‘But she is—was—a regular. She started coming in, oh, a few years ago. Never saw her before then. Sylvia Cohen. Hard drinker. Sometimes,’ and here Gina scowled briefly, ‘started fights.’

‘Mmm,’ came Sherlock’s voice, and then silence. There was a wordless stretch, filled with soft sounds of shifting fabric and shuffling limbs from behind the latched door.
Johnnie stood on the landing; Gina stood with her chin tipped up and her back to the wall beside the door, and gave Johnnie a look. Her cherry-slick lips quirked up; her eyebrows raised a fraction; and she inclined her head half toward Johnnie, half toward the hidden Sherlock. It was as demonstrative an expression of approbation as Johnnie had ever seen on Gina, and communicated quite clearly, silent as it was, ‘You would do well, Johnnie Watson, to keep hold of this one.’

Johnnie felt her blush and sloppy grin. She looked away from Gina’s amusement, smoothing out her features with a hand over her mouth. There was a body downstairs, she thought sternly. This was not the time. But oh, came a little voice before she could stop it, oh how Sherlock had—

The latch rattled and the door creaked, and there was Sherlock, looking crisp and only slightly bruised, in a pair of Smithy’s pressed black trousers and an un-tucked white button-down shirt. Johnnie felt the grin work its way back onto her mouth.

‘All right,’ said Sherlock, rubbing her hands together, ‘enough playing dress-up. Let’s get a look at Miss Cohen.’

Gina crossed the room and started back down the steps. Johnnie turned to follow, the traces of a smile still working their way off her mouth. She was so surprised, at the quick brush of Sherlock’s lips at her nape as Sherlock slid ahead of her on the stairs, that she hadn’t time to respond before Sherlock was well up ahead, questioning Gina.

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‘If it turns out that Cohen actually was poisoned,’ Sherlock said, on the stairs, ‘do you know of anyone at the club tonight who disliked her?’

Gina snorted.

Sherlock asked, ‘Unpopular?’

‘I was only thinking,’ said Gina, ‘that I myself did not like her, much. And she fought. I should have banned her from the club; then none of this would have happened.’

Johnnie smiled, unseen in the dark. Gina sounded, not so much wracked by guilt, as deeply annoyed with her own lapse in professional judgment.

‘These fights; were they with anyone in particular?’ Sherlock asked.

Gina made a hand gesture whose expansiveness was impressive given the dimensions of the stairway.

‘Take your pick,’ she said. ‘Butches, employees. Even the entertainment. I saw her fight with Chester Davis a few weeks ago.’

‘The pianoplayer?’ asked Johnnie, startled out of her thoughts on her tingling nape. ‘Why would she do that?’

Chester had to be pushing seventy, and looked ten years older. He’d always struck Johnnie as all business. Ninety-nine percent of the fights in the Gates were started by butches defending their claim on a femme, and Johnnie just couldn’t feature Chester making a play for anyone’s girl.

Gina shrugged, pushing aside the red curtain so that Sherlock and Johnnie could pass back under. ‘I’ve no idea,’ she said. ‘You can ask him. But honestly, I’m telling you, she fought with everyone. Maybe she was, ah, finishing her collection.’
Johnnie chuckled. ‘Wanted to be the first on her block to complete the set?’

Gina shook her head. Johnnie could sense her smile even from the back. Then Gina said, ‘She fought with your friend Cass.’

‘You mean Lou,’ said Johnnie, unsurprised.

‘I don’t think so,’ Gina said, leading them back through the kitchen. ‘Tall, blonde butch? Skin looks too thin? Like it hurts?’

‘Huh,’ said Johnnie. ‘Right, that’s Cass. But—she never fights with anyone.’ Gina spread her hands again, so Johnnie felt the need to clarify. ‘I mean she’s actually not supposed to. I think she has some kind of blood disorder. ’S how she got to be so funny, avoiding fights.’

‘Perhaps Miss Cohen was particularly provoking,’ suggested Sherlock, in a tone that made Johnnie suspect the statement of a larger significance inside Sherlock’s head.

‘Er, right,’ Johnnie said. ‘So, er, she fought with Chester, and Cass, and—’

She broke off, suddenly distracted. In front of the door to the ladies’ washroom Smithy was biting off words into the face of Andie Levinson. Andie was squared up in front of her, pointing at the door and shouting.

‘You have two members of the Metropolitan Police Force here, present, who are club members,’ Andie was shouting. ‘Where do you get off—’ while Smithy, rigid with cold dignity, said: ‘Gina Ware has every right to handle a disturbance in her place of business however she sees fit.’

‘This isn’t tossing someone out for fighting,’ Andie argued. ‘That woman’s dead in there; there are procedures, you can’t just—’

Johnnie saw Smithy glance up for a moment only; saw her exchange a split-second glance with Gina. Then Smithy moved forward, knocking Andie neatly out of the way. Gina simply swept through the washroom door, no hair disarranged, Sherlock and Johnnie in her wake.

‘Chester, and Cass, and, I believe she also fought with Smithy,’ Gina continued, as if there had been no interruption at all. ‘Miss Cohen made a pass at me, a few months after she started coming here, and Smithy—took exception.’

Johnnie snorted. Gina gave her a challenging look, and she wiped her face.

Sherlock, however, seemed to be absorbed in circling Sylvia Cohen’s body, which was propped against the washroom tile at the far end of the room, next to one of the two toilet stalls. In the accumulated muddy footprints from a night of Gateways members, there were two wide, clear trails where Cohen’s legs had dragged when someone manhandled her into position. Her mouth and eyes were gaping; there were trails of saliva down her front.

‘You didn’t move her?’ Sherlock asked.

Gina shook her head. ‘She was just like this. At, ah, ten-thirty? Only, I touched her to check for her heartbeat.’

Sherlock bent and studied Cohen’s shoes, and her trouser-legs, damp all up the backs; she leaned forward and sniffed at her mouth; pulled down her collar to check her neck. She pushed gently at Cohen’s face, turning it into the light. Johnnie and Gina watched Sherlock work.
Johnnie thought Cohen was probably in her late fifties or early sixties: her short hair almost entirely grey, her figure muscular running to stocky. Elderly by the standards of the Gateways crowd, especially as Cohen apparently went out of her way to pick fistfights with people thirty, even forty years her junior.

Then again, Johnnie thought, looking at the woman’s pockmarked complexion and the dark stains under her eyes, she might look older than her years. A dedicated drinker and presumably, given her surname, a Jew: might be, she’d had a bad war. As if reading Johnnie’s mind, Sherlock rolled up the sleeves on one and then the other arm. Johnnie winced, bracing for black marks: she’d heard dark rumours about the camps. But Cohen’s arms looked clean: no scars, no markings. Sherlock rolled the sleeves back down and tipped Cohen’s head up; Johnnie thought she noticed some faint scarring around the face and under the chin.

Eventually, Sherlock sat back on her heels. ‘We know someone else Miss Cohen fought with,’ she said.

‘We do?’ Johnnie asked, but then Sherlock glanced up with a quirked eyebrow and Johnnie remembered. ‘We do!’ she said. ‘The night—the first night we were here together. This woman fought with Leslie Matthews, right on the dance floor. Gina, you threatened Leslie with a ban.’

‘Evidently,’ said Gina, laconic, ‘I picked the wrong butch.’

There was a crash, then, and they all three looked around to see Andie Levinson and Sally Donovan fall through the door, panting, followed by a seething Smithy.

‘I told you both,’ Smithy said, voice grinding the words between her teeth, ‘that you could wait your—’ but Sally cut across her words and her path.

‘Gina,’ she said, her tone more urgent than Johnnie had ever heard her use, ‘I’m sure you feel you’re acting for the best, but you may not understand, there are procedures. It’s going to look very bad if you let this—this woman destroy evidence, and when the Met arrives—’

Gina turned her head a fraction, raised an eyebrow, and Sally stopped talking. Andie talked over the look they exchanged.

‘She’s right,’ Andie said. ‘Think how it looks that you let some amateur into the scene of the crime, when two Met officers were right here in your—’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Gina, very low, still looking at Sally, ‘were you two planning to stay on here, once the police arrive? Were you planning to make statements? Head the investigation?’

The silence was thick, and sudden. Johnnie looked from Sally and Andie, suddenly abashed, to Smithy, leaning in the doorway curling her lip. Sherlock straightened up by the body, slowly removing her leather driving gloves.

‘It’s not that we wouldn’t—’ Sally muttered at last, at the same time Andie said, ‘You know we’ll help any way we can.’

A muscle tensed in Gina’s jaw.

Sally looked pleadingly over at Johnnie, who said, quiet, ‘Come on, Gina, you know they’d lose their positions if the Met found them here. They won’t care, they won’t be sympathetic.’

‘No,’ Gina said, ‘I do not imagine the Met will be very sympathetic to any of the people they find here, once they are called. I’m sure we are all thinking about that. Miss Holmes seems to be the one
person simply does not care.’

‘Well, we won’t be much use to you sacked!’ yelled Andie.

From the direction of the body came the sound of leather smacking decisively against a wool-clad thigh.

‘Not to worry, Miss Ware,’ Sherlock said, crisp and unconcerned. Heads turned in her direction. ‘Donovan and Levinson wouldn’t be much use to you regardless of whether or not they’re sacked.’ She smiled brightly at Gina and moved toward Johnnie. ‘I think I have all I need here, if we want to —’

‘And what exactly do you know about it?’ Sally said, stepping into Sherlock’s space. ‘Any of it?’

‘Women’s Police Patrol?’ sneered Sherlock. ‘They have you investigating murders now, do they? Taken note of your ten—no, twelve—distinguished years of service and made you Inspector? Detective Inspector? No? Still rounding up lost kiddies and issuing warnings to ladies of the evening, then? Oh yes, you’re overwhelmingly well-qualified for the job, I don’t know why I didn’t see it before. If only I could aspire so high.’

‘Sergeant Levinson and I,’ said Sally, with painstaking enunciation, ‘have more experience conducting investigations than some posh freak who can’t even make up her mind which way to get off.’

Sherlock stepped back as if hit, and Johnnie started forward with balled fists, but Sally was speaking again, saying: ‘Not to mention, that Sergeant Cohen happens to be a colleague of ours.’

Nobody spoke. All eyes were suddenly on Sally, except for Andie’s, which were settling triumphantly on each of the other four in turn.

‘Oh, that comes as a surprise, does it?’ Andie crowed. ‘Suddenly the MWPP has something to contribute? The great private detective didn’t think to check the corpse’s pockets, then?’

‘Levinson, I will toss you into the goddamn alley myself,’ Smithy started, but Sherlock cleared her throat.

‘Her pockets are empty,’ she said. ‘I thought—a parking attendant, or a security guard. I was under the impression the Met’s health standards were somewhat higher than this.’

Sally let out a breath. ‘You’re not wrong,’ she muttered.

‘Cohen was held to special standards, then?’ asked Sherlock, looking up sharply. ‘Why?’

Sally rolled her eyes, didn’t answer.

‘You didn’t like her,’ Sherlock said, narrowing her eyes at Sally. It was somewhere between a statement and a question.

Sally rolled her shoulders, hands on her hips. Then she looked into Sherlock’s face, her mouth still tight.

‘I don’t think anyone liked her. Truth is, I don’t know why she wasn’t sacked ages ago. It’s not like she has seniority; she was only hired a few years after the War. It’s a mystery to me how she got the job in the first place, unless she knew someone who knew someone.’
'Does that seem likely?’ Johnnie asked. Certainly the woman’s near-ragged clothes didn’t suggest impressive connections.

Sally considered, her posture relaxing slightly as she turned toward Johnnie. Sherlock caught Johnnie’s eye for a moment over Sally’s shoulder, and stepped back unobtrusively.

‘She was a piss-poor cop,’ Sally said at last. ‘But I could never tell if it was laziness, or something else.’

‘Something—like what?’ asked Johnnie

‘I don’t know. I—it’s not like I walk around giving her a lot of thought,’ said Sally, her hand in her hair. ‘There was just always—something. Something, I don’t know, off about her.’

Sherlock snorted from the shadows; Johnnie shot her a warning look.

‘Can you think of an example?’ Johnnie asked Sally.

‘The Baker case,’ Andie said. ‘You remember, last Christmas. That was a proper cock-up.’

‘Right, yeah,’ Sally said, groaning a little. ‘Andie and I were working overtime. Like we do every year, you know, covering for officers with families at home. A call came in on something a little bit more—she shot a look in Sherlock’s direction, but continued, ‘—a little bit more interesting than the women’s division usually gets assigned. I mean, it was still—it was a series of thefts, but from a dressmaker’s shop, so there was still a kind of tenuous connection with “women’s affairs.” It would have gone to the men’s division, normally, but with so few officers at the station, it went to Andie and me. And well, we snapped it up, didn’t we? The kind of thing that could have got us promoted.’

‘Should have done,’ Andie cut in.

‘Yes, well,’ said Sally. ‘We worked day and night on that case. Before New Years we’d found the thief, and worked out a kind of sting, so the evidence would be flawless and the prosecution airtight. Our plan needed a third, and Sergeant Cohen was one of the only other officers at the station, so we pulled her in.’

‘Only she sold us out,’ said Andie.

Sally looked at her partner for a moment, biting at her own thumb, thinking. ‘I don’t know,’ she said at last, the words slow. ‘I’ve never been sure. She was either both incompetent and lucky, or else a scheming bitch, and I’m still not sure which.’

‘S no secret she was a bitch,’ muttered Smithy from the doorway, but Sally ignored her.

‘She more or less followed our plan, is the problem,’ Sally said. ‘But she just—she changed the timing just enough to make me wonder. It should have gone off quietly, without any outside interference, and with plenty of time to gather all the necessary evidence. As it turned out, Cohen delayed just long enough that we had Chronicle reporters swarming all over us on the way out, and a much less airtight case than we should have done.’

‘Funny coincidence,’ added Andie, checking her watch, ‘Cohen was the one who happened to be on hand when the reporters started asking questions. In the press, she got all the credit for our hard work, and a commendation from the Force. Even though lack of evidence meant they had to convict on a lesser charge.’

‘Yeah,’ agreed Sally, sighing. ‘Happy Christmas to Andie and me, wasn’t it. Things like that
happened quite a bit, though. None of the officers I know ever wanted to partner her.’

Sherlock moved out of the shadows, staring down at the dead woman.

‘She wasn’t grandfathered in,’ she repeated, thoughtfully. ‘You were already on the force when she joined?’

Sally nodded. ‘I joined in ’45, right after I was demobbed. I—if I remember rightly, Cohen came on a year or two afterward.’ She looked to Andie for confirmation, and Andie nodded.

‘Overweight, jaundiced and possibly cirrhotic,’ Sherlock said, still staring down at the corpse, ‘but even taking that into account, she can’t be younger than fifty. That puts her around forty when she joined the MWPP in ’47 or ’48. What was she doing before that?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Sally.

‘We weren’t exactly bosom friends,’ Andie chipped in.

‘No,’ agreed Sherlock. ‘I don’t suppose you were. And did she have any, on the force? Bosom friends, that is?’

Sally gave an eloquent shrug. ‘She was a bad cop and a nasty drunk. I think everyone more or less disliked her.’

‘Anyone in particular belong on the “more” side of that equation?’ asked Sherlock. ‘Where were you two between nine and ten, by the way?’

Sally slid her eyes toward Andie, but aloud she just said ‘We were dancing right up next to the piano, up until Smithy came out and started looking for you two. You need to call the cops. And we need to be gone before they arrive.’

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‘Fucking Levinson,’ Smithy said, shaking her head, leading Sherlock and Johnnie back out into the crowd, away from the washroom. Gina, having actually discovered the body, was staying with it to play that role when the police arrived. ‘You know what that jackass said to me?’

Smithy hardly ever swore around femmes. Johnnie wasn’t sure what this meant about her attitude toward Sherlock, but somehow she felt encouraged.

‘Something idiotic, no doubt,’ said Sherlock, preoccupied. ‘Why on earth didn’t she mention right off that she worked with Cohen?’

‘No big dramatic finish,’ said Smithy, and Johnnie laughed.

‘What did she say to you, Smithy?’ she asked, so Smithy rolled her eyes, and put on a frankly awful imitation of Andie’s Birmingham accent.

‘Get this. She says, “Poison, eh? Well I can tell you, that’s a woman’s murder method.” And then just stands there, like she expects me to pat her on the goddamn back. So I say, “Well, that’s a stroke of genius, Levinson! A woman’s murder method. That really narrows it down, since in case you didn’t notice, we are standing in a lesbian bar.”’

Johnnie and Sherlock laughed, and didn’t stop. It was sharp-edged, right on the verge of shocky, but still it cut the tension. Johnnie felt a little drunk.
Smithy fought off a smile and lit a cigarette and said, her voice shaking slightly, ‘Jesus Christ, man. A woman’s murder method. There’s maybe eight men been in all night.’

‘Used to be more than that, on a Saturday,’ said Johnnie, heaving air into her lungs, drying her eyes on her jacket sleeve. ‘Blokes who came in wanting to wank to women dancing together. You’re not getting as many of those, these days?’

‘Nah,’ said Smithy, exhaling and sounding steadier. ‘You didn’t hear? Ted’s gotten to be a real hard-ass with those guys. Says the girls deserve a place to drink and dance without worrying, and he doesn’t want any perverts coming in and hassling them. He hardly ever comes down himself, anymore, but he started making an exception. Came in and bellied right up to some of those guys, made eyes at them, you know, touching their legs, and their hands and everything. They left in a hurry.’

‘He didn’t really,’ said Johnnie, giggles threatening again. She tried to imagine burly, lumpish Ted Ware making a pass at another man. With Gina and Smithy looking on, no less.

‘Yeah, he sure did,’ Smithy said, grinning. ‘I started hoping we’d get some of those bastards in, just so I could watch it happen.’ Then her grin faded, and she nodded. ‘Ted’s a good man,’ she said, as if to herself, quiet and firm.

Nobody present wanted to follow up on that.

So Sherlock cleared her throat. ‘Gina said you fought with Cohen, back when she first started coming in.’

Smithy waved a hand. ‘Yeah, I knocked her around a little,’ she said. ‘Honestly I would’ve hit her harder if I’d known how much trouble she’d end up making for us, Jesus. But plenty of the regular butches have made a play for Gina over the years. She can take care of most of ‘em, but I’ll step in if they annoy her too much. Cohen was just barely bad enough for me to bother.’

‘But she got more annoying as time went on?’ asked Sherlock.

‘Annoying just about covers it,’ agreed Smithy. ‘Man, I think she fought with every butch in this place. I don’t know why Gina didn’t ban her, but it was like Cohen had a sixth sense about how far she could push it and still get away with murder.

‘Um.’ Smithy looked sheepish for a moment. ‘Figure of speech.’ Sherlock nodded, waving away Smithy’s embarrassment, but Johnnie had seen something else.

‘Hey,’ she said, nudging Sherlock’s elbow. ‘Looks like Cass and them haven’t left yet; you want to talk to her?’

And indeed: Cass, Lou, and Haley were still ensconced at their same table of—had it only been earlier tonight? Johnnie wondered. It seemed weeks ago, but it must have been only hours: there was the fascist Mary Sophia Allen, still passed out drunk at the next table over, just as she had been when Johnnie had been sitting fighting with Sherlock over whether to dance.

Now Cass and Haley were whispering together, and Lou was listening; all three looked engaged, but not alarmed. Sherlock turned to Smithy.

‘No announcement has been made?’ she asked.

‘Nope,’ said Smithy. ‘Gina wanted to wait until we were ready to call the cops. Looks like—’ she motioned with her head at the side door, where Sally and Andie were slipping out, ‘we can probably
do that now.’

This, however, seemed to remind Sherlock of something. ‘Say, Gina signs everyone in when they arrive?’ she asked.

Smithy nodded. ‘She usually signs people out, too. She had Ted take over tonight, after she found Cohen in the washroom, but there could still have been some time between the time she left and the time he took over, when nobody was at the register.’

Sherlock mulled this over, glancing toward the door, where a broad male backside was indeed perched on Gina’s usual stool.

‘We’ll have a look at the log-book later, then. Is Leslie Mathews here tonight?’

Johnnie glanced around automatically at the thinning crowd, but Smithy was already shaking her head. ‘She was here, earlier, but she left. I saw her go. ‘Bout ten-forty-five, I think. It was when I was running around looking for you two.’

Her withering glance was cut with a smirk. Johnnie felt herself colour up. Sherlock looked blithely unaffected.

‘Right, then,’ Sherlock said, brisk and businesslike. ‘The band is still playing their set. Smithy, if you go call the police now, then hopefully Johnnie and I can get to Cass and then Chester Davis, before they arrive.’ Smithy nodded.

‘I—’ Sherlock paused a moment, looking uncharacteristically uncertain. ‘Johnnie, I think it might be better, if you led off with Cass.’

Johnnie grinned. ‘You’re regretting that little show you put on for Lou earlier.’

Sherlock sighed, rolled her eyes. She put her arm around Johnnie’s shoulder, steering her away from Smithy, toward Cass’s table.

‘All things considered,’ she murmured, when they were a few paces off, ‘I can’t bring myself to regret anything about this evening.’

‘Oh god, really? You er—you can’t?’ said Johnnie, a little too fast, her face heating again.

And Sherlock bent down so that Johnnie could feel her breath moving on Johnnie’s ear, and said ‘The way you felt’; and Johnnie groaned in her throat and her fingers spasmed hard on Sherlock’s waist, and then neither of them could say anything more, as they were standing in front of a table with Lou and Cass and Haley looking up at them.

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The talk with Cass was surprisingly short-lived.

‘I didn’t know the woman from Adam,’ Cass said. ‘It was our first night here, and I wasn’t even dancing with anyone. She was dead set on starting a fight.’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock, who had lost her reticence in a hurry. ‘But what did she do?’

‘Punched me in the stomach,’ Cass said, matter-of-fact, swigging her pint.

‘Oh, quit having a laugh,’ said Johnnie. ‘You know what she means: how did it start?’
‘That’s what I’m telling you,’ Cass said. ‘It just came out of nowhere. I was chatting to Haley, and this—Cohen? I don’t know, this older butch. She walked up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder, and when I turned around she punched me in the stomach.’

Johnnie’s blank disbelief must have shown on her face, because Lou said ‘It’s true, I was there. Cass is such a delicate flower; she probably still has the bruise.’

‘Even after that,’ said Cass, ignoring the jibe, ‘I wasn’t going to fight back, I was just so surprised. But I stumble, and she follows me back, hits me again. It was like I had to hit her back, just to buy myself some breathing space while I thought what to do. So I kicked her a few times, seemed like that’s what she wanted. We tussled for maybe thirty seconds. And then sudden as she started, she kind of turned around and walked away. I was so shocked I didn’t follow. We never even exchanged a word.’

Haley nodded. ‘It was a weird fucking night,’ she said.

Lou and Johnnie snapped their heads around in surprise.

‘What?’ Haley snapped. ‘I’m not supposed to say “fuck”? Is that along the same lines as pretending there’s not a dead body in the ladies’ washroom?’

Sherlock’s lip quirked, and Haley looked up at her, dragging on her cigarette, and winked. Sherlock laughed, pure and giddy.

‘Officially,’ Sherlock said, ‘it’s quite suspicious that you should know about that.’

‘Please,’ said Haley, blowing smoke at the ceiling. ‘I snuck a look through the swinging door when Smithy and that Andie Levinson were having at each other. They were yelling about it loud enough, anyway. She is dead, then? Not just passed out? Lou said I was being overly dramatic.’

‘She’s dead,’ said Sherlock. ‘The police should be here shortly, if you need to—’

Haley brushed away the suggestion. ‘We’ve probably the least to lose of anyone here,’ she said, ‘being from out of town and all, and each others’ alibis.’

‘Alibis?’ giggled Cass. ‘Who are you, Miss Marple?’

‘We are,’ said Haley, with great dignity. ‘The three of us have been sitting together constantly, all evening, except for a few minutes when Lou went over there to—’

‘—to say hello to this lot,’ interrupted Lou, shifting in her seat and pointedly not looking at either Johnnie or Sherlock.

‘Yes, well. There you are. Even then, we all watched her go, and all she did was talk to Sherlock for a while.’ Johnnie’s hand tightened involuntarily on Sherlock’s waist. Haley smirked. ‘So obviously, none of us could have sneaked off and—er—what would we have done, anyway? Shot her? Strangled her?’

‘Some Miss Marple you are,’ said Cass, rolling her eyes. ‘You think some poor woman gets shot in the ladies’, and nobody hears the noise?’

‘I go to the pictures,’ said Haley, very dignified. ‘Maybe the murderer had a—you know, something to put on their gun, like a—’

‘A silencer,’ said Lou.
‘Exactly,’ Haley said, with a gesture of aggrieved gratitude, and Johnnie smiled, but then she noticed that Sherlock’s attention was wandering.

The band was finishing up their current tune; there was a long, snaky hiss from the hi-hat, and a flourish of keys. Chatter rose to fill the space left by the music, and tiny, wizened Chester Davis pulled the dust cover back down over the piano keys. Sherlock nodded minutely.

‘We should—’ she said.

Johnnie said, ‘Yeah. Thanks, you lot. We have one more stop,’ and pressed her hand into the small of Sherlock’s back to lead her over toward the band.

‘Mr. Davis?’ Sherlock asked, as they drew level. The drummer was drawing sheets over his kit, and the bassist was zipping her instrument into a bag.

‘Who wants to know?’ said Chester, raising an eyebrow half-skeptically and half-jokingly, which Johnnie thought was proof enough that he didn’t know what was coming. That, and the fact that he’d been playing the last four hours straight through without a break, unless he’d taken one during the—half hour? forty-five minutes?—that she and Sherlock had been outside in the alley.

‘I’m Sherlock Holmes,’ Sherlock said, putting out a hand.

Chester looked her over and turned back to his instrument. ‘Yeah?’ he said. ‘You want music at some garden party, or something? You should know, I never wake up before noon.’

For a bare moment, Sherlock’s consternation showed on her face. Johnnie hid a smirk behind her hand: Sally Donovan and now Chester Davis, both calling Sherlock posh on the same night. It had to rankle, being so transparent when she hadn’t been putting on a moneyed persona. Johnnie remembered Sherlock asking her once, aggrieved, Do you find my Cockney unconvincing?, and she had to stifle a rush of fondness, and a wholly inappropriate bark of laughter.

‘No, I’m not trying to engage your services, Mr. Davis,’ Sherlock was saying. ‘I was wondering what you could tell me about a Sylvia Cohen.’

Chester was impassive. ‘Name don’t ring a bell,’ he said, sweeping the contents of his tip jar into a leather purse.

‘She was a club regular,’ said Sherlock. ‘Older butch woman. Grey hair, stocky.’

‘Plenty of ladies by that description,’ Chester said, his face unmoving.

‘Gina Ware told me,’ said Sherlock, licking her lips, ‘that she saw you have a physical fight with Cohen, a few weeks ago. Do you often brawl with the regulars?’

The suspicion in Chester’s look deepened; he scowled. ‘You with the police?’ he said.

‘Why would you assume I’m with the police?’ Sherlock countered.

‘Only other time anybody asked me about fighting with a white woman,’ Chester said, ‘I ended up in jail.’

‘Oh for god’s sake,’ said Sherlock, losing patience, ‘no, we’re not—we don’t care about the fight like that.’

‘That’s what they said, too,’ Chester said, unimpressed. Sherlock rolled her eyes, sneaking a look at
her wristwatch.

‘Look, Mr. Davis,’ Johnnie said, stepping forward. ‘From what we hear, Sylvia Cohen picked fights with almost everyone in this bar at one time or another.’ Chester said nothing, but he looked unlikely to argue this point. Johnnie pressed on: ‘We really aren’t looking to get you arrested, and we’re not the police, but the police are coming. And Miss Cohen is dead in the ladies’ washroom.’

Chester Davis started, and stared.

‘Oh yes,’ said Sherlock, falsely bright. ‘Did I forget to mention that bit? Yes, she’s dead. Looks as if it may be murder. I expect the police will be here shortly.’

‘If you think I—,’ Chester started, but Sherlock cut him off.

‘We don’t,’ she said. ‘For one thing, you’ve been at the piano, playing without a break for the past, what?’

‘Four hours,’ Chester supplied. Sherlock nodded.

‘But Miss Ware doesn’t think the police are likely to look very carefully into the matter. So I am trying to establish as many of the facts as I can, before they arrive.’ She looked at her watch again, to make the point.

Chester nodded, considering in silence for an uncomfortably long time. Then he shrugged. ‘Isn’t much to tell,’ he said. ‘I didn’t know her, or anything.’

‘How did you end up fighting with her?’ Johnnie asked.

‘She started it, didn’t she?’ he said. ‘I only met her that same night. I don’t know what gave her the idea. She was probably pretty drunk, but she sure did want a fight. She crowds me up against the wall back in the hallway to the washrooms. I make to leave and she starts running her mouth off.’

‘Running her mouth off, how?’ asked Johnnie. Chester rolled his eyes.

‘Asked me—questions,’ he said.

‘What sort of—’ Sherlock pressed, and Chester made a frustrated noise.

‘Oh, I don’t—all about, what did I think of all this in the States?’ Chester said. ‘She put on an accent, like Smithy’s. But making fun. And she wouldn’t have said that kind of thing to someone young and strong as Smithy. Things like, “Looks like Negroes over there gettin’ too big for they britches, wanting to ride up front with the white folks, what did I think of all that?” and she was keeping me pinned to the wall, just waiting for me to throw a punch.’

‘And what did you do?’ Sherlock asked.

‘I twisted out from under her arms,’ Chester said. ‘Started walking away. But she reached out and grabbed my shoulder, and I turned around and saw she was about to try to punch me. So I ducked again, and tripped her with my foot. She fell on the floor, twisted her ankle.’

‘And then?’

‘And then I damn well ran out on her,’ he said, ‘before she could get back up and follow me. Never said a word to her, myself.’

‘Hm,’ said Sherlock. ‘Tell me, tonight…’ and she trailed off, then spoke up again. ‘Do you normally
take note of the crowd around the piano?'

Chester was taken off-guard. ‘Yeah, I—suppose. The ones singing, anyway.’

‘And tonight, during this last set. Whom did you notice?’

‘I—well, let’s see, there was…I don’t know all the girls’ names. There was that Leslie Matthews, who gets in so many fights. I always keep an eye on her; she was right up next to the piano most of the night. And uh, Georgie, I think her name is, big butch girl in a blue suit, she was there, you can’t miss her voice, man, she really belts it out. A few other butches I only see on the weekends…and that mixed couple, you know the ones.’

‘No,’ said Sherlock, though Johnnie was pretty sure she did. ‘Who do you mean?’

‘Don’t give me that,’ said Chester, with a sneer. ‘I saw you with ‘em. Light-skinned black girl with a skinny Jewish butch. She’s the only feminine one who comes over to drink and sing with the rest at the piano.’

‘And they were here all evening?’

‘Near as I can recall,’ Chester said.

Sherlock had an odd look about her, the kind of thoughtful that often led to other things; but just then Ted Ware walked into the club with two uniformed Met officers.

Pandemonium ensued. Club patrons dove out of sight and slipped around the three men to make their ways up the stairs, both back and front.

Ted was trying to keep the constables on track, headed straight back past the rapidly-emptying dance floor toward the washrooms. But the sight of so many people unabashedly fleeing, affected them like cats after rats: truncheons out, stopping the butches with an arm across the chest, and the femmes with a hand on the shoulder, ‘what’s all this’ing at all and sundry. Sherlock made a disgusted grimace.

‘I don’t see much point in remaining to witness this,’ she said, and Johnnie nodded. They both turned round to thank Chester Davis for his time, but sometime in the interim he had already disappeared.

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In the back of the taxi, trundling away from Chelsea and back toward Marylebone, Johnnie tried to get her breath. She was giddy, and on edge, and every time she closed her eyes her head seemed to spin, halfway to sleep. She felt she’d been awake for a week, and yet wasn’t exactly sleepy. Sherlock was unnecessarily close to her on the taxi seat, and Johnnie could feel her vibrating all down the side of her body. It made Johnnie vibrate, too.

‘Christ,’ Johnnie said, eyes springing open. ‘When was the last time you ate anything?’

‘Hm?’ said Sherlock, staring through the back of the cabbie’s head with her fingers to her mouth.

‘I think—I think I’m starving,’ said Johnnie, with a kind of a wild giggle. Sherlock said nothing, so she rapped on the glass and redirected the cabbie. They hadn’t anything in, back at the flat.

They gorged on fish and chips, in an all-night shop in Soho. Or rather Johnnie gorged. Across the greasy table, Sherlock still vibrated quietly, lost in thought.
She looked—just the same, Johnnie thought, with a mad feeling of alarm. Three hours of interrogation and Johnnie was no longer aching, and desperate as she’d been in the alley; but the whole night felt so like a dream, or a nightmare, that her brain set itself to cataloguing every scratch and bruise coming up on Sherlock’s skin. If only to prove them real.

By the time they’d hailed another cab and made it back to Baker Street, Johnnie’s eyes would barely stay open long enough to climb the seventeen stairs to their flat. She stumbled forward, and Sherlock caught her, and led her into Sherlock’s own room, which mercifully did not require any more stairs, and stripped her with calm efficiency. Johnnie had hoped…but now she hadn’t even the energy to be disappointed. Her whole body cried out for sleep.

Her eyes fell shut again on Sherlock’s face above her: strangely open, strangely fond.

‘Y’coming to bed, then?’ Johnnie mumbled, turning over, already mostly sleeping, and Sherlock said, ‘I’ll be in in a bit,’ and even that was more than Johnnie would remember later, with any clarity.

The next morning she woke up impossibly warm, her face buried in Sherlock’s smoke-smelling curls, her hand resting on the curve of Sherlock’s hip, and disbelieving joy washed and washed over her. Sherlock, pressed against her. Waking up near-naked next to Sherlock, in Sherlock’s bed. She almost lost her breath, the warmth welled up so lovely in her chest and her belly.

And it lasted; it wasn’t a dream. It lasted through the realisation of the ringing phone, and through Sherlock’s gorgeous early-morning stirrings. It lasted through Sherlock levering herself up out of bed, and kissing Johnnie’s shoulder distractedly as she threw on a dressing gown and padded out of the room, hips moving maddening under the silk. It even lasted through Sherlock’s first, sleep-roughened words: through the click of the receiver, and Sherlock’s ‘Yes, good morning, Miss Ware,’ and her ‘Gina, all right, yes,’ and her ‘Of course, I would be glad to,’ and it lasted right up until Sherlock set the receiver down again, came back to the bedroom door, and told her that Smithy had been arrested.

Chapter End Notes

Very limited endnotes this time!

1. Random note: Cass’s near-albinism and unspecified “blood disorder” might point to [Hermansky-Pudlak syndrome](#).
2. The detail about queer Met officers being having the most to lose when clubs like the Gateways were raided, and not being able to admit to frequenting said clubs, is very much drawn from life. During this period, professions like the women's divisions of the Armed Services and the MWPP were involved in an active campaign to change their images, and wipe out their reputations as havens of lesbianism. Uniforms were feminized, extracurricular activities were monitored, and women officers who were seen as presenting as too "butch" were told to femme up or pack their bags. This, in traditionally masculine, athletic professions.
May 29, 1955
7:15am
221B Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

‘They arrested who?’ Johnnie yelled, just as Sherlock ran back into the room, vibrating with excitement.

It was shocking, a bit, how her heart beat. Real murder! And Sherlock hired straight: cash for services, like an honest tradesman, and no dressing up like Bill the Trinity alumnus to win over stuffy barristers in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. She’d fairly flown upstairs. Corridor, door, clothes for Johnnie; and back downstairs, past the phone now replaced on its cradle, back into her bedroom and her—oh! yes, occupied—bed.

She realised she must be grinning a second after she pushed open the door, when she tossed over Johnnie’s bundle of fresh clothes and Johnnie didn’t catch them because she was staring, shocked, at Sherlock’s face. Sherlock cleared her throat; schooled her features into false sobriety and turned to the chest of drawers so she could grin again.

‘Smithy,’ she said, trying to keep the jubilation from her voice, ferreting about for a set of underwear. ‘They arrested Smithy. I expected something of the kind.’

Her dressing gown was slipping off one shoulder. She shrugged, impatient, happy; and then, staring into her underwear drawer, the bottom dropped out of both.

Engaged on her own merits, yes. But: who was she to be, setting out for the Gateways in the middle of the morning with Johnnie Watson? She had somehow—forgotten to consider it.

Right, then, right, think back: Gina and the ruined evening dress; the loan of Smithy’s clothes. This would be an investigation, a proper investigation: so, trousers, button-down. But she would be doing it with Johnnie Watson: so, skirt, blouse; or: three-piece day suit; or: Christ I want you stripped —god, but that was—unfeasible, thought Sherlock; she had to wear something. What had been agreed to, last night in the Gateways alley? And why should this come as a surprise, when every investigation for the last eight months had taken place with Johnnie at her side? Sherlock stared into her socks and knickers, forgetting to breathe.

‘You expected them to arrest Smithy?’ said Johnnie, from behind her.

It snapped her back out of her panic; she almost laughed. The bohemian persona, she decided. Trousers, but only just. Too artistic for the police, neither explicitly feminine nor masculine. Not presuming too much on the confidence of any one party. She knew what Johnnie had said, but she wouldn’t presume on what she’d meant. There was a black turtleneck in the next drawer down.

‘You expected it?’ Johnnie was saying. ‘Why didn’t we stay, then? Try to talk them out of it?’ Sherlock glanced over her shoulder, and Johnnie said ‘Well all right, we couldn’t have done much,
but the whole thing’s—’

‘Preposterous,’ agreed Sherlock, exchanging her dressing gown for knickers, and then a camisole. ‘She’d have had to leave the bar unattended, for one thing. And she would hardly have been going out of her way to call the victim a bitch and a nuisance while standing over her dead body, if she were trying to deflect suspicion.’

‘Well, and it’s Smithy,’ Johnnie said. ‘She wouldn’t—she would never—’

Sherlock turned around and opened her mouth and—there was Johnnie Watson, in Sherlock’s bedroom. Bare and sleep-tousled, her mouth opening and shutting like a fish, her fist still clutching a corner of blanket though she stood barefoot on the floor boards. Her hair was stuck up on one side and puffed out on the other. Her freckled shoulders were golden in the grey morning light.

There was Johnnie Watson, and Sherlock engaged on a murder case on her own merits; and the hon eyed glow of Johnnie’s skin; and the guilty relief of being free when another person wasn’t; and she darted forward, breath held and daring, and wrapped an arm around Johnnie’s waist, and kissed her, deep and sliding-wet.

Johnnie made a little yelp of surprise, stiff in Sherlock’s arms, terrifying, but—. But then she just folded against her. God, whimpering. Suckling so heartbreak-lightly on the very tip of Sherlock’s tongue, she was—. She was pushing her face up toward Sherlock’s face, blind like a plant toward the sun. Sherlock hummed. Overcome. Arms full. Her whole skin singing.

But in a moment Johnnie would remember to be stern, to be scandalised. And so Sherlock broke away before Johnnie could, and turned back to the dresser.

‘Yes,’ she said, clearing her throat. ‘“It’s Smithy” was Gina Ware’s primary argument, as well. I don’t think it would play too well with the Met, though, do you?’

‘Well, but I,’ said Johnnie, and stopped, and took a shaky breath, the ghost of a moan. Then she said: ‘But. Smithy would never just leave a body in the loo of the Gateways. I mean. Right where Gina was bound to come across it? She would never do that to Gina. That’s about the first thing anyone who’s ever met Smithy, would tell you.’

‘Again,’ said Sherlock, half-turning as she climbed into her capris, ‘Not the most convincing argument in the eyes of the police.’

‘But,’ said Johnnie, and stopped again, rubbing the heel of her hand into her sleep-sandy eyes.

‘She is the bartender,’ Sherlock said. ‘And the police have confirmed that Cohen was killed by a massive cyanide overdose in her cocktail. Whoever did it either wasn’t an expert, or wasn’t trying to conceal what they’d done. Or both.’

‘Which is another argument against it being Smithy!’ said Johnnie. ‘I mean, even supposing she wanted to kill someone, which I don’t—’ (Sherlock put up her hands in surrender, holding her turtleneck over her head like a flag) ‘—even supposing that,’ continued Johnnie, ‘why on earth would she do it right in her own place of business, where she was bound to be a suspect? And why would she make it look obvious?’

‘I have a shrewd suspicion,’ said Sherlock, dryly, tugging the turtleneck down over her head, ‘that your estimate of her intelligence and capabilities are rather higher than that of the average Met officer. A foreigner, and a masculine woman? And on top of all that not even white? She must seem just next door to a caveman.’
'I know you’re—Goddammit,' Johnnie said, kicking the bed and stubbing her toe. The curse seemed to take in her foot, and Smithy, and the whole of the Met. ‘Even a bloody dog doesn’t want to foul up his bed.’

‘Based on what I could gather from Gina,’ Sherlock said, ‘the running theory among the officers was that Smithy wanted to hide in plain sight—camouflage her act amongst a crowd of people who might also want Cohen dead.’ She gave Johnnie a ‘hurry up’ gesture, waving a hand at the pile of clothes still lying abandoned on the floor.

‘Yeah,’ Johnnie said, tugging at her hair. ‘Right, sorry,’ and reached down to grab the undershirt off the floor. ‘Why is she supposed to have offed Cohen in the first place?’

‘Presumably, the same reason anyone else would have. Both Gina and Smithy admit that Cohen had made a play for Gina, and that Smithy didn’t like it.’

Johnnie snorted from inside her shirt, which was distractingly endearing. When it was over her head she said, stepping into her trousers for emphasis, ‘Cohen never had any more chance with Gina, than any of the other butches who’ve hit on her over the years. Which, in case that isn’t clear, amounts to exactly none.’

Sherlock, tying up her hair in the mirror above the dresser, told herself not to ask; but she still opened her mouth and cursed herself and said: ‘Did you? Make a play for her?’

Johnnie’s head stayed down, but her eyes flicked up a moment from her hands on her trouser-flies. She shook her head no, looking back down. ‘I know a lost cause when I see one,’ she said. ‘Or at least. I thought I did. Anyway, my record at not getting hung up on them is, er.’ She straightened up with a crooked grin. ‘Very nearly perfect.’

Uncertain warmth, pooling in Sherlock’s face and her chest. She cleared her throat, looking down at the floor, shuffling into espadrilles.

‘Well, in any case,’ she said, ‘Gina and Ted posted bail, so Smithy is back at the Gateways, at least for no w. And Gina has—’ (her voice felt tight when she said it) ‘—Gina has engaged me—us—to investigate.’

Sherlock didn’t turn around, though it wasn’t—Johnnie would surely be preoccupied with concern over Smithy, after all, and so it was only to be expected that she would take a more practical point of view toward this news, would take it all as a matter of course, probably; and indeed it was ridiculous, this giddy, nervous pride fluttering about in Sherlock’s chest. It was all fine, there was nothing she wanted, exactly; she just wouldn’t turn around, and then—

—and then Johnnie’s face was nuzzling against her back, her arms hugging tight around Sherlock’s waist, and Sherlock breathed.

‘Bright woman, Gina Ware,’ said Johnnie, gravelly into Sherlock’s nape. Sherlock could feel Johnnie smile against her skin, through her cotton shirt: gooseflesh all down Sherlock’s spine. ‘You’re who I’d have called, too, in her place.’

‘I—’ said Sherlock, and stopped because there was something in her chest threatening to escape, and she couldn’t tell if it was going to be a sob, or a giggle, or a sigh. Instead she just breathed, and put her hands on Johnnie’s hands on Sherlock’s front, to hug her back the best she could.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Well! We should go, then,’ and Johnnie gave her one last squeeze before she stepped back, still smiling.
Down in the cab, though, Johnnie’s look was all anxious worry.

‘They’re right about one thing,’ Sherlock said, coming back to herself and looking away from the window. ‘There were an uncommon number of people with motive and opportunity, all packed together in a tiny space. You would think it would provide the perfect camouflage, which makes—’

She broke off, and chewed on her gloved finger.

‘Which makes what?’ demanded Johnnie.

‘Well,’ said Sherlock, and then paused again. ‘You have to admit it stretches the limits of credulity.’

‘Good,’ said Johnnie, tugging at her hair, ‘fine. If you feel like sharing with the rest of us, you’ll let me know, won’t you?’

Sherlock shifted her vision from the facts of the case to the inside of the cab. It was an effort. She sighed, but also smiled. Point out the obvious, then. Sometimes it even helped.

‘Look at all the potential suspects,’ she said. ‘And these are just the ones we know about. The pianoplayer Chester Davis was seen fighting with Cohen just a few weeks ago. He says she provoked the fight out of the blue, although we have only his word for that. There’s a history of animosity, anyway. However, he can’t have poisoned Cohen, since he was playing with the band all evening, not even a washroom break during the relevant window.’

‘Yes, and I—’ said Johnnie, still frustrated, so Sherlock cut back in.

‘Then there’s your friend Cass Thorssen. No, don’t say anything, it’s almost exactly the same situation. Cohen provoked her into a fight a month or so ago, seemingly without any provocation, and this time we have Haley and Lou backing that story up. Still, it’s a record of hostility between Cass and the victim.’

‘But it can’t have been Cass,’ Johnnie scoffed. ‘First of all, that’s asinine. Really, Sherlock. And secondly, she was with Haley and Lou all night.’

‘Exactly!’ said Sherlock, looking at Johnnie encouragingly, but Johnnie just stared back. Sherlock sighed.

‘Then,’ she went on, ‘we have a rather more compelling motive in the shape of Andie Levinson and Sally Donovan, who worked with Cohen and had suffered at her hands. Missed a promotion either because Cohen was incompetent, or because she was intentionally undermining them. They both admit to an active and long-standing dislike of the woman. But they claim, and Chester at least partially confirms, that they were both dancing by the piano for the majority of the crucial window of, say, nine to ten-fifteen.’

‘Right,’ said Johnnie.

‘That doesn’t strike you as suggestive?’ asked Sherlock.

‘ Strikes me we’re back where we started,’ Johnnie said. Sherlock rolled her eyes, but continued on.

‘Chester likewise confirms that Leslie Matthews, whom you and I witnessed fighting with Cohen, was also singing by the piano during the time in question,’ she said. ‘We don’t know yet why they fought, and she potentially could have slipped away for a few minutes without Chester noticing, but that’s at least a partial alibi for yet another suspect.'
'Then there’s Gina herself,’ Sherlock went on, and Johnnie said ‘Oh, you can’t be serious,’ so Sherlock raised her eyebrows. ‘I don’t see why not. I would have lain even odds on the Met arresting Gina versus Smithy, especially as they’re rumoured to be…involved.’

Johnnie snorted, chewing on her lip. ‘Both foreign, both queer, neither white,’ she spat. ‘It was probably a rough choice, between the two.’

‘More importantly,’ Sherlock said, ‘the same motive might apply to them both. Gina could, just as easily as Smithy, want to get rid of an obnoxiously attentive suitor, who has also been fighting with her clientele. Come to think of it, the same could be said of her husband.’

‘But Gina couldn’t have done,’ Johnnie pointed out. ‘She was at the door all night. She’s always at the door all night.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said. ‘And do you see now? What are the odds of all that?’

‘I…what are the odds of all what?’

‘What are the odds of seven distinct suspects, and I say again that these are only the ones we know about, all present on the night in question, in a very small space with a plethora of chaotic action, and that all but one of them would have a verifiable alibi for several whole hours of the evening?’

‘What are you—you think—what?’ said Johnnie. ‘You think Smithy is being set up?’

Sherlock beamed, which Johnnie seemed to think inappropriate. Somehow Sherlock couldn’t seem to stop. So she looked back out the window instead, drumming her gloved fingers on the arm-rest.

‘The thought had occurred,’ she said.

‘But who would want—’ Johnnie started, and cut herself off.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, 'that is the question.'

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May 29, 1955
8:35am
The Gateways Club, 239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

The Gateways was shut on Sundays, but Ted met them at the top of the stairs and let them in. If he was surprised at the sex or personal appearance of the private detective his wife had hired, he made no sign. He just put out his hand to shake Sherlock’s, and clapped Johnnie gravely on the shoulder. Then he led the way down the stairs, taking one stair at a time, ginger with his short left leg.

It was disconcerting to be descending the dim basement stairs while outside the sun shone bright on the pavement. Gina’s stool stood empty at the bottom, and the main room, when they turned the corner with the lights full up, felt eerily small, and dingy. Their footsteps echoed in the quiet. The band’s instruments were all sheeted in the corner; the long stretch of the bar was deserted.

Ted turned to look at them, all big basset-hound eyes.

‘Smithy’s just back in a booth,’ he said. ‘I—look, is there anything I can—I mean to say.’ He cleared his throat, rubbed one liver-spotted knuckle. ‘She’s a good sort,’ he said, looking away.
‘Smithy had you take over Gina’s duties at the door,’ said Sherlock, ‘after Gina found the body.’

Ted nodded.

‘Where were you before that?’ Sherlock asked. ‘Smithy said you don’t normally come down to the club during evening hours.’

‘Yes, that’s—that’s right,’ said Ted. Sherlock thought he looked and sounded more distraught than either Gina on the phone or Smithy over the body. ‘I, er,’ Ted went on, ‘I usually see to Luigina—that’s our daughter, you know, eight months old. But last night Gina’s mother had her.’

‘So you were—’ Sherlock prompted.

‘I have a poker game,’ said Ted. ‘At a friend’s pub, just a few doors down. Thursdays and Saturdays, Jimmy Halloran’s place.’

‘Remarkable,’ Sherlock muttered, under her breath. Johnnie looked over, sharp, but Ted hadn’t heard it. Raising her voice, Sherlock said, ‘And I suppose you were there all evening, in the company of other poker players?’

‘Er, yes,’ said Ted. ‘Yes, I was, from about six on. Smithy called over to Jimmy’s when she, er, needed me, and I came right back. Reckon that was about ten-thirty.’ He punched the palm of one hand with the other. ‘I just feel sick about this,’ he said. ‘Smithy just. She’s a good kid.’ His eyes were bright. Sherlock shifted from foot to foot.

‘I know, Ted,’ Johnnie said, putting a hand on his shoulder. ‘Sherlock’s good at this, you know. We’ll do all we can.’

Ted looked at Johnnie, gratitude like Sherlock’s all over his face. Sherlock cleared her throat.

‘Well then,’ she said, ‘we had better talk to the woman herself.’

‘Of course,’ Ted nodded, ‘of course.’ He squeezed Johnnie’s hand on his shoulder, and gave it an awkward pat, and turned to lead them back.

Gina and Smithy were sitting in the booth farthest back on the entrance side of the club. Smithy’s button-down was rumpled, and smeared, and she was holding Gina’s hands over the top of the table. Sherlock nodded to them as she approached. Gina tipped her chin up in a fierce little nod of her own.

‘I take it,’ said Sherlock, fixing Smithy in her sights, ‘that you did have to leave the bar at some point last night between nine and ten-thirty.’

‘Yeah,’ Smithy said. ‘Customer had a bad spill at the bar, food and drink all over the place, and somehow the whole kitchen was out of rags. That kind of thing always happens at rush times. I had to run and unlock the storage closet; Gina and I are the only ones with keys. That was around nine-
thirty. I couldn’t have been gone more than ten minutes.’

‘Who was it?’ said Sherlock, fingers steepled.

‘Who was—who? Smithy said.

‘Who is the customer who had the spill?’ Sherlock clarified.

‘I—I’m not sure, to be honest. It was somebody sitting right around here,’ Smithy gestured to the side of the bar facing their booths. ‘But it was so crowded, you know? I was turned around, serving someone on the other side, and then there was this crash, and—’ she shrugged. ‘When I turned back around, everyone was just backing away from the mess.’

‘I’m sure,’ said Sherlock, grim. ‘But. Leaving that aside for a moment. Gina tells me the working police hypothesis is that you drugged Cohen’s cocktail just prior to nine-thirty, then used those ten minutes to lure her out of sight, then drag her body into the ladies’, yes?’

‘I suppose,’ Smithy said, ‘Yeah.’

‘The poison would have acted very quickly, even if she sipped at her drink,’ Sherlock said. ‘I assume no other employees saw you getting the supplies from the storage cabinet.’

Smithy’s mouth gave a feeble quirk. ‘Yeah, you assume correctly,’ she said, rubbing at her eyes. ‘We were slammed, no time and no reason for anyone to babysit my trip to the rag cupboard.’

Sherlock nodded; then looked around, at Gina and Ted. ‘Did any of you have more interaction with Cohen than you told us about last night?’

The Wares and Smithy all exchanged baffled glances, shaking their heads.

‘She started coming into the club, oh, a few years ago,’ said Gina. ‘Smithy fought her once, she and I broke up her fights any number of times. Otherwise, I know nothing about her. I did not even know that she worked at the Met, with Sally and Andie.’

Gina looked to Ted, who added, ‘I, er. I bought the bar after the War. Won it in a poker game as a matter of fact, though not Jimmy’s. Don’t know what the members might have been like before then, though some of these,’ he gestured around at the portraits on the walls, ‘the old ones, are left over from then. But all that’s to say, I only ever saw this Sylvia Cohen in the last year or two.’

‘So you don’t have any idea what Cohen was doing before, say, 1953?’ asked Sherlock.

‘No idea,’ said Smithy.

‘That seems to be a pattern,’ Sherlock said, and was quiet for a minute. Then she glanced sideways at Gina, and then across the table.

‘Johnnie,’ she said, ‘speaking of this Jimmy Halloran. Why don’t you go take a look at his pub? Get a general lay of the land. Floor plan, distance from the Gateways, and so on. Gina, Ted: tell her what you can, as well.’

Gina and Johnnie both looked surprised, and Ted was impassive, but Gina said ‘Yes, I—I will, of course, if you think it will help,’ squeezing Smithy’s hand as Johnnie slid out of the booth. Ted cleared his throat, and stood aside, and Sherlock slid out too, to let Gina past her.

‘I’ll—see you in a bit, then,’ said Johnnie. Sherlock nodded, and watched the trio make their slow
way across the bar and up the stairs: Gina’s arm around Ted’s waist, Johnnie’s elbow held unobtrusively convenient in case he needed more support.

Sherlock thought how Ted and Gina, climbing the stairs, fitted so easily together; and of Gina’s hands and Smithy’s hands, intertwined on the table. And then of Sally Donovan, saying: some posh freak who can’t even make up her mind which way to get off. All the hard shells and soft bellies of people who loved each other: was Johnnie expecting to coddle Sherlock, now? To shield her? To soften her down? Something tight clenched in her chest, like an engagement forgotten, and only remembered the next day.

She pushed it aside. Smithy. The case.

‘I thought we might speak more frankly,’ she said, lighting a cigarette and offering one over the table, ‘without Gina and Ted here.’

Smithy took it, lighting up and exhaling. ‘Okay,’ she said, stretching her legs under the table, looking cautious.

‘I assume the police case against you is that you are sleeping with Gina Ware, and that Sylvia Cohen was threatening that relationship. I don’t—’ she said, holding up her hand as Smithy started to speak, ‘I’m not asking whether you and Gina are sleeping together,’ at which Smithy’s expression relaxed a hair. ‘But you do protect her from unwanted advances, yes?’

‘I—’ Smithy took a deep drag on her cigarette, and stared up at the ceiling. She thought so long that Sherlock was opening her mouth to prod her, but then Smithy said: ‘I know it looks that way. And okay, yeah, I fight someone sometimes, but — you’ve got to understand, she’s—she doesn’t need, I mean, anything, from me.’

Sherlock must have looked unconvinced. The statement was unconvincing.

‘Look,’ Smithy said, leaning forward over the table. ‘I know folks look at me and Gina and think— whatever they think, that she’s weak and I’m strong, or she’s—using me, or I’m using her, but the truth is I’m just lucky to be along for the ride. She doesn’t need me, or Ted, or anyone. She could run this club with her eyes closed, all by herself if she needed to.’

‘But she doesn’t need to,’ Sherlock said.

‘Not exactly,’ said Smithy. ‘Sometimes I think she’d have less to take care of if she did.’

Sherlock’s eyebrow rose, involuntary, that apprehension clenching again in her chest. Smithy dug her fingers into her scalp, with a smoky sigh.

‘Listen,’ she said, looking up. ‘I guess Johnnie told you I was in the airforce?’

Sherlock blinked. ‘Er,’ she said, ‘yes. Yes she did.’

‘Well, that was great of her,’ said Smithy, ‘but it’s not exactly true. US Airforce barely allows blacks, and it barely allows women, and if you’re both you’re shit out of luck. I flew in the War as a Civil Air Patrol pilot. Ran search and rescue, and courier missions. I hit all the allied countries at least once; after a while it was mostly Moscow and Leningrad. For, um. One reason or another.’

Sherlock narrowed her eyes. Smithy waved a hand, begging her patience.

‘The point is,’ she said, ‘it was never a government position. My brother was an Airforce pilot—we trained together in Alabama—but I never was. It was still a lot like flying in the Airforce. I was
making trips on government business, transporting government documents. But it was never above-board, and that always—got me, somehow.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, thinking of Bill the Trinity alum.

‘So a few months ago,’ Smithy said, ‘there was this dinner, put on by the US embassy, to honour all the US military pilots living in England. And the thing was, it included Civil Air pilots, too. It was—you know, in a way I still thought it was bullshit. I still don’t get a pension, I don’t get listed in the rolls. I don’t get any medals or whatnot. But Gina, she got all quiet when she saw the invitation, and she said I should go. Got pretty damn insistent about it, actually. Said she and Ted would cover for me at the bar, and wouldn’t take no. There’s, um, there’s no real arguing with Gina when she gets like that.’

‘I saw her break up a fight,’ said Sherlock, ‘the first night I was here. She was—uncompromising.’

‘Yeah,’ said Smithy, grinning, looking for a moment like a schoolgirl, making eyes at her older pash across the dining hall. ‘She’s something.’

The thing in Sherlock’s chest spasmed, and fluttered, that Smithy in her tie and trousers could think of Gina’s fierceness and look so young. Not like she looked down on Gina, at all. (Though Sherlock also remembered her with her arms crossed, glaring down at the fight from her post in front of the bar.)

Smithy cleared her throat. ‘Yeah, so,’ she said. ‘So I went. And I still think a lot of it was bullshit. Folks from all the papers, talking up how great the States and Britain are, and the long history of brotherhood between the countries. Not mentioning the Soviets were our ally then, too, or how many of the people at the dinner had no war pension. But…some of it was better than that.’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock again.

‘And anyway,’ said Smithy, crushing out her cigarette in the ashtray, ‘I saw people I hadn’t seen in years. Had a ball, actually, reliving old times. Stayed longer than I’d thought I would. Drank more than I should’ve. I guess there were state secrets talked up that night that the government wouldn’t much like.’ She grinned a little, then looked down at the table.

‘The point is,’ she said, looking up again and into Sherlock’s eyes, ‘My cab drops me back off at the club, right? And I walk in, and the whole place is torn apart. I mean, tables turned over, upholstery ripped out of the booths, the whole nine yards. It’s a Wednesday night, so not one of our busier times, but that night it was almost empty, and the few members left are just staring at Gina. And there she is, right in the middle of it all, going around and lifting tables and chairs back upright, not even breaking a nail. This glare in her eyes.’

Smithy shivered, remembering. Sherlock had a sudden vision of it: Gina Ware, furious, incandescent, bending and bending and straightening in her black sheath dress and her heels.

‘And the thing of it was,’ Smithy went on, ‘she wasn’t even going to tell me. I think if there hadn’t been twenty people still in the club who’d seen the whole thing, she wouldn’t have even filled me in. But there they were, and I was scared and mad, you know, and. Um. Seeing her in the middle of all that wreckage, it. Ah, hell.’

She cleared her throat, rubbed her eyes. Sherlock’s lungs ached, somehow. She didn’t look away.

‘So it turns out,’ Smithy said, taking a deep breath and letting it out, ‘there was this group of neighbourhood toughs. Formed what they called a protection gang, like they were trying to be from,
I don’t know, Chicago or something. Going around the area terrorising local businesses for protection money. They got in here and Ted was out at his poker game, I’m off at this dinner. It’s just Gina, alone in the whole place, with six full-grown men on her. And they’re not asking for all that much, really; she could’ve just given it to them. But she stands her ground, she told me she was shaking, but she says “What are you gonna do, hit a woman?” Smithy laughed, unsteady. ‘I wished I could’ve seen it.’

‘And they left her alone?’

‘Well,’ said Smithy, ‘if by “alone” you mean a hundred pounds’ worth of damage and a terrifying night. But yeah, they didn’t hit her. And the funny thing is, if I’d have been there, they’d sure as hell have hit me. Six guys. Shit. I’d have been nothing but bruises and broken bones.’

The thing in Sherlock’s chest was making her warm; was making her eyes water.

‘But she’s—she’s tough as nails, is what I’m saying,’ finished Smithy, looking down at her fingers making shapes on the table wood. ‘Gina looks out for me and Ted every bit as much as we do her, and she would never—I would never feel I had to protect her like that. Let alone, fuck, I don’t know, stake my claim on her, or anything like that. ’S just not how things are.’

‘I believe you,’ whispered Sherlock, her voice buckling. The thing in her chest was coming to rest. So sweet it hurt.

Smithy glanced up, sharp. She stared into Sherlock’s face for a solid space of time, and Sherlock stared back.

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Johnnie and the Wares weren’t back when Sherlock was done questioning Smithy, and Smithy admitted she was near to dropping dead from forty hours without sleep. So Sherlock shook her hand, and Smithy loped up to her room, the back stairs creaking loud in the abandoned club. Sherlock was left to her own devices.

A feeling of revelation still smouldered bright in her chest, to the shape of She’s tough as nails in Smithy’s proud, sad voice. She paced the floor of the club, fixing her mind on the shape of the case. Letting hope glow softly, just out of sight.

The odd things were, she thought, four-fold.

Firstly (as she walked out from behind the bar, toward the empty dance floor): that so many potential suspects should be furnished with an alibi when the murder had taken place in such crowded and chaotic environs.

Secondly (as she passed the apex of the bar’s U-shape, where it jutted out into the room): that Smithy herself, whose very occupation should naturally provide her with an alibi, was so conveniently called away from her post just as the murder was probably being committed.

Thirdly (as she crossed the dance floor, and passed over the spot where she had stood while Johnnie rushed to break up the fight): that Sylvia Cohen, decades older than most of the Gateways patrons, should apparently be in the habit of picking fights with complete strangers.

And fourthly (as she ran her fingers over the cover on the keys of Chester Davis’s piano): that despite so many of the Gateways patrons having disliked and fought with Cohen, relatively few of them had any knowledge at all about her life or character before the last few years.
Sherlock herself was hardly a demonstrative, outgoing person; yet surely the patrons of her normal haunts, even the ones who disliked her, could tell more about Sherlock Holmes than the information that she fought, and had been coming in for two years. Combined with the scarring under Cohen’s chin, thought Sherlock, it was all extremely—

A tug, at the very edge of her attention. She paused, and turned slowly back, but nothing suggested itself. She slowed; stopped; retraced her steps.

She had been thinking, she remembered, stepping slowly and keeping her mind deliberately unfocused, about Sylvia Cohen. She had thought of being a regular in a place, and Cohen’s mysterious history, and she had looked over there just as she thought—and there it was again, a prick of recognition. But she couldn’t see it, not at first.

She stepped back again, blanking her mind, and thought the scarring under Cohen’s chin, it was all extremely—

There.

It was dark, smudged with decades of smoke-grime and overshadowed by fresher, more recent portraits that had been layered next to it in the years since. And when Sherlock looked directly at it, it didn’t spark anything within her. But when she caught a glimpse of the forehead and cheekbone, out of the corner of her eye—could it be? There was certainly no reason it should be impossible.

The three exiles clomped back down the stairs while Sherlock was returning with a vinegar-soaked dishrag and a bottle of furniture polish, her hands quick with excitement.

‘Ted,’ she said, hearing his uneven descent, ‘has the Gateways always been a membership-based club? Since before you won it, I mean.’

‘Yes,’ came Ted’s voice, faint around the corner and then huffing into clarity as he turned into the club proper. ‘I inherited the log-books, and all.’

‘My question precisely,’ Sherlock said, beaming at him before she crouched to dab at the ancient painting. ‘Gina, do you know where—what am I saying, of course you do. Could you fetch them?’

Gina nodded, and hurried off. Ted limped over to where Sherlock was dabbing at the wall.

‘Curious about an old member, then?’ he asked, looking over her right shoulder. Johnnie came up to look over the other one, and the skin all along Sherlock’s left side prickled with her nearness.

She sat back on her heels. ‘Do you recognise this woman?’ she asked.

Ted squinted, hand on his chin, then shook his head. ‘Can’t say as I do,’ he said. ‘But it’s so dark. Definitely before my time.’

Sherlock snuck a look to her other side, where Johnnie was standing, hands in pockets, eyes narrowed at the portrait. Her pale lashes were almost touching, top to bottom.

Gina bustled back into the room, then, out of breath, a pile of dusty log books piled in her hands. Their spines were labeled with spans of years.

‘We can split them up among us,’ Sherlock said. ‘We’re looking for any record of Sylvia Cohen owning a membership to this club prior to Ted taking it over in 1946. With the log books split among four of us, it shouldn’t take long.’
‘You believe that is a picture of Sylvia Cohen?’ said Gina, taking her turn to look over Sherlock’s right shoulder as Ted picked up the log book from 1931-1932 and Johnnie grabbed the one from 1933-1934. ‘It doesn’t look like her.’

‘Cohen had scarring under her chin and around her nose,’ Sherlock said, carefully wiping furniture oil off the wall, ‘characteristic of having had plastic surgery. If you cover the lines of the nose and the chin…’ she demonstrated, leaving only the forehead, eyes, and cheekbones of the portrait exposed.

‘I—suppose,’ Gina said, backing away and squinting at the portrait.

‘I think—I think you may be right,’ said Ted, slowly, sounding surprised as he looked up from 1931-1932. ‘I wouldn’t have seen it, but—I think that may be her.’

‘You have to look at the bone structure,’ Sherlock said, tilting her own head. ‘The face itself, and not the trimmings.’

‘You’re bloody brilliant,’ Johnnie said, under her breath, and her tone was so fervent that Sherlock’s face heated, and she thought, nonsensically, of Smithy saying tough as nails.

‘Yes, well,’ she said, ‘the bad news is, that if she went to all the trouble to change her appearance, she’s probably not using the same name, either.’

Johnnie looked down at 1935-36, the grin slipping off her face so quickly that Sherlock chuckled. ‘What are we on about, then?’ Johnnie asked, and Sherlock went back to daubing the smoke-damaged portrait as she said ‘Best to exhaust the simplest avenues first.’

But Gina was coming up behind them, two coffees in each hand. ‘It looks as if—as if the artist wrote the woman’s name next to her portrait,’ she said. Johnnie took one coffee, and Gina put the other on the floor next to Sherlock.

‘But it’s not even close to legible,’ Sherlock said. ‘And the damage is just too old. Nothing’s making any difference at all.’

‘Hm,’ Gina said, ‘I don’t suppose—’ and stopped.

‘What is it?’ Ted prompted, so Gina said, ‘Well. If the artist wrote her name next to her portrait, he might remember who she is, mightn’t he?’

Sherlock looked up at Ted, whose eyes were widening. ‘Are the portraitists generally regulars here, then?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ Ted said, excited, getting to his feet. ‘Yeah, they always have been as long as I’ve owned the bar. Some of ‘em have gone on to become well-known, or—that’s what I’ve heard, anyway.’ He was limping into the back now, raising his voice to be heard. ‘But when I took over, this painting thing was already going on. Blokes told me the previous owner had spotted them free drinks for decorating the walls. So they did—where is that blasted book?—they did portraiture, of the regulars they saw around the place.’

Johnnie and Sherlock were looking at each other, grinning, Sherlock rising to her feet.

‘Here it is!’ came Ted’s voice from the other room. ‘I knew it was somewhere about.’

He came limping back into the main room, carrying a black file-box under one arm, with a Polaroid instant camera balanced on top of it. Gina rushed forward to rescue the camera.
'This is where I shoved all the records and what-not,' Ted said. He sat down at a table, huffing a bit with the exertion and tearing the cover off the box. ‘To tell you the shameful truth I’ve never looked through it what you might call properly, being so busy with the club and then getting married to Gina, but—’

He trailed off, rummaging through receipts and deeds, and there was a tense silence while Gina snapped images of the wall, and the other two watched Ted work. Sherlock counted a long four minutes before he let out an ‘ahhh,’ and held up a half-sheet of paper, complete with a scribbled name. Sherlock bounded forward to take it.

‘This is the artist?’ she asked.

‘No guarantees,’ Ted said. ‘But the note says he did “most of the north wall before the War,” so the odds are good.’

Johnnie crowded up behind Sherlock, peering around her shoulder and reaching around from behind her to steady the note in Sherlock’s hand, and—Sherlock had a sudden sense memory of the same position in a hotel room blocks and weeks away. Her breath caught in her throat. She could tell Johnnie had heard it, because Johnnie’s hand spasmed, quick on Sherlock’s wrist, pressing a moment into the pulse point there.

Sherlock exhaled, slow and careful, as Johnnie read ‘Benjamin Hepworth, Portloe, Cornwall. I, er, reckon there’s no phone number hidden away in that box of yours?’

Ted shook his head. Gina got on the line with the operator, but to no effect. Mr. Hepworth, It seemed, wasn’t on the telephone, although the operator in the nearby town of Veryan Green did confirm his continued residence at the address given. Gina rang off, chewing on her lip.

‘Well,’ said Johnnie. ‘What d’you reckon?’

Sherlock stood in front of the portrait, looking down. ‘I reckon,’ she said, slowly, a smile creeping onto her face, ‘that you should call in at the garage, and we should take a trip to Cornwall.’

Johnnie stared. ‘Via what?’ she said, ‘the train? I’ve never even heard of this village; it’s not as if we’re headed to St. Ives.’

Sherlock bent, retrieved her scarf from the floor, and wrapped it around her neck as she pivoted to face Johnnie.

‘On your bike, of course,’ she said, speaking past her heart beating in her chest next to the hope that had glowed there, faintly, all morning; brushing past Gina’s bemused and Johnnie’s wide-open eyes. ‘It only makes sense to take the Vincent.’

Chapter End Notes

1. Things that are historically true: Ted Ware claimed to have won the Gateways Club in a poker game ‘with a Jewish businessman.’ He and Gina had a daughter named Luigina. Smithy was a skilled American pilot who flew during the War.
2. Things that are not historically true: Smithy’s first name was probably not Mabel.
In fact, I never encountered a record of her full name. She was also not a Civil Air Patrol pilot; historically, Smithy was white, and therefore eligible for the official women’s division of the US Airforce. She was stationed in Ruislip during the war, which is when she first started coming to the Gateways. However:

3. The details surrounding Smithy’s aviation history are based in fact. In WWII black women were not admitted into either the embryonic women’s division or WASP (see Mildred Carter’s story), or the newly-formed African-American division of the US Airforce, known as the Tuskegee Airmen. However, women students were accepted for civilian aviation training at the Tuskegee University in Alabama, which is apparently where both (fictional) Smithy and her brother trained. Having earned their licenses at that or a few other similar programs throughout the country in the late 30s or early 40s, a few African-American women did go on to serve the War Effort by joining the Civil Air Patrol. See, for example, the story of Willa Beatrice Brown Chappell.

Flyers in the Civil Air Patrol were not officially military, but they performed a variety of war-related missions, including search and rescue, reconnaissance, coastal and border patrols, courier and cargo transport, and cadet and pilot training.

4. The story about Gina Ware standing up to a gang of toughs all on her own is true. Jill Gardiner recounts her daughter Luigina’s words (in From the Closet to the Screen):

[Gina] stood her ground through hell and high water–including the protection gangs that terrorised so many licensed businesses in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s. And she did once stand alone against a group of men who came down to attempt to take the Gateways into a racket. They roughed the place up a bit. She told me she was terrified but furious and faced them with the question, ‘What are you going to do? Hit a woman?’ They were, it seems, embarrassed and left her in peace. She told me after the incident she seemed to gain some kind of reputation and respect and was left alone.
May 29, 1955
11:50am
The Gateways Club, 239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

Gina fixed them all a meal in the Gateways kitchen: cold roast beef on rye and a half-pint each of something bitter. They sat, eating, places set next to each other at the bar.

Johnnie bolted hers without hardly tasting it, staring over at Sherlock staring into space.

Sherlock, she thought, was investigating a murder. Sherlock had ground her hips hard into Johnnie’s teeth in the Gateways alley. Sherlock had been hired to clear Smithy’s name—which was, bizarrely, Mabel. Sherlock wanted to ride to Cornwall, one-up on Johnnie’s motorbike after eight months of insisting flat-out on walking across London, exhausted at three in the morning, rather than climbing on the back. It was all a bit much to take in.

Maybe something, maybe everything, was different, now, Johnnie thought. Or maybe three hundred miles was simply too far to walk, even for feet as stubborn as Sherlock Holmes’s.

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May 29, 1955
1:10pm
Stamford’s Auto Repair, Euston Road, St. Pancras
London, England

Sherlock would barely allow a stop at Baker Street to load Johnnie’s duffel with a change of clothes, and whatever dribs and drabs of foodstuffs they could scrape together. So it was only a few minutes past one when Johnnie straddle-walked the Vincent out the big double doors of Stamford’s Auto Repair, apologising again and again to Mickey for missing more work. Mickey waved it off, grinning, saying ‘Mr. Nicholson always trusted me better with his carburettor, anyway’; and Johnnie glared at her with a grin behind it while Sherlock fidgeted just outside the garage door in her Bohemian ensemble and the too-large American cowboy boots which were, against all logic, the only suitable riding footwear she possessed.

Johnnie kicked the stand down and turned around on the seat, letting the engine idle. Sherlock’s chin was up. She looked like she didn’t want to, after all; but when Johnnie motioned her over she came easily.

Johnnie took a deep breath and was then all business: showed Sherlock where to rest her right boot, and how to swing her left one up and over the seat. Told her to hold to Johnnie’s waist, or the back of the seat; and ‘Don’t lean too much into the curves,’ she said, while Sherlock nodded, not meeting her eyes, ‘just relax and try to stay in line with my, er, my body,’ and then Johnnie faced forward
again and eased into gear, and they were off into the honk and bustle of the Euston Road.

Sherlock perched precariously, at first, tentative about getting a firm grip on Johnnie’s waist. Johnnie couldn’t tell whether she had a better hold on the bike itself, and a few times at a stop, she felt Sherlock’s shoulders collide sharply with her own back. It made Johnnie nervous about stopping quickly; it distracted her on the curves. It made her wish she’d borrowed the half-helmets Mickey kept in storage in the back of the garage, though they normally never occurred to her.

But by the time they left London proper, criss-crossing the Thames between Richmond and Kingston, Sherlock was solid against her back. Arms tight about Johnnie’s waist; hands in the pockets of Johnnie’s leather jacket; head tucked next to Johnnie’s over Johnnie’s shoulder.

They sped together through villages and by-ways. The road opened up as they cut south, past Basingstoke and Winchester and into Southampton, headed toward the shore. It had been years—years, Johnnie thought, surprised, watching the fields and hedge-rows unfold in front of her—since she’d been out this way.

Back then she’d been alone on the Vincent, though not on the road. It had been three complicated, knotted-up days in ’51, when Ana Vilaseca had sold off her Barcelona flat and come back to England before sailing out on the Queen Mary, back to New York and thence to Santiago.

Johnnie had imagined, maybe, in the back of her mind, some kind of grand passion rekindled. She had just got the Vincent running that year; Ana had borrowed a Royal Enfield off a friend and they’d raced each other grimly down the southern highways, their engines coughing and thready. They had ridden late into the damp darkness, long past the hour when it stopped being enjoyable or even safe: fleeing the specie of being squeezed together in a booth in a wayside pub, downing their pints too fast and talking of anything but that unfashionable and vaguely shameful subject, the War.

Johnnie had brought the Vincent back to London, and had never left it since.

But now, today, roaring down a long slope near Bournemouth, rounding a corner and catching a first glimpse of the froth-grey Channel, the bike felt hungry for the road.

Sherlock’s weight changed the balance, changed the quality of the steering. That was true with any passenger; but Johnnie had forgotten how it was different, riding with a girl one-up in the country rather than in town. In traffic the extra weight felt clumsy; unwieldy. And Gateways femmes in their party dresses perched daintily and waited to arrive.

But at speed, on the open highway, now that Sherlock’s front was fairly moulded to Johnnie’s back, the extra weight smoothed them out. It made the bike more committed, wrapping around the curves at the slightest touch, an extra grip to the tires as they bit into the road.

Between Weymouth and Bridgport they skirted close to the coastline. The sun broke from its cloud-cover and gilded the green fields sloping down and down and down to endless water; and the smooth weight of their motion in the midst of all that beauty felt rich, and fine, and precious.

For a few hours it just—was, and Johnnie didn’t have to think about what it all might mean. They cut inland at Sidmouth and made for the moors.

A little after six Johnnie pulled the bike off the road by a broken-down gate. She slung the duffel over her shoulder and Sherlock pulled her winter coat from the side-luggage, and they scaled the gate and traipsed half a mile across undulating green land. Johnnie snuck glances at Sherlock, her boots
and her flyaway curls.

They laid out Sherlock’s coat on the top of a tor, and sat on it cross-legged eating almonds and day-old bacon, and wheat bread with honey, all in the lee of a weathered granite cross.

The breaks in the clouds were more frequent now. Sherlock stretched out on her back, eyes closed in the dappled light. Johnnie sliced up an apple with her pocketknife and fed Sherlock two slices to every one she ate herself, pressing the fruit-flesh to Sherlock’s lips. Sherlock opened her mouth; felt blind for it with her slippery pink tongue.

When the apple was gone Johnnie looked down at all Sherlock’s skin. Her fingers were laced on her stomach, near granite-still. She was probably thinking about evidence, Johnnie reckon. About timelines and motives and opportunity. She thought how Sherlock’s voice had trembled in her throat, telling Johnnie she’d been engaged on her first murder investigation. Now again, the muscles moved under the skin of her long neck. Johnnie’s heart beat. She wanted so to touch.

She leaned down, awkward and slow in her leathers, not wanting to startle, and kissed Sherlock’s sticky-sweet mouth.

She was gentle, expecting gentle. But Sherlock’s hand came up and grabbed her jacket and pulled her in, and Sherlock’s mouth opened under her, fierce and wanting. Johnnie was knocked off-balance. She fell sideways on top of Sherlock stretched out on the granite. Sherlock’s legs were tangled up with Johnnie’s, and her hand not grabbing Johnnie’s jacket was hard in Johnnie’s hair, and oh, Johnnie thought. Oh.

Minutes in, Johnnie pulled up and panted. ‘I thought,’ she said, lifting herself up on her elbows, ‘I thought I might be disturbing you. If you were—busy thinking about the case.’

Sherlock looked up through dark dark lashes, eyes like the choppy Channel waters. ‘I was thinking,’ she said, oddly grim, ‘about riding with you. About how it.’ She closed her eyes again, grimaced. ‘It was better than I’d thought.’

Johnnie brushed a curl off Sherlock’s forehead. ‘You’ve thought about it? I thought you’d, what was it?’ She paused, and mimicked Sherlock’s poshest tones. ‘No wish for an early death.’

For her trouble she got a look so distinctively Sherlock—mouth pulled down, eyebrow up, personal offence at the collective stupidity of the world—that Johnnie laughed, wheezed. Winded with fondness.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock snapped, rearranging her face, lying back. ‘I thought about it.’

‘Why didn’t you, then?’ said Johnnie. ‘I never understood why you didn’t want to.’

‘Oh for goodness’s sake, because it.’ Sherlock licked her lips, bit her tongue. She still held Johnnie to her with her gaze and her hands, chin up, mouth a little open. Breathing like it pressed against the back of her mouth. ‘Because it makes me want to. To f—fuck you, Christ, Johnnie, even thinking about it.’

‘You.’ Johnnie swallowed, hard and sudden. ‘It does?’ She was still stretched out on top of Sherlock, hips to boots.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. ‘Walking home after cases,’ she said, sounding almost angry. ‘My feet
would hurt, and that was something, anyway. Thinking about how it might feel to be pressed up against your—you arse, and your shoulders, with the—the same huge engine throbbing between our legs—and she arched up on the rock, and Johnnie gasped ‘Oh Christ! Oh Christ, the mouth on you,’ eyes wide, mouth dry, hands digging into Sherlock’s sides under her black cotton turtleneck.

Sherlock was saying something else, somewhere far away: ‘You don’t—I didn’t mean,’ it sounded like, but all Johnnie could say was again ‘Oh my god.’ Needing, sudden and needing, hips pressing down, tongue numb, no air in her lungs.

But then—no, no, Sherlock was squirming out from under her. Then: Sherlock clearing her throat, drawn up tall. Saying ‘It’s. It’ll be sunset in a bit. We have—important business, you know.’

‘But—!’ said Johnnie, laughing, half-horrified, gesturing down at the arching after-image of Sherlock’s body beneath her on the sun-warmed rock.

But the real Sherlock locked her crossed arms. Her jaw was set, trembling, and her legs were spindly-fragile in her too-large American boots. ‘We haven’t any time to waste on trivialities,’ she said, so Johnnie packed up the duffel, dazed, and they walked back to the bike in the gloaming.

It was different, after that, riding with Sherlock. The light was shading into gold and crimson, soft on the water in Saltash as they crossed, pinking the vast piers of the Royal Albert Bridge. Then it was dusky, and then it was dark, and the air was clean and salty-cold. But the perfect sufficiency of the afternoon had gone.

Now, instead, Johnnie was restless. Her skin shivered wherever Sherlock put her hands. Now she just bloody wanted, at every point of contact: Sherlock behind her, touching her all along her back, hips against Johnnie’s arse and breath on her neck. And Johnnie with her gloved hands clenched on the handlebars and her face forward, unable to touch back. All the time torn, and tender. Thinking of Sherlock’s angry, fragile limbs, and the way her teeth bit into her lower lip on the first sound of fuck.

All the time thinking: Sherlock had imagined all that, and then said It was better than I’d thought.

By the time they pulled into the car park of the one motor lodge in Portloe, Johnnie’s lungs and her head ached, and her skin was so sensitised that the hard seams of her leathers almost hurt.

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May 29, 1955
9:32pm
Gull’s Nest Motor Lodge
Portloe, Cornwall

In the shack labeled ‘office’ they spent twenty minutes shuffling from foot to foot while a toothless octogenarian complained about his local council, consenting at last to exchange their five pounds for a set of room keys. Johnnie toted their duffel inside. Sherlock locked the door behind them. They stood and looked at one another, oddly shy.

There was nothing to the room but an ice bucket and a lamp, on a nightstand between two narrow beds. Absurdly, the separation of the beds made Johnnie awkward. Would they push them together? Sherlock had looked so unsure, hunched over on the tor. It was just…the thought of hurting her.

So Johnnie said, ‘I’m going to just—bathe, then,’ wrong-footed by her own cowardice, and closed
the door to the en-suite.

The bath was small, and clean; the water unexpectedly hot. Johnnie breathed steam in through her mouth, hearing Sherlock like a stuck gramophone record: *I wore it for you... because it makes me want... waste on trivialities*. God. How to make it come right. Breathing around the knot in her gut.

When she’d stood up and was towelling off, Sherlock knocked on the door, and didn’t wait before opening it. She came in wrapped in her own towel, arms crossed. Johnnie pulled her pyjama bottoms up, still dripping a bit on the bathmat.

‘The bath then,’ Johnnie said. ‘It’s. Decent-sized, so,’ moving to squeeze through the doorway and into the main room, but Sherlock caught her wrist. Johnnie froze, breath bated.

‘About earlier,’ Sherlock said, raising her face, voice cold if halting. The knot rose up in Johnnie’s throat. ‘I admit to getting flustered. I. Shouldn’t have told you all those—things. I hope you aren’t now labouring under the delusion that I’m—’

‘Don’t,’ Johnnie burst out, and swallowed. ‘Please don’t take it back. It was.’ She laughed, sharp, rotating her arm so her thumb was rubbing gentle circles on Sherlock’s wrist. ‘It was one of the sexiest bloody things that’s ever happened to me, so—please don’t say that it, I don’t know, wasn’t true, or. Or that you don’t.’ She stared down at her thumb, rubbing Sherlock’s wrist in the silence.

‘It,’ Sherlock said at last, quiet. She licked her lips. ‘It, er. It was certainly true.’


‘It couldn’t—really,’ Sherlock said, in a rush, turning half-away, gesturing with her free hand, ‘You’re trying to make me feel better but I—I know it couldn’t possibly have been one of the—.’

Johnnie gaped at her. Then leant in, growling ‘*Christ*, Sherlock,’ fastening her mouth to Sherlock’s collarbone, fierce and biting for a bare moment before pulling back. Sherlock just let her, her breath quick and harsh, not moving.

‘You have no idea,’ Johnnie said, muffled against the mark of her teeth on Sherlock’s skin. ‘That’s at least two of the top, I don’t know, ten times in my *life*, and I’ve never even.’ She swallowed. Sherlock still didn’t move. ‘Never even got off with you myself,’ Johnnie finished.

And then—*then*—Sherlock shuddered with a great breath and: ‘*Oh,*’ she said, her voice abruptly ragged in Johnnie’s ear. Which was mystifying. Fucking gorgeous, and mystifying.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock said, again, and swallowed, and gave her head a little shake, mouth open. ‘But that’s not something you.’ Her hands were clutching uselessly at her sides, clenching onto air.

‘I bloody do,’ said Johnnie.

‘I *hear* you with them,’ said Sherlock, which Johnnie ought to have found mortifying, and didn’t. ‘Through the floor, and you don’t—’

Johnnie looked up at the ceiling, laughing through shaky breath, hands on Sherlock’s shoulders. ‘Did you think I was stone? Or just, I don’t know, remarkably unselfish?’
‘You never—,’

‘I tried to be quiet but I think I—I think by now I’d crawl to you on my knees if you only let me rut against some tiny part of you, god Sherlock,’ and she practically was, already, standing in her flannel in the damp motor-lodge washroom while Sherlock made soft overwhelmed ohs in her throat, ‘I don’t want to do anything you don’t want to do but I’m bloody mad for you, you have to know, I—,’

‘Oh,’ Sherlock said again, mouth panting wide as if shocked open. ‘I want,’ she said, almost to herself. ‘Oh. I want you to.’

‘You,’ said Johnnie. ‘This is—god.’

She would have pushed Sherlock backwards, quick and rough, but the knot in her gut was unspooling and her hands were shaking and it was all she could do to just touch her backwards. To touch her hip, unsteady; touch her waist and step forward; touch and touch fingertips to her shoulder, and neck, and wide-eyed face, walking her back until Sherlock’s knees hit the mattress. And Sherlock sat, sudden, still in her towel.

Johnnie had to close her eyes for a space of breaths. Her hand trembling in the air halfway to Sherlock’s towel-tucked chest.

‘I was going to—to bathe, as well,’ Sherlock gasped, like she still couldn’t get her breath. She was fluttering her arms close to her sides: broken wings, keeping the towel up. Johnnie’s throat felt swollen.

‘The dust and the. Er,’ Sherlock said.

Johnnie reached forward, hand a little steadier and not steady at all. She just brushed against terrycloth. The towel fell open to either side of Sherlock’s waist and her breasts, which were—Johnnie remembered the warm weight teasing her inner arm in a hotel room in Chelsea: how she’d been swollen between her legs, wet and aching with it—and heard herself moan, deep in her chest.

‘And the, er, walk. On the moor, I think,’ Sherlock was saying. Johnnie closed her eyes again. She could—she could just flex her thighs together and come, God, so close. Electric. She brushed folded-up knuckle-backs to curving night-cool skin. Sherlock was rambling: ‘I may still smell of—of.’

‘I bloody love how you smell,’ Johnnie whispered, and nudged her back, and back: flat on her back on the narrow, straightened bed. ‘You gorgeous,’ she said, or something like it, she wasn’t sure, crawling up Sherlock’s body; ‘all the bloody time,’ as she sucked hot kisses onto Sherlock’s cool navel, and her rib, and her armpit, and all the beautiful haphazard bits of Sherlock’s naked body.

So naked. Johnnie was quivering. Stripped, Sherlock was—fuck, Sherlock was—bare, stripped and—Sherlock crooked her leg, tucked between Johnnie’s kneeling thighs, and that would be—she would shatter apart if she just pushed with her hips.

Panting; humiliating; too soon. She locked her knees around Sherlock’s leg to stop her. Sherlock’s eyes, impossibly wide; staring up at Johnnie like every time she blinked she had to make herself. Johnnie’s stomach muscles quaking with the effort of resisting, just this side of the edge, so close, keep back, fuck, back, all her concentration just to keep back, and then: Sherlock, pushing, sudden,
up off the mattress. Lips hard on lips, Christ, Sherlock’s artless tongue in Johnnie’s mouth and Sherlock’s leg shoved up hard between Johnnie’s legs and Johnnie was shouting, shaking, hands full of Sherlock’s arse, hips jerking down into skin, down, and down, and down.

Johnnie was curled into herself, half on top of Sherlock’s chest. When she opened her eyes again, it was to Sherlock staring up at the ceiling, strangely still.

‘You really did,’ Sherlock said, wondering. ‘You let me—see you.’

Johnnie laughed, dazed and creaky.

‘Not that I’d have put up an argument, but you didn’t give me much choice. God,’ she added, like an afterthought. ‘I feel like I can breathe again.’

‘But I didn’t,’ said Sherlock, biting her lip. ‘I didn’t do anything.’

Johnnie drew back, propped up on an elbow. ‘You do realise that I spent the entire two hours from Dartmoor to here, thinking about nothing but what you said to me, and how you said it.’

Sherlock looked up at her. ‘Did you,’ she said.

‘I did,’ Johnnie said, a smile threatening. She leaned down and bit again, gently, at the mark on Sherlock’s collarbone.

‘And that was—intriguing,’ said Sherlock. She was a bit breathless now, but Johnnie could see her still doubtful, working it out. ‘Just hearing me, er. Talk.’

‘It was,’ Johnnie confirmed, nuzzling her shoulder.

‘I thought you might be derisive.’

‘I’m not.’ She’d slipped down Sherlock’s body and was nosing against the heavy swell of her breast. The give of it against her cheek. Christ. Lovely.

‘It’s just, I realise it’s not a very, er. Practicable. Set of connections to make, and I.’

Johnnie swallowed a laugh, rolling her eyes against Sherlock’s skin. ‘Well,’ she said, sitting up with her mock-serious face, hands tucked on either side of Sherlock’s waist, ‘that’s really the part that got me—,’

‘Oh,’ Sherlock said, too quick.


‘I just couldn’t stop wondering about the practicalities of what you’d, er, envisioned.’ Johnnie said, and bent her head, Sherlock’s nipple peaking between her lips. ‘You know, when you were walking home, imagining riding with me.’ She bit down, quick and gentle, and Sherlock gasped above her while Johnnie spoke against her skin, cracking the words on the backs of her teeth. ‘How it made you want to fuck.’

‘Oh!’ Sherlock said. Immediate, like she couldn’t help it. Johnnie allowed just a flash of a grin.
‘Then I wondered,’ Johnnie said, with her serious face back on, ‘for example,’ leaning up to lay light kisses at the side of Sherlock’s mouth, following them with her thumb, ‘if you walked down the Euston Road after the Klein case, still in your men’s suit. You said your feet hurt but I wondered if it hurt to walk for other reasons. If under your pressed Harrod’s trousers you were soft and dripping.’

Sherlock moaned, shocked, wanting. Johnnie could feel the vibration in her thumb, gentle on Sherlock’s bottom lip. She was leaning down, speaking low into Sherlock’s ear, so she was surprised when Sherlock’s mouth opened and took her thumb into warm—wet—tongue and Johnnie had to fight to keep her voice steady.

‘Looking to all the world like a clean-cut young law clark,’ she rasped, ‘and all the time you were imagining being snugged up behind me, with your gorgeous hands on me, holding for balance. Rutting yourself desperate against my—ugh,’ for Sherlock had sucked, hard, on her thumb, ‘—against my hips until you’d come off shouting, still in all your clothes.’

‘Nhmm,’ Sherlock said, around Johnnie’s thumb. Oh, there, Johnnie thought: like that, like that, arching up like she had on the tor, fuck, beautiful. Her thumb slipped out of Sherlock’s mouth; trailed wetly down over her chin, down her working throat.

‘Intriguing?’ Johnnie asked.

‘Very,’ Sherlock said, voice tight, airless. Eyes wide. Johnnie trailed her thumb down Sherlock’s sternum, nail blade digging just a hair into the skin.

‘More?’ she whispered, and ‘Yes,’ Sherlock gasped, so Johnnie gentled her fingers down Sherlock’s stomach, soft scratching of nails in dark rough curls of pubic hair.

‘The thrill of having it that way,’ Johnnie said, fighting to make her voice casual again, ‘would be in the motion of it, like. And maybe—,’ watching Sherlock closely now, ‘—maybe that I’d be occupied? Yes? Oh Christ, you—I’d have to keep us on the road. I’d be helpless to stop you, or help you. I’d just have to—fuck,’ Sherlock’s hips were twitching up now, tiny restless motions, ‘I’d have to keep my eyes on the road and just let you, let you use me to get yourself off.’

‘Oh, tuh—tuh—,’ Sherlock was saying, ‘touch—,’ eyes squeezed shut looking almost in pain. Johnnie bent down and stole a kiss, hard, fast, tongues, with Sherlock keening into it and heat twining again up Johnnie’s spine.

‘But then I thought,’ Johnnie panted, leaning back up, curling her fingers quick between Sherlock’s legs where—oh she was—hard, and soaking, and it sparked Johnnie’s blood. Two fingers fluttering against Sherlock’s clit. She made herself keep speaking.

‘Maybe you’d rather I be more active, like: maybe you’d make me drive us out in the country somewhere, and pull up under a tree and,’ two quick fingers dipping just inside so she writhed, fuck, gorgeous, ‘I’d leave it in neutral with the stand down, engine still running between your legs.’

‘Our legs,’ Sherlock panted, ‘both of us,’ arching again, reaching for Johnnie’s hand, and Johnnie groaned out ‘Yeah,’ and hooked two fingers inside her, thumb now tapping, erratic, against her clit. Johnnie realised dimly that her own hips were dragging against Sherlock’s thigh again.

‘Yeah, both of us, both of us,’ she panted, curling her beckoning fingers, pressing with her thumb, ‘you in your peasant skirt with—with no knickers, sat back against your hands, leaking all over the
leather, and—,’ god, the noises Sherlock was making, ‘me turned round straddling the seat up against the tank, with my—my hands, one hand holding you up, one hand—,’ one hand inside Sherlock’s body, clenching around Johnnie’s hand, ‘—one hand twisted against the seat so I could fuck into you while you sat there sweating and panting and oh,’ she said, as Sherlock shoved down onto her fingers and she curled them forward, hard, ‘oh god you’re beautiful, come for me, Sherlock, please, now,’ and she kept just enough consciousness, as her vision tunneled and she pressed down into Sherlock’s thigh again, again, again, to keep slight, steady movement in her fingers, to keep feeling Sherlock’s body beating against her hand.

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May 30, 1955
8:31am
Gull’s Nest Motor Lodge
Portloe, Cornwall

They heard later, from the ancient innkeeper, that the next day dawned dark and grey, but neither of them were awake to see it. By the time Johnnie cracked her eyes at half eight, the sun was a visible glow behind the clouds, and all the cars and buildings cast blurred but discernible shadows on the ground. She lifted the blind and took it in, shivering a bit in the cool morning air. Then the latch was slipped and the door shouldered open, and she leaped for a wrap.

It was, of course, only Sherlock. Who rolled her eyes at Johnnie’s startled expression.

‘I’m still starkers,’ Johnnie said. ‘You could’ve knocked.’

‘Actually, you never quite achieved nudity,’ Sherlock said, nodding to Johnnie’s flannel pyjama-bottoms.

Johnnie looked down. They were, indeed, still hanging off her hips: threadbare pink-and-green tartan, garish and cosy. She blushed, suddenly, remembering all the things she’d said the night before.

‘In addition,’ Sherlock said, holding up the black-plastic diamond, ‘As I assumed you would remember, I am the one with the key.’

Johnnie cleared her throat, sheepish. ‘You brought tea,’ she said, reaching out a hand.

‘I brought bergamot-flavoured bilge,’ Sherlock corrected, handing over a chipped floral cup. ‘The Ancient Mariner wouldn’t take no for an answer.’

Johnnie chuckled. ‘More surprisingly,’ she said, taking a sip. ‘you’ve let me sleep the day away. Cor, you’re right, this is bloody awful.’ It was so awful, in fact, that she momentarily forgot where the sink and bins were, and spun around, looking for a way to get rid of the stuff.

‘Hepworth sleeps until noon,’ Sherlock said, taking Johnnie’s cup back.

‘How do you know?’ said Johnnie. ‘Lord, that aftertaste is even worse.’

‘Ancient Mariner,’ Sherlock said again. ‘Knows everyone in the village.’
'But then—how long have you been talking to him? You can’t have known about Hepworth, before.'

‘Artists, Johnnie!’ Sherlock said, waving an impatient hand. ‘Late to bed and late to rise, makes a—,’

‘You didn’t want to wake me up,’ Johnnie said, smiling slow around the bitter taste of stewed tea. ‘Don’t bother denying it, I don’t need your admissions of undying devotion, I’ll just—Oi,’ she said, because Sherlock had turned and grabbed her around the waist, Johnnie’s naked skin against the rough woolen weave of Sherlock’s winter coat, and then Sherlock was kissing her, awkward and messy, trying gracelessly to shut her up, and Johnnie was laughing into the kiss.

When Sherlock pulled away Johnnie could feel herself still grinning. ‘I like you saucy,’ she said.

‘Fine, fine,’ Sherlock said, rolling her eyes. ‘Just, let’s all like me in the village, with some decent tea and a side of gossip.’

Johnnie dug through her duffel, hiding her smile and her raised eyebrows until she heard Sherlock say: ‘And maybe a fry-up. I don’t think I’ve been so starved in my life.’

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May 30, 1955
12:33pm
Barth House
Portloe, Cornwall

Benjamin Hepworth was an elderly, thin-haired man, hard of hearing and slow of foot, but seemingly, to Johnnie’s initial surprise, still very much agile of mind. He had declared brightly at the door that they must have the wrong house, he didn’t get visitors; and only after Sherlock spent three minutes talking fast and loud about her admiration for the mural art at the Gateways Club in Chelsea, had he invited them inside. Now he shuffled from teacup to teacup at a pace that made Sherlock twitch visibly with impatience, perched on his white-painted garden chair amidst a riot of faded bluebells.

‘I don’t get visitors anymore,’ he said again, grinning, pouring out Sherlock’s tea. ‘You mustn’t think I’m complaining. I quite detest other people as a regular thing. It’s why…I moved to the country!’ He shouted the last few words right into her face, as if delivering the punchline to an uproarious joke, and snickered wheezily to himself as he shuffled over to fill Johnnie’s cup. The women exchanged a nonplussed glance over his stooped shoulder.

‘Mr. Hepworth,’ Sherlock said, raising her voice, and taking Gina’s Polaroid out of her blazer pocket, ‘do you recognise this painting?’

‘Eh? What’ve you got there?’ Hepworth said, turning and shuffling back in her direction. He took the Polaroid and glared at it, confrontationally, just as Johnnie took a sip of her tea.

She almost spit it out again. ‘It’s not even one in the afternoon!’ she sputtered.

‘Ahh, a little lunchtime pick-me-up never hurt anyone,’ he said, waving a hand, not looking over. ‘Though thanks are always welcome. That’s the last of my Christmas brandy.’ Then he waved the Polaroid in Sherlock’s face. ‘Course I know it!’ he shouted. ‘I painted the damn thing, didn’t I.’
‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, flashing a smile. ‘We suspect you did.’

Hepworth harumphed, and shuffled over to his seat on the other side of Sherlock’s table. ‘No suspicion about it,’ he said. ‘Turns my stomach. Can’t stand m’style from those years. Sloppy brushwork, and the palette Boaz insisted on, my god. Man thought it gave the place “unity,” Looked like somebody shit on the walls.’ His laugh was sudden, bark-like, shockingly not wheezy at all. Johnnie sipped her brandy-laced tea, wrong-footed.

‘Course,’ he said, slurping from his own cup, suddenly jovial, ‘I was dead drunk most of those years. What d’you want to know about that one?’

‘Do you remember the woman it depicts?’ Sherlock asked.

‘Sure I do,’ Hepworth said, swaying a little forward and back. Johnnie wondered if being asked to tell a story brought out his desire for a rocking chair. ‘That was the policewoman,’ he said, ‘The one who went bad, in the war, what was her name?’ Allen something?"

‘Mary Sophia Allen?’ Johnnie said.

Hepworth banged his fist on the table. The teacup rattled. ‘No, wait a mo,’ he said, ‘no, I’m wrong, I mean yes, you’ve got the right name, but that wasn’t her, it wasn’t her. That was her friend.’

‘This woman was friends with Mary Sophia Allen?’ said Sherlock.

‘Well,’ Hepworth said. ‘That’s what we called it in polite company.’ Johnnie choked on her steeped brandy.

‘This woman was the lover of Mary Sophia Allen?’ Sherlock asked, while Johnnie tried her best to clean tea-and-brandy off the front of her shirt with only a limp doilie.

Hepworth was grinning now, chuckling. ‘Well now,’ he said. ‘I can’t say positively one way or the other. Never followed ‘em home, or peeked in the windows of their flats. But there’d be nothing to be surprised at, in it. I’m not sure if you’re aware,’ he added, peering from Sherlock to Johnnie, ‘but even in those days, the Gateways had rather a reputation for that kind of thing.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Sherlock said, making a face. ‘We’re aware.’

‘Among others,’ Hepworth went on, ‘that were more my line. One way or the other, though, they were close all right. Thick as thieves, and drunk as a whole den of ‘em. Erins!’ he said, slapping the table again and rocking forward. ‘Ellen Erins.’

Sherlock sat back, looking at the picture in her hands. ‘Ellen Erins,’ she repeated, thoughtful, staring down.

‘No, but look,’ Johnnie said, giving up her shirt as a bad job. ‘You’re talking about the fascist Mary Sophia Allen, yeah? Hitler’s pen-friend? I mean.’ She gestured into thin air with a kind of desperation, feeling she’d more than proved her point.

‘Aye,’ Hepworth said, getting up to refill Johnnie’s cup. ‘But this was before all that. And before that ladies’ division of the London police. Mary Allen, she’d set up a separate ladies’ force, during the Great War. Hear her tell it, she did it single-handed with no help from nobody, and fought every man
jack of a copper in the city to stop it getting broken up, after the boys were demobbed. She would come into the club in her uniform, her back straight as a martinet’s, and start barkin’ orders. Spine didn’t relax ’til she passed out, and that wasn’t too often; she could really hold her liquor.’

‘And this Ellen Erins,’ Sherlock cut in, ‘she would meet Allen at the club?’

‘Ayyyye,’ Hepworth said, a chuckle in his throat. His voice seemed to get younger, more limber, as he talked. ‘Almost everybody there was bloody terrified of ’em both. I tell you, I was quaking in my boots, they were that severe. Allen with her military manners and Erins was a—a reporter, that’s what it was. She was one of the first lady reporters at, er—one of the big papers.’

‘The Observer?’ Sherlock suggested, shrewd.

‘No, no,’ Hepworth said, closing his eyes into the sun to remember. ‘Not the Observer. Not the Guardian. It was a Tory paper, I remember, because she would complain about the censorship board, and how they’d cut her pieces down so far there was nothing left. I think it—the Chronicle? Or maybe the Telegraph.’

Sherlock made a note, and after a moment Hepworth opened his eyes and went on.

‘Well, you can imagine what kind of a cutthroat bitch you’d have to be in that line of work, pardon my language, but it’s true. She told stories! She told ’em loud enough for the whole bar to hear, and nobody dared complain about it. Men reporters tryin’ to scoop her, or steal her copy, or make out they’d put together a pitch that was really hers. I can tell you now, in their place I’d never’ve had the bollocks. The way she’d look at you, like she’d gouge out your intestines with a broken scotch bottle, only it’d be a waste of good liquor. And Allen leaning on her shoulder, looking like she was thinking about doing it anyway.’

It was bizarre, Johnnie thought, hearing about the Gateways in the years before Ted and Gina; after one War but before Johnnie’s own. The club had always seemed hers, somehow: inevitable, like an act of God. But there had been a time, hadn’t there? when nobody in the Gates had heard of Johnnie Watson, and nobody in England had heard of Adolph Hitler. And apparently Mary Sophia Allen had spent those days in Chelsea, drinking with a Jew.

Or—if Cohen was really Erins, was she a Jew? She hadn’t particularly looked like a Jew, either painted on the wall or dead on the washroom floor. But then, Johnnie thought, neither did Cass.

‘They were hard, all right,’ Hepworth was saying, ‘bloody mean. But they were the only ones for each other, you could see that right off. Whenever one of ’em was drinking at the bar, and would turn round and see the other come in—it was like she’d look—lighter, somehow, like a weight had lifted off her, just for a minute. ’S the sort of expression a portraitist’s always on the watch for, that—genuineness.’

He cleared his throat, and Johnnie said ‘Yes,’ perhaps a bit too fervently, because Hepworth and Sherlock both looked over at her, sharp. She took a swig of tea-and-brandy to cover the silence.

‘Well,’ Hepworth said, ‘they shut the place down, six days a week. Hanging off each others’ necks, shouting and carrying on. I’d wager it’s thanks to them the club stayed open all through the early thirties. The Depression, you know.’ He trailed off, pensive, trailing a thumb to dry lips.

‘What happened a few years later?’ Sherlock asked. ‘In the middle thirties, the late thirties?’
‘Hmph!’ Hepworth said, seeming to jerk back into consciousness. He rose again, shuffling over to refill Sherlock’s tea-and-brandy, and then Johnnie’s. ‘I moved down here, didn’t I?’ he said. ‘Back in ’35. Couldn’t stomach it any more, in the city, when the wars started up again on the Continent. Too many people, too much rush and bustle, and people got—ugly. I detest them, you know!’ he added, smiling, bright and off-kilter.

‘So you never knew what happened between Allen and Erins?’ Sherlock said.

Hepworth shook his head. ‘I needed a bit of salt, sea air. Stopped taking the papers, and just. Never started up again. Twenty years ago, now! I can hardly believe it.’

They all sat in the silence, drinking their tea-and-brandy, looking out over the rippling mass of grass and bluebells, toward the grey band of the Channel.

Sherlock stirred, and said, ‘Interesting, isn’t it? That nobody currently at the Gateways mentioned Allen interacting with Cohen. You would think they’d at least acknowledge one another.’

‘Maybe she didn’t recognise her,’ Johnnie said. ‘What with the surgery, and all.’

‘I was able to recognise her from a twenty-year-old wall portrait, after twenty minutes with her corpse,’ Sherlock said. ‘A long-time friend and possibly lover would hardly be dumbfounded by a new nose and an altered chin.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Not to mention, if Cohen was going around yelling and brawling, Allen would undoubtedly have heard her voice.’

Johnnie put down her teacup, and rubbed her fingers through her hair. ‘I suppose at least the two never fought each other. That we know of.’

Hepworth sighed, still gazing out at the Channel. ‘Other sea-cities have faltered,’ he intoned, quiet and slow, ‘and striven with the tide. Other sea-cities have struggled, and died.’

He looked suddenly so mournful, in the dappled afternoon light. Nobody spoke. The salt breeze came up on their faces.

Then he waved a hand. ‘My apologies,’ he said, blinking. ‘Just something a friend of mine wrote. But, friendships: they falter, too, in the fullness of time.’

There seemed little answer to this. Johnnie sighed. She sat chewing on her lip, thinking. Hepworth had refilled her tea-and-brandy, without her realising.

‘I still think the whole thing is mad,’ she said, breaking a long silence, ‘It’s all backward, isn’t it?’

‘It certainly seems so,’ Sherlock said, but Hepworth said, ‘How do you mean, then?’

‘Well,’ said Johnnie. ‘It makes no sense. If this woman, if her name were really Ellen Erins, and her presumably Irish, why would she choose the middle of the War, or just after the War, to assume a Jewish name? I mean. You would think it would be the other way ‘round, wouldn’t you? A Jew passing herself off as a Gentile, that makes sense, in the face of Hitler and all. But an Irishwoman posing as a Jew? Just when it was most dangerous? And when her best friend or possibly lover was an anti-Semite?’

Sherlock was slumped in her chair, chewing lightly on the fingers of her gloves, like she sometimes did when she was refraining from comment. Johnnie stopped, obliging, but Sherlock waved a hand:
‘Keep going,’ she said. ‘It’s helpful, hearing you work away at it.’

Hepworth chuckled. Johnnie rolled her eyes, starting to feel the brandy. But she said: ‘Well. And what if she was actually Sylvia Cohen? That means that—years before the Fascist threat—she was for some reason living under an assumed name. Probably listening to Allen hold forth on the Jewish Problem, and that can’t have been a laugh a minute. What sort of a—what sort of a person would do that?’

Sherlock shifted sharply at that, fidgeting in her chair, but Hepworth was chuckling again. ‘Joined up at seventeen, did you?’ he said, pushing himself to his feet.

‘What do you—’ Johnnie began, but Hepworth held up a hand.

‘I don’t mean to—to shatter your illusions, young lady,’ he said, slightly winded, mostly kind. ‘But Hitler hardly invented hatred. In those years…well, she wouldn’t have been the first person to pass as something she wasn’t, in order to live.’

They stood, and looked at one another. Sherlock was nodding, so Johnnie did, as well, and held out her hand.

‘It’s been a pleasure, Mr. Hepworth,’ she said. ‘Thank you, for the, er. Tea.’

‘No trouble, no trouble at all,’ he said, vaguely. ‘I would apologise for booting you off the manor, but. Well. Conversations with other people, these days. They’re quite taxing. Think I’ll just finish my tea, and have a lie-down before supper. The sunsets over the Channel at this time of year are a treasure.’

Hands shaken, thanks given, and Sherlock and Johnnie made their way back to the gate separating Mr. Hepworth’s cottage garden from the lane out front.

‘We’re going to have to, I don’t know,’ Johnnie said, ‘walk about for a little bit, before we get back on the bike. That brandy was—’, and Sherlock laughed and nodded, and said, ‘Strong.’

Johnnie looked behind, and in front, and there was nobody in the lane. She slid her arm around Sherlock’s waist, and buried her nose for just a moment in Sherlock’s curls.

‘Back to London?’ she said into Sherlock’s ear. ‘Off to interrogate the terror, then, when we’ve sobered up? See what she has to say about this Cohen charlatan?’

Sherlock nodded, thoughtful, chewing on her glove again, and pushed herself gently away from Johnnie’s body.

Chapter End Notes

1. Visual inspiration: the coastal road from Weymouth to Bridgport (and again); a temptingly broken-down gate in Devon; the tors of Dartmoor under a shifting sky; another tor topped with a granite cross; Royal Albert Bridge over the inlet at
Saltash, Cornwall.

2. I feel obliged to say that you should always ride with a helmet! Even though they weren’t too popular in the 50s, and definitely not legislated. Also, any and all motorcycle-related sex fantasies in this chapter should not be acted out, holy shit, do not try this at home, kids.

3. I’d also like to say that I hope this chapter doesn’t come across as villainizing people who identify as stone. Many butches interviewed in Jennings and Gardiner did identify that way: they took pride in giving their partners sexual (orgasmic) pleasure, but did not want to, or allow themselves to, be touched in return. In some of the testimonials, this worked to the satisfaction of both parties; in other cases, one or more of the partners found it a source of frustration or sadness. However, most real-world relationships do have sources of frustration and sadness; none of this is meant to denigrate the experiences of stone folks, butch or femme, now or then.

In this specific story, Sherlock has an early history with Vicky Trevor, in which she felt coerced into a femme role, (including being the passive recipient but not the active giver of sexual pleasure), and then punished for not conforming well enough to that femme-ness. As a result, the passive recipient/active stone dynamic is one Sherlock dreads, and not one in which she is probably going to thrive. But that doesn’t mean the same is true for everyone.

4. Benjamin Hepworth is a portmanteau of two real-life Cornwall artists working around this time: Benjamin Nicholson, a portrait painter in the St. Ives School, and Barbara Hepworth, a Modernist sculptor. St. Ives, where both these artists were based, also happens to be the location of Talland House, the vacation home of Virginia Stephen (later Woolf) and her family during her childhood, and the latter-day setting of her novel *To the Lighthouse*.

5. The lines Hepworth quotes are from HD’s exquisite poem “Other Sea Cities.” Lucky him, to have known Miss Doolittle in their mutual youth.
Chapter 14

May 31, 1955
9:34am
15 Seymour Walk, Chelsea
London, England

The bell just rang and rang.

They’d phoned ahead, Allen’s landlady assuring Sherlock in soft burred Belfast tones that yes, her tenant was in, hadn’t left the flat in a day and a half. And so Sherlock stood back on the stoop, watching Johnnie press forward, shoulders military-tense. Already hating Allen, her finger on the bell.

When Allen at last jerked open the door, she was obvious. Snarling into the light, blinking at nothing, reeking of Gordon’s. She would be dull, Sherlock thought, but easy. Perhaps even amusing. Her type could never stand it if they failed to impress.

‘Sherlock Holmes,’ she said, extending her hand to remain unshaken in mid-air as Allen curled her lip.

Sherlock felt the shift and rustle, beside her, as Johnnie’s hands curled into fists in the pockets of her black leather jacket. It was a novelty: knowing that for once she, and not Johnnie, would naturally assume the more civil demeanour.

‘We have some questions——,’ Sherlock began. Allen didn’t wait to hear the rest; she moved to shut the door in Sherlock’s face, but Sherlock continued ‘—for you about Ellen Erins,’ and shoved her boot into the crack of the door. Allen stopped, her face bare shock for just a moment. Sherlock fought down her glee with difficulty.

‘You’ll be inviting us in,’ Sherlock prompted, foot still outstretched. Allen let go the door, and turned around to climb the stairs. Sherlock and Johnnie followed.

While they were still on the stairs, Allen yelled down: ‘You think you’re clever for having worked out her old name.’ Plainly not concerned about what the neighbours thought, then, which was only confirmed when her rough voice continued: ‘but call a yid a yid: she was a Cohen, all right.’
'Do you believe Miss Cohen’s Judaism is relevant to her murder, then?’ asked Sherlock, getting to the top of the stairs.

Allen’s flat was neat by virtue of being almost completely empty. Occasional dusty cans were ranged on the kitchen shelves; bookshelves stood bare but for a few mildewed guidebooks and ancient newspapers. A solid three weeks’ dust blanketed every surface.

‘She was a liar,’ Allen said, collapsing on the mouldering couch. ‘And grasping, as they are. I suppose somebody had enough. Did us all a favour.’ She moved her mouth, like chewing something sour.

Sherlock was describing a slow circuit of the room, making a show of poking languidly into corners. The spectacle would have carried more weight, she thought, if Johnnie hadn’t been following so close at Sherlock’s elbow that she was afraid to change direction.

‘Well,’ Sherlock said, draping herself into the only other chair in the room to survey Allen. Johnnie perched next to the chair, arms crossed like someone from an American gangster film.

‘Since you appear so pleased with the end result,’ Sherlock continued, ‘you won’t object to enlightening us on all Miss Cohen’s past crimes.’

She must have overdone it: Allen answered her tone, not her question.

‘You think you’ve got one up on me, don’t you?’ Allen sneered. ‘You think because you’re young, and you’ve won over Ted Ware’s Dago wife and her hopped-up Negro lover, and because you’re Johnnie Watson’s flavour of the week, you think you—,’ after which Sherlock only had time to swallow once, hard, before Johnnie was on top of Allen with her knee in Allen’s stomach, the bone of her forearm pressed into Allen’s throat.

‘Apologise to her,’ Johnnie growled, at the same time Sherlock rose to her feet and said ‘Oh, for God’s sake.’

Neither Johnnie nor Allen moved from their eye-lock on the sofa. Sherlock strode across the room and pulled Johnnie up, still fuming, by the back of her jacket.

‘Enough of this,’ Sherlock said. ‘Johnnie, your sentiments are—,’ she squeezed the back of Johnnie’s neck, then released her, ‘—appreciated. But unnecessary. Miss Allen, if you think Miss Watson and I have the wrong idea, by all means.’ She sat back in the chair, spreading her hands in invitation, and gave Allen her mildest curious glance. ‘Convince us otherwise.’

Johnnie stood next to Sherlock, bristling. Heat poured off her, and Sherlock’s annoyance fought with something else. She’d never seen Johnnie like this, and she—but there was no time, now, to name it.

Allen sat up, jaw set, jerking her clothing back into position.

‘All right,’ Allen said. ‘Fine. That kike bitch ruined twenty years’ work for me, is that enough for you? She cosied up to me for a decade and then used what she knew to make a few quid. At the expense of her—her best friend, and the women of London.’

‘Oh yes?’ said Sherlock, feigning mild interest.

‘Yes,’ said Allen. ‘I don’t suppose a child like you has heard of the WPS? The Women’s Police Service?’

Sherlock felt the stirring from beside her, but she held up a hand, and Johnnie fell back.
‘Enlighten us,’ Sherlock drawled.

‘You’ve heard there was a war before yours?’ said Allen, lighting a cigarette. ‘Well, believe it or not, kids, there was a time even before that war. And I spent it establishing the WPS.’

‘All by yourself, no doubt,’ Johnnie blurted out. Sherlock gripped Johnnie’s wrist; Johnnie shut up, though she didn’t look happy about it.

‘May as well have been!’ Allen said. ‘Nobody else was stepping up to do it. Just me. First women’s police force in England. I built it from the ground up: recruitment, training, uniforms, protocol development, and I fought the ugly battles with the Met over jurisdiction and so-called cooperation. What a bloody joke. They wanted nothing to do with me, or my girls.

‘But I knew there were women meant to do that work, and I trained them. It wasn’t any of this cock-and-bull the Met has their women doing now. We investigated real crime, and defended the suffragists rioting for the vote. You can bet nobody at the Met thanked us for that.’

Johnnie scoffed. Sherlock rubbed the inside of her wrist and she subsided.

‘Then the Great War came,’ Allen went on, ‘and all the young Met officers went off and fought. And for a few years people found us useful. But it was like every war, wasn’t it? Once the dregs of the forces came back, we were out of fashion. I was on the attack every bloody day to keep us funded and running, those days after the Great War.’

‘And this is when you got to know Ellen Erins?’ Sherlock cut in, still affecting boredom.

‘Sylvia Sheeny Cohen,’ Allen corrected.

‘Do you have information confirming Cohen to be her real name, then?’ Sherlock said, with the air of the mildly intrigued. She let her stomach clench a bit in secret laughter, to see how Allen’s mouth twisted. She squeezed Johnnie’s wrist again, laughing secretly. Hoping Johnnie might, as well.

At last Allen said, ‘Yeah, that’s when I got to know her. Back in ’22 or around then, when I was still fighting like a mad thing to keep my girls in uniforms and jobs. And she was—she was making the rounds of the big papers, fighting like mad, too. Trying to break in as a crime reporter.’

‘And you succeeded,’ Sherlock said. ‘How jolly for you both.’

Allen narrowed her eyes, but nodded her head. ‘Tooth and nail, with me, it was always tooth and nail and the skin of my teeth,’ she said. ‘And Ell—Sylvia got taken on at the Chronicle.’

Sherlock raised her eyebrows. She took her hand off Johnnie’s wrist to write ‘Chronicle’ in her notebook, though she was hardly in danger of forgetting. Allen watched her do it, and rose to the bait.

‘You probably think that’s—the Chronicle was a lot smaller in those days,’ she snapped. ‘Sylvia was nothing special in the writing department, if that’s what you’re thinking. I doubt she’d have landed the job at all, but everything was so jumbled, then. That old windbag Townshend-Farquhar, who runs it now? He’d just taken it over. Sackings left and right, taking on his own people. Somehow Sylvia impressed him. Actually got him to put her on the crime beat, which was—unusual.’

Closer to ‘unprecedented’ than merely ‘unusual,’ Sherlock gathered, from Allen’s intonation. She didn’t press the issue.

‘Do you know how she—,’ she said instead. Allen grimaced and spoke over her: ‘She never told me
the details.’

Sherlock made another mark in her notebook. Allen glared. Johnnie shifted her feet.

‘So,’ Sherlock said. ‘You delivered the WPS heroically on the other side of the post-War years, and Sylvia Cohen, then known as Ellen Erins, worked the crime beat at the Chronicle. And in-between times, you drank together at the Gateways.’

‘Where she fattened me up like a lamb to the slaughter,’ Allen said. ‘Making up to me like that, like we were—were friends. Shameless yid slut.’

Johnnie hissed next to her, but Sherlock hmmm’ed over the top of it, not rising. ‘And to what did all this tend?’ she said.

‘What are you on about?’

‘To what slaughter the fattening?’ said Sherlock. And then, with a spectacular show of boredom: ‘What did she get out of it?’

‘You’re joking,’ Allen said. ‘Didn’t do your schoolwork on this one, did you?’

Johnnie’s hands were clenching and un-clenching at her sides. Sherlock shot her a warning glance, then looked back at Allen.

‘Why don’t you tell us about it?’ Sherlock said, actually smiling a little.

Allen gave a dry laugh, levering herself to her feet. From the bottom drawer of the gunmetal desk in the corner, she drew out a manila envelope, fat to bursting. She walked across the room toward them, and Johnnie put out a hand to take the envelope, but at the last minute Allen changed trajectory, flipping it upside-down so that a cascade of yellowed newspaper clippings fell out and onto Sherlock’s lap. Allen flicked the envelope after its contents, and resumed her seat.

Sherlock picked the clippings up at random from the pile. They were all cut precisely, smooth edges ruled along the dividing lines between LONDON JUNIOR LEAGUE SUPPORTS ‘WHOLESOME’ NEW MET DIVISION and whatever once came next to it; between WPS ALLEN’S CORRUPT UNDERWORLD PAST and its erstwhile neighbour. Sherlock flipped a page up and read: ‘…the wisdom of entrusting our children’s safety…,’ and, turning to another newsprint square: ‘…in an impressive demonstration of the patience and virtue of English womanhood.’

‘She got a pay rise, and a prize for journalism,’ Allen said. ‘I got a tireless smear campaign, and twenty years of hard work thrown on the flames. By ’38, she’d wiped us out.’

Johnnie exhaled, hard. ‘Are you actually,’ she said, and licked her lips. Sherlock took hold of her wrist again, rubbing circles. ‘Are you actually trying to claim that the success of the MWPP is all the fault of a single reporter?’

‘The MWPP could have succeeded perfectly well without shutting down the WPS,’ Allen snapped. ‘We weren’t in competition. The Met has their so-called lady officers running around after stray puppies, and chatting with whores in Picadilly of an evening. It’s the men’s division we were competing with. The MWPP was set up as a distraction, so they could pretend my girls were redundant. As well as being unfashionably virile compared to the pretty little homemakers on the Met’s payroll.’

Sherlock snorted before she thought better of it. She looked up at Johnnie and—
looking down at her with a kind of fury in her eyes. Sherlock started; it was—unsettling. She looked away. Allen, who seemed to have gathered a head of steam, ploughed on.

‘And yes, since you asked, I am saying that Ell—Sylvia’s stories went a long way toward convincing the public of that line. Before the Chronicle started up this bollocks, the majority were on the side of the WPS. We had twenty years behind us. People felt that counted for something. But Sylvia came along, and made out I was going to, I don’t know, break into peoples’ homes and corrupt their daughters. Using all the things I’d told her over the years, twisting them, making them ugly. Like she shat violets, like she hadn’t been sitting right next to me at the Gateways, matching me drink for drink.’ She snorted. ‘Underworld fucking corruption, my arse. Grasping Jew ambition, that’s what it was.’

‘Oh, and grasping ambition had nothing to do with it, did it,’ Johnnie said, twisting her wrist hard out of Sherlock’s grip, ‘when you were mooning about like a schoolgirl over autographed photos of Adolph—’

‘Just because a given side lost the war,’ Allen spoke over her, curling her mouth up, ugly, ‘doesn’t mean they got everything wrong.’

Johnnie was actually shaking with rage. She stood between Sherlock and Allen, furious and silent, giving no ground at all.

Sherlock stowed her notebook in her inside jacket pocket. She stood. Johnnie crowded closer in front of her, absurd and protective. Sherlock put a hand on her shoulder, and moved her two steps to the right.

‘Leaving politics aside, Miss Allen,’ she said, ‘we’ve just a few more questions. Miss Cohen altered her appearance sometime during or after the War, did she not? Do you know exactly when that was?’

‘As if I have time or inclination to track the personal history of the Wandering Jew,’ Allen scoffed.

‘Fine, good,’ Sherlock said. ‘Could you at least tell us, when was the last time you saw Cohen before her transformation?’

‘She stopped coming in to the Gates when the really nasty stories started coming out,’ Allen said. ‘’36, ’37? She was still the same old Ell—woman, then.’

Disappointingly early. But Sherlock nodded. ‘And—correct me if I’m wrong, but you kept patronising the Gateways all along?’

‘And why shouldn’t I have done?’ Allen asked. Puffing up her feathers.

Johnnie crowded forward again. Sherlock put her hand back on her shoulder, but Johnnie shook it off, so Sherlock moved to the side.

‘Why indeed,’ said Sherlock. ‘Why indeed. And when was your first realisation that Cohen had resumed drinking there? With her altered appearance, I mean. After the War.’

‘If you’re trying to suggest,’ Allen said, ‘that that ridiculous nose job threw me off for a second, then you’re an idiot.’

‘Mmm,’ Sherlock said, leaning heavy on the boredom in her tone. She thought she might be overdoing it again, but she was—dis quieted, by Johnnie’s anger. ‘Well,’ she said, anyway, trying for an off-hand manner, ‘we have a number of corroborating witnesses to the date of her return; I doubt
‘March thirtieth, 1953,’ Allen spat, immediate. Sherlock stopped herself grinning. ‘That specific enough for you? Do you want the time and place, as well? It was just before ten-thirty, last round before that Smithy’s break. She called for drink orders, and somebody yelled for a scotch and soda, just behind my ear. I’d’ve known that voice anywhere.’

‘Oh,’ Sherlock said, in the driest tone she could muster, ‘that is early, yes. But then, if you don’t mind my asking, why didn’t you make contact? Did you speak with her at all? Acknowledge who she was?’

Allen stared down at her extinguished cigarette butt, grinding it into the mottled green glass of her ash-tray. She didn’t answer. Sherlock thought she looked small, and dirty.

‘You needn’t prevaricate,’ she said, to the top of Allen’s bent head. ‘I saw you, and smelled you, passed out on a central table by the dance floor from about eight o’clock onward the night of the murder. I don’t believe you were shamming.’

Allen straightened up, and stood up, and Johnnie bullied forward so Sherlock pulled her back, and Johnnie glared at her.

Then Allen just sagged, and turned her back.

‘As if I would bother with her,’ Allen said, to the wall above the couch. ‘Only thing that would have come out of speaking up would be a broken jaw or two.’ Sherlock regarded her for a moment, and Allen jerked her head.

‘Sleeping dogs,’ she said. ‘Now get out of my house.’

***

‘What a fucking pair,’ Johnnie said, striding so furiously back out to Fulham Road from Seymour Walk, that Sherlock had to stretch her long legs to keep up with her. Sherlock’s chest felt stretched, too, sharp and dreadful, watching Johnnie’s back.

‘You think so?’ she said.

‘Christ, Sherlock, even you have to admit they deserved each other,’ Johnnie said. ‘What a pair of harpies. I’m surprised Cohen didn’t manage to finish Allen off while Allen was doing her in. Like those sisters. You know who I mean, poisoned each other over some lover while their father was wandering around in a storm.’

‘Regan and Goneril,’ murmured Sherlock. Tight, her skin felt painfully tight.

‘That’s them,’ Johnnie said. ‘About the closest thing I’ve ever seen to this damned story. I mean. Cohen! Did you ever hear of anyone so two-faced? Either she was playing this mad long game, going under an assumed name and spending a decade and a half cosying up to someone just so she’d be able to make a quid off her secrets; or—which, I don’t know, might be even worse—she was genuinely friendly with Allen and still didn’t hesitate to throw her under a train when the opportunity came up.’

‘Those are the only options that occur to you, then?’ asked Sherlock. Cold. Distant, and cold. ‘You can’t think a bit creatively?’ Two-faced, Johnnie had said; and how many faces did Sherlock have?

‘I don’t bloody need to think creatively, Sherlock. I’m not even sure I can decide which option is
more sickening. I mean to say. Why the hell would a trustworthy person assume a false identity, in peacetime?"

Cold. Lurching panic in her stomach.

‘It must be so comfortable for you,’ Sherlock said, chilly as anything, ‘living in a world where only the murders of nice, respectable people deserve to be solved.’

‘What are you—you’ve got the wrong end!’ Johnnie spluttered. ‘Allen’s even worse; she’s a menace. The sooner we can get to Scotland Yard and back with some arresting officers, the better, in my book. God,’ she said, kicking out at a post box as they passed, ‘I hate it, I hate that dykes like them exist. They’re the frightening bedtime stories parents tell their kids about people like us, that we’ll end up drunk and alone in some bedsit in Chelsea, or mad and homicidal, or, hell, in Allen’s case, all of the fucking above.’

‘You think Allen’s the murderer, then?’

‘What? I—of course I do!’ She laughed a little, and turned to Sherlock, whose face felt set in concrete, still weighed down by sickening, by two-faced. ‘Come on,’ said Johnnie. 'Are you telling me you don’t think she did it?'


‘Quite a large coincidence, then, that to nobody at the Gates did she ever mention the presence of her estranged lover, against whom she’d obviously held a grudge for over ten years. Quite a large coincidence that she’s an unrepentant Fascist, and the murder happened to take place in such a way that a Black woman was set up to take the fall for the murder of a Jew.’

Johnnie was breathing hard, and her voice was rising. It was distantly satisfying, to Sherlock, that her own breathing stayed just the same. So cold, though, the air in her lungs.

‘Think, Johnnie,’ Sherlock said. ‘We saw Allen, passed out drooling on the table next to your three friends, both before and after the murder.’

‘She was obviously shamming!’ Johnnie yelled, then laughed, incredulous. ‘It’s not as if we were watching her the whole time. Right?’

‘She was doing a very convincing job of it, if that’s the case,’ Sherlock said, cool and even. ‘Her face was nearly blue. She was sleeping in a pool of her own saliva.’

‘Well, she had good reason to put on a show! Are you seriously discounting the possibility of that— that woman’s guilt, based on her seeming to be drunk? What more obvious false alibi could there be?’

‘Not discounting,’ said Sherlock, ‘merely pursuing the logical train of thought. The orchestration of alibis for all other likely suspects in the club is far too exact to have been engineered by a woman bent over a table all evening with her eyes closed, even if she wasn’t properly drunk. We can ask Cass, and Haley, but—,’

‘No, you know what,’ Johnnie said, stopping on the streetcorner in the cold May morning, just in front of Sherlock so that Sherlock had to stop as well. ‘We don’t need to ask Cass or Haley. How does this not bother you, Sherlock? How were you sitting there, just—. You can barely be civil to old Mrs. Patrick down the shops, for God’s sake, for the amount of time it takes to pay for your shopping, but you sat there, perfectly calm, and talked to this—monster, do you—’
‘I hate to disillusion you,’ Sherlock said, trying to push past Johnnie’s shoulder, ‘but Mary Sophia Allen is not rendered guilty of the murder of Sylvia Cohen merely because her politics disagree with yours.’

Johnnie blocked her, shoved her back.

‘Her…politics,’ Johnnie said, licking her lips. ‘Do you even—do you care about any of these things, just. Out of curiosity. Does it actually matter to you. As more than, I don’t know, another amusing little game of dress-up.’

Tight, panic tight in her chest. Caring. Dress-up. Sickening. Game. Was this because of what they’d —? Did Johnnie want—? Was there some kind of horrible, horrible mistake and Sherlock had—?

‘Does it make a difference?’ Sherlock said. She thought her voice would be squeezed off, but it only shook a little, a very little.

‘It does to me,’ Johnnie said, like she was trying not to yell. ‘Only, all right, I risked my life fighting against everything that woman stands for. And it would be, you know, lovely to think that my—that you cared about that in a way more involved than as a sort of—of mental exercise.’

‘The world’s not so simple as Queen and Country versus all the darkness of the world,’ Sherlock snapped.

‘And I shouldn’t complain,’ Johnnie shot back. ‘Mental exercise is where you really shine, isn’t it.’

Before Sherlock could react, Johnnie had spun, sharp, and was storming away, down the cold, sunny pavement of Fulham Road.

***

_Breathe_, thought Sherlock. _Breathe. The case. Breathe. The cold air. Breathe._

She couldn’t—she’d thought it was all right, that Johnnie understood how different characters didn’t mean wrong intentions; and how ballet flats didn’t mean—soft, but she’d obviously been wrong and she couldn’t—she couldn’t think about that right now.

She would think about the case. She would think about Mary Sophia Allen, and Sylvia Cohen, and Smithy—no, best not Smithy. She would think about Sylvia Cohen. She paced the pavement, and the narrow strip of mud and grass it bordered.

She would think about Sylvia Cohen, once known as Ellen Erins. Once known as Ellen Erins, who drank at the Gateways and worked at the _Chronicle_. A reporter at the _Chronicle_.

And then: the War had come, and Ellen Erins had disappeared. She had reappeared in 1953, as Sylvia Cohen, and Johnnie would—Johnnie would say that was sinister, that it said nothing good about Cohen’s character, because what kind of person disappears for five years and reappears with a different identity, and—

And Johnnie was probably right, Sherlock thought, drawing her coat around her, cold in her bones. What kind of a person does?

But before the War, she thought. Before the War.

Before the War, Sylvia Cohen had been Ellen Erins, _Chronicle_ reporter. Hired on specially by Harold Townsend-Farquhar, young Tory owner of said paper, who was about to make it into one of
the most influential rags in London, at least for the next ten or fifteen years. Ellen Erins, working the crime beat at the *Chronicle*, and something—something about that sparked in the back of Sherlock’s mind.

She kept thinking of—of Sally Donovan, for some reason, and of Johnnie saying *Mental exercise is where you really shine*. It was probably so obvious! But she couldn’t think properly.

Ironic, Sherlock reflected. Prove Johnnie right, then. *Think.*

Think about Ellen Erins, leaving the *Chronicle* for some unspecified reason before or during the War (doesn’t matter why, not now, no Johnnie, doesn’t matter now). So. Erins had left during the War, and when she’d come back she hadn’t resumed her position at the paper. That was strange, wasn’t it? She’d been Townsend-Farquhar’s pet appointee; she’d helped him smear his enemies in the public eye. But when she’d come back from the War, she’d not only avoided the *Chronicle*; she hadn’t taken any reporting job. She’d been hired on, instead, by the MWPP, and that—

—and *that*, thought Sherlock, turning on her heel on Fulham Road and—to hell with it—putting up her hand for a cab, *that* was why she’d kept thinking of Sally Donovan. Not for any of Sally’s jibes or insults, but because of what Sally had told them, standing over the woman’s dead body. *As it turned out, Cohen delayed just long enough that we had Chronicle reporters swarming all over us on the way out.*

Not just any reporters, Sherlock thought. *Chronicle* reporters.

The cab pulled out into traffic. A left, a right, another left, Sherlock had the window down, cool air on her face, no longer fixated, unless she thought of it, on the image of Johnnie’s retreating back. Cohen hadn’t gone back to the *Chronicle*, after the War. It could have been down to a row with Townsend-Farquhar, or a change of heart.

Or it could have been because she’d never left.

The taxi was skirting the Park, now, the Serpentine to Sherlock’s right. She drummed her fingers on the armrest, chewing the tips of her gloves, thinking.

What if Cohen hadn’t changed her loyalties when she’d changed her name? What if she’d been using her position at the Met as a mole, reporting back to someone at the *Chronicle*? How would that look?

It might look like…untraceable bits of information afforded the *Chronicle* but not other papers. But all reporters had their sources, thought Sherlock. All editors had their inside lines. No, what Sally had described—*Chronicle reporters swarming all over us*—that sounded like a break. Like Cohen had played the incompetent copper, in order to engineer an early break for the *Chronicle*. Early access; first on the scene. Access to evidence the police hadn’t yet bagged up or organised away. The opportunity to put the first spin on a story. The opportunity, up to a point, to hush things up.

Regent’s Park; Great Portland Street. There was traffic in the Euston Road. Sherlock fidgeted in her seat.

It was investigable, at least. If not her first choice of ways to spend a morning when her composure was already so—so compromised. She swallowed. (No, don’t think of it. *Mental exercise is where you shine*. One mustn’t—one must—one mustn’t go to pieces now.)

Breathe.

It was investigable. Perhaps even demonstrable. All she would need, she thought, as the taxi drew to
a stop and she looked out at the courtyard entrance of the British Library—all she would need was a truly massive newspaper archive.

Chapter End Notes

1. The stories surrounding Mary Sophia Allen and the formation of the WPS (Women's Police Service) and MWPP (Metropolitan Women's Police Patrol) are a mixture of fact and fiction. Allen was a real person who really did found the WPS in 1914, really was a militant lesbian, and really did turn to fascism and become an ardent admirer of Hitler during WWII. Her heavy drinking is also historical. It's also historically true that, after the founding of the MWPP in the 1920s, the WPS was increasingly associated with sexual deviance and political radicalism, and lost favour with the public as a result. From Rebecca Jennings’s *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*:

   Under the leadership of Margaret Damer Dawson and Mary Allen, both of whom were lesbians, the WPS made an important contribution to women’s policing during the First World War. However, Doan has argued, their former connections with the militant suffrage movement, and their unconventional gender and sexual identities meant that, when the Metropolitan Police decided to establish their own women’s police service [the Metropolitan Women Police Patrols], the WPS were largely excluded and increasingly came into conflict with the Met during the 1920s.

   The final irony perhaps is that a predominantly lesbian WPS leadership … who wanted the power to police heterosexual behaviour—patrolling parks to disrupt activities of heterosexual couples, assisting in raids on brothels, preventing loitering and solicitation by prostitutes, and aiding women and children who had been indecently assaulted—were, as a result of the Met’s campaign, constituted as the impure. While in the public sphere WPS were ‘enforcing norms of sexual morality’, in their private lives they rejected the dominant culture’s valorization of femininity and family and preferred not to marry or take up conventionally feminine occupations.

   The fictional part of the story is the role of the (fictional) Chronicle newspaper’s smear campaign, and its role in helping to run down the WPS in the public eye. It seems conceivable that such a thing might have happened, but I have no particular reason to believe that it did. I also monkeyed with the chronology a bit: historically, the WPS was dead in the water by the late 20s, rather than the late 30s.

2. Regan and Goneril are the snake-like elder sisters from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, who betray their father and sister, and then die by a combination of murder and suicide. Johnnie's memory of them is a bit mixed up, but correct in essentials.
May 31, 1955
5:56pm
Metropolitan Police Headquarters
3 Broadway, City of Westminster
London, England

The MWPP headquarters were tucked away in the basement of New Scotland Yard, amidst concrete and dying pot plants, and a dearth of natural light. Sherlock had to ask twice for directions on the way down. She thought about Sally Donovan’s story of last Christmas, and reflected that any real crime making its way down this concrete labyrinth must be an unusual occurrence indeed.

Tonight, Sherlock’s eyes ached with newsprint. When they slid closed, tiny typeset letters swam against her lids.

Transitions were always the weak point in an investigation, from a physical point of view. Seven hours behind an archive desk in the British Library, cross-referencing two years’ worth of issues of the Chronicle, the Guardian, and the Times, and it hadn’t even occurred to her to think of fatigue, or hunger pangs. But when she’d stood up at last, clutching in her hand a dated, numbered list, she’d had to sit down again, hard, on the straight-backed chair she was holding to.

Stars had swum in front of her eyes. She had shaken her head, and got to her feet, and made herself stop at a newsstand for cigarettes and a packet of mixed nuts before flagging down another cab for the ride to New Scotland Yard. Johnnie would throttle her for so many cab rides in a day, but—but she wasn’t thinking about Johnnie, right now.

Sally Donovan and Andie Levinson, it turned out, shared an office toward the end of an east-facing corridor. It might have had a view of Big Ben, if only it hadn’t been underground. Sherlock reached around to knock on the open door; when she turned the corner, Andie was standing by the hat-rack, shrugging on her jacket.

‘Holmes,’ Sally said, looking up from locking her desk drawer. ‘What are you doing here?’

Sherlock held up her list: neat columns of dates, ranged against locations, victims, major incident features.

‘I need your help,’ she said.

Sally tipped her chin up. ‘What makes you think—,’ she began, but Sherlock cut across her.
‘Because I may have the explanation for your former co-worker’s seeming incompetence,’ Sherlock said. Andie stood, arms crossed by the hatrack, watching Sally, who leaned back in her chair.

‘Yeah?’ Sally said. Sherlock nodded.

‘But I need a look at your records to be sure. Between 1952 and 1955.’

There was a spluttering from the direction of the door. ‘Are you mad?’ Andie said. ‘I mean, are you actually—we can’t just—we barely have sufficient access ourselves, we can’t just let a civilian into the records room.’

‘Maybe not,’ said Sherlock, waving the folded pieces of paper in Andie’s direction. ‘But you could run along and check on it yourself.’

The modulation was off in her voice, Sherlock thought. Her whole body felt like it was swaying, right along with the paper in her hands. She wasn’t thinking about it, wasn’t thinking about Johnnie or any of it. She was demanding. She was pursuing. She was turning to Sally, who was clearing her throat.

‘All right,’ Sally said, ‘Convince me why either Andie or I should stay here even later than we already are, in order to track down some damn thing for some freak from Gina’s, on top of the caseload we already have. And I’m going to need a damn sight more than vague references to Sergeant Cohen’s incompetence.’

Sherlock nodded, tried to steady the swaying in her limbs. Sally gestured to the chair in front of her desk. Sherlock sat.

‘All right,’ Sherlock said, ‘all right. You told me about how Cohen sabotaged you that time last Christmas, and when you came out there were all those reporters?’

‘As if we could forget it,’ said Andie, from the corner.

‘You didn’t say just any reporters, did you?’ Sherlock pressed. ‘You said they were from a particular paper, do you remember that?’

‘I don’t—,’ said Sally, but Andie said ‘I think they were from the Chronicle. Why? Is that important?’

‘No,’ Sherlock snapped, running a hand over her face, bent over in Sally’s chair. ‘I’m just here, making conversation with my two chums from the MWPP, of course it’s important.’

Sally raised her eyebrows, and Sherlock held up a hand. ‘Look,’ she said, ‘I’ve spent the last two days finding out what Cohen did before the War. Interested yet? She worked as a reporter at the Chronicle. She was hand-picked when Harold Townsend-Farquhar took over there in 1922. Now, you didn’t know this, and nobody at the Gateways knew this, and I’d be willing to bet that she didn’t tell anybody about it when she was hired here, but this,’ she held up the folded paper again, ‘is a list of crime stories, in the Chronicle, that were broken at least one edition early as compared to three other London papers. I need you to—,’

‘—to see how many of them Sergeant Cohen was assigned to,’ Sally said, nodding, grudging. She looked over at Andie, who shrugged her shoulders.

‘It can’t hurt,’ Andie said.

‘More accurately,’ said Sally, ‘it most certainly could hurt, and would hurt, if Lestrade or anyone else
found out that we followed up a tip outside our purview on a case not assigned to us, without alerting any superiors or questioning the qualifications of the—what do you even call yourself?’

‘Consultant,’ Sherlock said.

‘Of the consultant who brought us the lead,’ Sally finished. She narrowed her eyes.

‘Will you do it anyway?’ Sherlock asked.

‘Yes,’ said Sally.

She beckoned Andie over to take the paper from Sherlock’s outstretched hand, and Andie did, looking down the list with interest.

‘You understand the theory of the thing,’ Sherlock said, not at all sure that Andie did. ‘You just need to mark which of these cases Cohen was assigned to. Mark the specific incidents rather than just keeping a tally; it might be relevant later on.’

‘Yeah, all right,’ Andie said, taking a breath and looking at Sally. ‘I see three I know she worked, already. I’ll be back in a bit,’ she told Sherlock. ‘Should take twenty minutes, half an hour.’

Sherlock and Sally sat listening to Andie’s footsteps fade away in the concrete hallway. The world was still swaying, slightly. Sherlock took the second packet of mixed nuts from her inside jacket pocket, and opened them up. A carriage clock ticked on Sally’s desk.

‘A thank-you would be nice,’ Sally said.

‘Pardon?’ said Sherlock.

‘A thank-you. For helping you out when we have no possible reason for thinking we can trust you.’

‘Ah,’ Sherlock said. Her head was pounding. ‘Nuts?’

‘No, that’s…not what I said,’ said Sally.

Sherlock sighed. ‘You said you had no reason to trust me. Though Gina Ware seems to have no such reservations; nor does Smithy, nor does J—,’ but her throat closed up, and she simply coughed.

‘Nor does Johnnie Watson,’ Sally finished, despite Sherlock. ‘And you think that ought to have some kind of—significance, for me and Andie.’

‘You do, er. Know her,’ said Sherlock, chewing on a cashew.

‘Yeah,’ said Sally. ‘Longer than you have, anyway. You know what happened, the first night I met her?’

‘I suppose you’re going to tell me,’ Sherlock said.

‘She was sat up at the bar,’ Sally said, ‘chatting with that Smithy. And we were sitting right next to her. That was before Gina got Chester Davis in to play piano, so there wasn’t as much singing. Andie and I introduced ourselves, the three of us were just chatting, you know. And who should walk in? But Diana Dors.’

She paused, plainly expecting a reaction, but Sherlock just popped a walnut in her mouth.

‘Diana Dors,’ repeated Sally. ‘You—how can you not know who she is?’
‘Irrelevant, obviously,’ Sherlock said.

‘The Cat and the Canary?’ Sally said. ‘Diamond City? Ring any bells?’

‘Plainly not,’ said Sherlock, through gritted teeth, ‘so you’ll just have to tell me.’

‘She’s an actress. A real, film-star actress. She’d come into the club a couple of times before, and of course, everybody noticed her. You really don’t—well. She’s spectacular. I mean, you’ve never seen such a figure. Long, shining blonde hair, and she can dance all night and it just falls back into place. And gowns? Well, the studios pay for them all, of course.’

Sherlock’s head ached. ‘Sounds lovely,’ she said. ‘I’m sure you all had a wonderful time.’

‘We did,’ Sally said. ‘That’s what I’m telling you. Miss Dors had come in before, like I said, and of course every butch in the place was on her like that. Andie and I had broken up for a few months that year, so she tried her luck, and Marijane tried hers, and Mitch and Pat and everyone glamourous butch in the place. And Diana would laugh, and dance, and let them buy her drinks, but never anything more, not even a kiss. She was—I guess you could say aptly named. She liked to come and look, but she didn’t let anyone touch.’

‘Indeed,’ said Sherlock. She tried for the bored, superior demeanour she’d put on earlier with Allen, but she still felt a bit like the room was swaying.

‘Indeed,’ Sally mimicked her. ‘So Andie starts,’ and here Sally stopped, brought up short by something. Sherlock was resting her forehead in her hands, but she thought she still managed a smirk.

‘Remembered something less than flattering, have you?’ she said. Sally rolled her eyes.

‘Nothing important,’ she said. ‘Like I said, Andie and I weren’t together then. So Andie starts telling all about what a tease this Diana Dors is, how she leads all the butches on, how she’s a gold-digger and all. And your Johnnie takes quite an interest in what she’s saying, doesn’t she? How did Andie know this? Maybe Miss Dors just hadn’t liked her, and what else did she know about her to be talking like that? So sooner or later, Andie says, I bet you five quid, she won’t let you kiss.’

Sherlock looked toward the door, scrubbing at her face again, but there was no sign of Andie returning. ‘And then?’ she said, trying again for the bored voice.

‘And then Johnnie says, “You’re on.” And she straightens up, and throws back her drink, and goes and asks Diana to dance. Well,’ Sally said, gesturing with one hand, ‘you know how it is, dancing with Johnnie.’

Sherlock considered this. The only time she and Johnnie had properly danced, she recalled that she had flung herself at Johnnie’s neck, and Johnnie had attempted to hold her awkwardly at arms-length like a fifth-form schoolboy. But surely, she thought, that didn’t mean—it was hardly a representative sample—she closed her eyes. Her head throbbed.

‘So I needn’t explain to you,’ Sally went on, ‘that before the song was over, Johnnie had that Diana draped over her leg in her gold lamé gown, and ten seconds went by where you could see all the way up that woman’s suspenders. They were gold, Miss Holmes.’ Sally leaned forward. ‘And her skin was gold. It shimmered. She was like some shining piece of art. She matched—,’

‘Johnnie’s hair,’ said Sherlock, under her breath, and then cursed herself that she’d said it out loud.

Sally smiled, slow, watching Sherlock across the top of her desk. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘They were quite
a pair.’

Sherlock drew a breath. Let it out. Said, ‘I assume there’s more to this fascinating rehearsal, Miss Donovan.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Sally. ‘They danced three songs together, and Johnnie leaned over and whispered something in her ear. And Diana laughed, and nodded, and Johnnie gave her a peck on the cheek, and then stepped back and kissed her hand. Andie took out her wallet, then, because it looked like Johnnie was saying her goodbyes.’

‘But she wasn’t,’ Sherlock said.

‘She was,’ Sally said, looking like she was thoroughly enjoying herself. ‘But Diana wasn’t. She leaned back in and said something to Johnnie, and when I say “said something,” I mean it looked like she was pouring honey into that butch’s ear. And Johnnie gets this slow smile on her face, it was like—well. I’m sure you’ve seen the smile I mean.’

And Sherlock had seen that smile: wide, and incredulous, and slow to form. It was one of the first expressions she’d seen on Johnnie, as a matter of fact, and she’d thought of it as…hers. But that was absurd, she thought. Johnnie had never met her when she’d danced with a b-list movie star in the Gateways. Sally was only trying to wind Sherlock up.

‘I can see you have,’ Sally was saying. ‘Well, needless to say, we were all three very interested in what was going on. Smithy even stopped work for a minute or so, to watch. And then beautiful, cold-fish Diana Dors takes Johnnie Watson by the hand, and leads her back to the ladies.’

Sherlock couldn’t help it; she drew in a breath. Sally gloated.

‘We didn’t see a golden hair on either of their heads for a good few hours,’ Sally said.

‘I’m surprised you didn’t intentionally interrupt them,’ Sherlock snapped, glancing again toward the empty doorway. It was a throwaway line, but Sally’s mouth twisted. Sherlock almost laughed. ‘They locked the door, didn’t they?’ she said. ‘Or you actually would have done.’

‘All I’m saying,’ Sally said, leaning forward and stabbing her blotter decisively with a letter-opener, ‘is, Johnnie had the most beautiful femme in the Gateways, begging her to slip off somewhere private. She’s had—’

‘I’ll be damned,’ came Andie’s voice then, around the corner, ‘all but two of these, she was assigned —’

But Sally kept right on, talking over her partner, saying, ‘—she’s gone out with pearls-and-taffeta femmes, but in case you hadn’t noticed there are also plenty of girls at the Gateways who get a little —,’ she curled her lip at Sherlock, ‘—bohemian, a little brainy, and still know how to do themselves up. They’re still not likely to show up on a Saturday night looking like a—like a banker, or some kind of—some kind of hobo. They’re also not likely to walk around insulting Johnnie’s friends, or to shoulder in at a murder investigation like it’s more interesting than their date. Like they can do better than the police.’

Sherlock found she was standing, without realising she’d stood. She was gripping the chair back, shaking, and there seemed to be cashews rolling about the office floor. Sally was breathing hard, looking a little surprised herself. Andie was staring between them, holding the paper halfway up like she’d started to offer and then forgotten what she was about. Sherlock drew herself up.

‘You’re telling me she has options,’ Sherlock said, ‘and I don’t. All true, all true.’
She breathed, and breathed, and spun around, and plucked the paper from Andie’s suspended hand, and swept to the door. Then she turned around, hand on the doorjamb.

‘Thank you,’ she said, formal and austere, looking right at Andie, ‘for all your help and encouragement. I shall sleep better in the knowledge, that while I may be making one mistake, I am not, at least, in the habit of making the same one, over and over again.’ And with a pointed glance at Sally, she swept from the room.

But as she hurried back up the concrete labyrinth under the glare of fluorescent light, looking down at Andie’s notations against Sherlock’s own rows and columns, even the memory of Sally’s shocked face wasn’t much of a comfort.

***

May 31, 1955
9:35pm
221B Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

It was Johnnie, for once, who was pacing the floors of Baker Street.

She realised dimly that there was a certain irony about that, but she couldn’t be fussed to care. Maybe they could even laugh about it, she and Sherlock, when Sherlock got—when Sherlock came—

She kicked the sofa, and hurt her toe.

It wasn’t as if she’d spent the whole evening worried, she told herself. There were the few hours she’d been livid, drinking tea and then beer in an overpriced tourist pub in the Brompton Road, spending more money than she could spare because she hadn’t wanted to go back to the Gateways and offer up any explanations about what they’d been doing, or why Sherlock wasn’t with her now.

She had ordered Earl Grey and wished for Mr. Hepworth’s brandy; and she had cursed Sherlock for a machine, and an ice queen, and a condescending git and anything else she could think of.

Sherlock. Rabbiting on about Allen’s drinking and the need for ‘creative thinking,’ when the solution was staring her in the face. But Sherlock could never take the path of least resistance, Johnnie had thought, fidgeting in her white-painted chair. Things always had to be complex with Sherlock; difficult. She’d spend eight months giving the evil eye to the white-haired baker on the corner on account of some rubbish about the leather of his belt, but dismiss the guilt of a Fascist and her chameleon traitor lover after a scant half-hour’s unpleasant interview. Allen and Cohen were a snake, Johnnie thought; and Sherlock a blind fool for not letting it eat its own awful, stinking tail.

Johnnie’s McAllister granny had always said that it took until tea-time for the Watson temper to simmer down. She had always delivered it like a joke, but it was eerie, anyway, how often it turned out true. Johnnie had sipped her weak, overpriced tea, and sat stewing amongst tourists, and gradually the film loop of Sherlock’s indifference had run down in her brain, and Johnnie had stared into her chipped commemorative plate and remembered things she’d said.

Did you ever hear of anyone so two-faced? I mean to say. Why would a trustworthy person assume a false identity, in peacetime?

And Sherlock, her mind helpfully supplied, in three different false identities every week.

Johnnie had groaned. An American woman in a striped t-shirt had turned around to glare at her, over
the head of a child sticky with ice-cream. Johnnie closed her eyes, and threw some bills on the table, and hurried out the front.

And she’d hurried all the way home, was the absurd thing. She’d hurried home on foot, not sure now whether she was right or wrong, making the walk back to Baker Street from Chelsea in under an hour. And then she’d just sat, and waited, and stared at the walls and at the carriage clock on the mantel. Anxious and resentful by turns, and stupider by the minute.

But Sherlock’s characters weren’t identities, anyway, Johnnie thought, for the fourth or fifth or seventh time. And this whole thing was just—it was asinine. How could Sherlock think—whatever it was she thought? Did Johnnie take offence when Sherlock ran off her mouth about—whomever? Auto mechanics, say? Or idiots who went to nightclubs and chatted each other up? Or good grief, people who fell in l—

Oh hell, Johnnie thought.

She certainly would take offense, at that.

She groaned. Her scalp felt oddly tender, and she realised, after a moment, that she was tugging again on her hair. She’d probably been doing it all evening. She probably, she thought, looked mad: most likely far madder than Sherlock, unless Sherlock had for some reason transformed into Lourdes, or the sinister station master, in the eleven—no—twelve hours, now, since Johnnie’s outburst.

And then: a key in the lock, and steps on the stairs. Johnnie was up and starting toward the door as Sherlock opened it, looking nearly as mad, after all, as Johnnie felt, and they both started speaking at once.

‘I’ve been having a lovely chat with your friend—,’

‘Look, when I said that about Cohen I obviously didn’t mean—,’

They stopped.

‘You didn’t mean what?’ said Sherlock. Chin raised. Speaking on a deep, shaky breath.

The one benefit of the Watson temper was a good deal of practice with apologies. Johnnie straightened up, took a breath.

‘I should have thought how it would sound,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry, Sherlock, I’m not saying I agree with you about Allen, but it was—of course I didn’t mean you, but I—,’ she shut her eyes, then opened them again, startled, when she felt Sherlock’s shaking breath, sudden on her face.

Her tongue ticked back a click.

‘I, er, should have thought,’ she repeated, licking her lips. ‘And I—god, I very much hope you’re not about to—to kick me out of bed for being a stupid clod, it was just—.’ And then she couldn’t speak, could hardly breathe, because Sherlock’s lips were hard hard hard on hers.

‘Mwhait?’ Johnnie managed. Then her mouth was full of Sherlock’s twisting tongue.

Johnnie stepped back. Stepped back. Stumbled, her foot reaching back. She threw out a hand, and only then realised that Sherlock had backed them up against the stairs, was pushing and urging at Johnnie with the stairs at Johnnie’s back, so that she would climb.

Up, she thought, strained and breathless. What was this—Up.
Up, stumbling, the rest of her apology thick in her throat, bashing her hands and her elbows on the hard stairs. She’d had things to say; and now Sherlock on top of her pushing her up and up; and Sherlock’s hands seemed everywhere with Johnnie’s brain shocked and sluggish and the stairs biting into her back.

She shook her head halfway up, when Sherlock let go her mouth to move down her body. Johnnie blinked hard and shook a little, like a dog after the rain. Sherlock bit at her neck, and oh. With a gasp Johnnie abandoned the last bits of her plan, and caught herself up.

Here, yes, here, she thought. Brain and body and blood, here on the stairs of Baker Street, being—Jesus, being unexpectedly savaged by Sherlock Holmes.

‘All right,’ she said, shaky, putting up a hand to touch Sherlock’s hair but Sherlock had twisted up, already, so that Johnnie’s palm slipped against her ribcage instead and Sherlock whined. ‘All—god,’ said Johnnie, ‘yeah, yes, yes.’

But where had this come from, good Christ, Sherlock already had Johnnie’s shirt unbuttoned, and her trousers undone, and had herself naked to the waist with her ridiculous boots still on her feet, banging their empty toes on the wooden stairs as she banged her bare shoulder on the bannister. She rucked up Johnnie’s undershirt, fingers cold and frantic. She bent her hot mouth without seeming to think or aim, just sucking hard haphazard bruises into the skin of Johnnie’s chest and shoulders and stomach until Johnnie’s breath came in gasps.

In Portloe Sherlock had been tentative to the point of terrified, and now. Now she was incendiary. Bloody growling. Flushed, and pushing. Biting at Johnnie’s skin, bullying them up the stairs with her knee between Johnnie’s legs and her arms under Johnnie’s arms.

It was—Sherlock was on top of her, wanting her so. She couldn’t—couldn’t get enough air.

‘Bed, then,’ she gasped, ‘we should—bed,’ and Sherlock said against her collarbone ‘What do you think I’ve been trying—,’ and bit her again like she was shutting herself up, and Johnnie didn’t answer because she was aching and winded and honestly had no idea.

But it seemed to have gotten through, anyway. Sherlock climbed over her and up the last few steps. She pushed upright just as Johnnie had got herself up on her knees, holding her trousers up with one hand, scrambling to her feet and running after Sherlock into Johnnie’s bedroom.

By the time she turned the corner, Sherlock was shucking off her trousers. She turned around to face Johnnie in just her white bra and blue knickers and wide, wide eyes.

‘God, you look—,’ Johnnie said. Her throat closed.

Sherlock looked like a cataclysm. Hair wild; breathing through her mouth. Scabbed-over lip; yellowing bruises on her torso from their fight in the alley, which was—Christ, could it be only three days gone? Face and arms dirt-smereaded at mad angles; new rubbed-red scrapes on her forearm and her hip from twisting around Johnnie on the stairs, and one on her right shoulder that was actually—Johnnie’s hand clenched, protective—actually bleeding in a narrow trickle halfway down to her nipple, and that shouldn’t—it shouldn’t, but god, it did.

‘I look like a disaster,’ Sherlock said, laughing a little, nervous.

‘Yeah,’ said Johnnie.

‘Do you.’ Sherlock licked the smile off her own mouth. ‘Do you.’
Yeah,’ said Johnnie, and let go her trousers to pull her undershirt over her head, and stepped over the whole mess to wrap herself up in limbs and skin.

Johnnie moved forward even after they were already together; got her arm tighter around Sherlock’s waist. It unbalanced them, and they stumbled over the edge of the footboard, and landed sprawled on the bed with their legs dangling over the edge. Johnnie fell forward as Sherlock fell backward, with a little sound like triumph that Johnnie had never heard.

‘I want—I want,’ Sherlock was panting, staring up at Johnnie, so Johnnie slithered up her front and licked and sucked away the blood from her breast. She kissed the side of her jaw, hard, and said, ‘Do you? God, do you?’ and Sherlock arched up like that day on the tor, and said ‘More.’

She was like—like some wild bird, thought Johnnie, and they mustn’t both be frantic, they mustn’t both be wild. She pushed herself up on her arms and forced her eyes shut on the sight of Sherlock’s trembling limbs and her open mouth and just—

Breathe, she thought. A count of seconds. Breathe.

‘Look at me,’ she said, opening her eyes again and taking Sherlock’s chin in one hand. Sherlock kept eye contact like doing it shocked her with raw current, but she didn’t look away.

‘Anything,’ Johnnie said, looking at her, ‘god, anything you want,’ and Sherlock drew in a great breath and used her feet on the floorboards to push her hips up into Johnnie, and said ‘More.’

‘Yeah,’ said Johnnie, so softly.

Her eyes were fixed on Sherlock’s eyes, and Johnnie’d never—she would normally be laughing, kidding with a girl as she trailed blunt nail-tips backwards down her stomach. Sometimes putting her at ease, sometimes waiting for her to kid back, to give Johnnie a challenge, show her how she liked it. But this, Johnnie thought: this was nothing like normal. She felt she might break something in Sherlock with just a single finger wrongly placed, and she wasn’t sure—even if laughter could fix it, she wasn’t sure she could find it within herself, looking down at Sherlock’s frail, ferocious body. She was only touching Sherlock with her very fingertips, but Johnnie moaned with the weight of it.

‘More,’ Sherlock breathed. Johnnie hardened her fingertips on Sherlock’s stomach, and then reached between her legs, two fingers among the folds of her. Like they’d done in Portloe, she told herself, and Sherlock hadn’t broken then. She’d been soaked wet, like now; and warm, like now; and arching beautiful off the sheets, like now; only now she was saying ‘More, please, Johnnie, more.’

‘Right,’ Johnnie said, ‘god, you’re lovely, you’re so lovely,’ and Sherlock whined, high in her chest.

Johnnie closed her eyes again to steady herself as she pushed two fingers inside Sherlock to the knuckles, wet, god, gorgeous, the smell of her. As if the smell of Sherlock laughing over a case in the kitchen or the corridor were a green shoot, and here was the soil from which it grew.

Johnnie’s mouth watered; her teeth ached. She had to—she had to taste, so she slid back down over the edge of the mattress, her knees on the floor, and tongued at the base of her own fingers hard against Sherlock’s flesh.

‘Christ, Christ, oh, more,’ Sherlock said, hands spasming into fists in the coverlet, so Johnnie kept moving her tongue and her jaw but she pulled her hand back, and then thought for a second only and pushed back in with all four fingers, tight and aching, and sucked.

Sherlock wailed and pushed her hips up again, which was—god. She’d been with no one at all for years, thought Johnnie, if ever, yet now she was pushing up, and up, hard onto Johnnie’s teeth and
clenching around Johnnie’s fingers, which were crushed together and twisting a little, curling a very little back toward Johnnie’s mouth.

Johnnie was dizzy with it. Sherlock ground herself down on Johnnie’s goddamn knuckles and still said ‘More.’

Johnnie was dizzy. She had to remember to breathe. Lifting herself up onto her right elbow with her left hand still pushing and pushing and her kneecaps hard on the floor. Gasping, looking down at Sherlock, dewy with sweat, actually—actually begging. It was, it must be, a dream.

‘I’ll—I don’t want to hurt you,’ Johnnie said. Dazed.

‘Please,’ Sherlock said. Johnnie waited for more, but none came: just imploring eyes cast down the length of Sherlock’s body like she had no other words. ‘Please, please,’ she said again, and for a flash Johnnie saw herself open to Sherlock like Sherlock was open to her, trusting and desperate and full of her.

Something like tears welled up in Johnnie’s chest.

‘All right,’ she said, gentling Sherlock with her free hand like Johnnie would want in her place, ‘all right, just. Just wait a—’

Sherlock moaned in protest, so Johnnie said, her voice high and pleasuring, ‘—just a few seconds, just a few—,’ with the last of her breath. She pulled back so she wasn’t inside Sherlock anymore but was still touching her with the tips of her fingers.

She slid her other hand under the bed. Box. Lid. Petroleum jelly. And then she was back above Sherlock who was Christ still moaning—whining—jerking up with her hips into the air.

‘More,’ Sherlock said. Johnnie thought she might go blind with wanting.

Breathe, she thought. Breathe.

Cool jelly on her fingers and her knuckles and she bent her head again, nuzzling, sucking at Sherlock, twisting her slick hand inside her, four fingers up to the knuckle with her thumb tucked down into her palm.

‘Yes, oh,’ Sherlock said, with almost a sob of relief to be filled again.

Wanting to—. Wanting.

But Johnnie pushed down the thought as Sherlock pushed down, and down, and down on her hand. She straightened back up so she could ride out Sherlock’s motion, but: ‘More,’ said Sherlock, ‘more,’ like a grunted chant now with every frantic push of her hips, ‘oh, more.’

‘Oh Christ, I want to—,’ Johnnie said, and Sherlock said ‘more,’ and Johnnie cursed, and then held her breath so she wouldn’t speak, and twisted her four top knuckles past Sherlock’s pubic bone and Sherlock said ‘Hunnnh’ and pushed into her hand.

‘Oh, god,’ Johnnie panted, around her hot-bitten lip. ‘God, Sherlock, look what I’m—look what I’m doing to you.’

She stared, and twisted her knuckles the little bit she could, and stared, fuck, and then dipped her head again, kissing, tonguing at Sherlock’s hot skin stretched tight around her hand.
'Look what you—look what you asked me, what you asked me to do to you.' She had to bite her lip again to stop herself talking just at the moment when Sherlock said, ‘More.’

*You’ll hurt her, you’ll hurt her, get inside her,* Johnnie thought, but Sherlock’s whole body was shaking and her eyes were pleading and her mouth was open; and so Johnnie twisted her hand just a little more, and her thumb knuckle slipped inside, and no, god, Sherlock made a noise like she was ripping apart, like she was in agony.

‘Sorry! Oh, I’m sorry,’ Johnnie said, tears starting in her eyes, going to pull back. But Sherlock clamped her hand over Johnnie’s wrist, still just **vibrating**, and wouldn’t let her.

‘I’m hurting you,’ Johnnie said.

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock, voice wrecked, and held Johnnie’s wrist, and moved her hips in tiny shivery circles with Johnnie’s whole fist inside her, face screwed up like she was splitting apart.

‘Sherlock, don’t, you don’t—we don’t have to, you don’t—have to—,’ Johnnie said, feeling, god. Feeling dragged under by waves.

‘Push, just a—little—,’ said Sherlock. She sounded **drugged**.

‘Are you.’ Johnnie’s voice broke. ‘Are you sure,’ she said, but she pushed, just a little, and Sherlock shivered harder, and Johnnie twitched her hand forward again, the tiniest amount, and said ‘Are you —oh Christ. *Oh, fucking Christ*’ as Sherlock’s eyes rolled up and her body started clamping down on Johnnie’s fist.

Johnnie bit her own mouth bloody but still she whined.

She knelt up, and petted compulsively at Sherlock’s sides and chest, as Sherlock shook.

It was—too much, far too much, Johnnie thought, as Sherlock went limp on the mattress with her eyes closed. But that was—was wrong. It shouldn’t be too much for *her* and not for *Sherlock*, for God’s sake. Unsure, near-virginal Sherlock, who was lying heaving breaths on Johnnie’s bed, body still filled to breaking with Johnnie’s *god god god* with Johnnie’s fist.

It was, but it shouldn’t be. It shouldn’t be.

Johnnie started to ease her hand back, but Sherlock’s hazy voice said ‘Stay.’

‘No, I—have to—,’ Johnnie said, not breathing, breathing too fast.

‘Please,’ said Sherlock. She rolled her head from side to side on Johnnie’s pillow, breathing in like she was feasting on the smell.

‘More, please, please,’ she said. Johnnie closed her eyes and pushed infinitesimally with her fist, and Sherlock gasped and said ‘Yes,’ and said ‘Put your mouth on me,’ so Johnnie did, pushing her front into the mattress, words boiling up in her chest; tears pricking at her eyes.

*No,* she thought, *it’s too much, it’s too much.* Sherlock hitched her hips in heartbreaking tiny movements against Johnnie’s teeth. And she couldn’t still be saying ‘More,’ it wasn’t—Johnnie couldn’t—

‘More,’ Sherlock said, and Johnnie—

Johnnie pulled up her head, and gasped a breath, and said ‘Fuck, fuck, Sherlock, fuck, will you do it
to me?’ and then said ‘Fuck’ in cold, panicked horror as Sherlock went still beneath her hands, trying to lift up her head.

‘No,’ Johnnie said, ‘No, nothing, I—nothing. You want more, you want—’

Sherlock said ‘Johnnie, what—,’ and Johnnie could see her starting to think again, which was—inevitable.

But still Johnnie reached her free hand into the petroleum jelly and smears her fingers messily and reached down under her wrist disappearing into Sherlock’s body and stroked over the cleft of Sherlock’s arse. Sherlock made a shocked, bitten-off noise in her chest. Her head slammed back into the pillow and she and twitched away from Johnnie’s hand, and then groaned and pushed back against it.

Sherlock was panting. Wide eyes, trying to speak. Johnnie was cold with dread, and didn’t want to hear.

So she pushed with her fist. Sherlock’s mouth opened wider. She moaned, and formed an almost-word, and Johnnie held her breath; and since Sherlock would already think Johnnie was broken she might as well be filthy on top of it, so she slid a slicked finger into the warm grasping heat of Sherlock’s arse.

And Christ, Sherlock was panting under her. Such beauty, and Johnnie hadn’t been strong enough to stay quiet.

She lowered her head again, staying quiet, and licked, sucked at Sherlock’s clit as Sherlock gasped out ‘Do you,’ and then ‘oh do you oh do you want me to?’

Johnnie didn’t answer, only pushed up with her right-hand finger, feeling through the thin wall of tissue where Sherlock’s body was stretched with Johnnie’s fist.

Sherlock said ‘Hnnnnh,’ and then, ‘Do you?’ still breathless but fierce behind it, lifting up her head.

Johnnie stilled. She rested her forehead on Sherlock’s pubic bone, and breathed deep. Just tiny pushes with her fist, and deep breaths. And at last she said, ‘Yeah,’ and closed her eyes.

‘Then I want to,’ Sherlock said, twitching her hips just a tiny bit faster than Johnnie’s fist was twitching, before Johnnie stopped altogether and her head came up to stare.

‘You what,’ Johnnie breathed.

‘I want to, I want to do, oh,’ as Johnnie pushed back and then forward, wondering, with two fingers in Sherlock’s arse now and her knuckles twisting in Sherlock’s cunt.

‘I want to do, do everything, I want to fill you with parts of me, Johnnie, I want to—,’

‘Jesus,’ Johnnie said. ‘Oh Jesus, you impossible—’

‘I—I, I—I—oh,’ and Johnnie was going without breath now, pushing with her hips against Sherlock’s leg against the mattress, watching Sherlock twist and pant and try to speak whole words as her body squeezed down and down and down on both of Johnnie’s shaking hands.

‘You should have told me,’ Sherlock said, managing to sound accusing at the same time as she sounded seconds from passing out, head cushioned on Johnnie’s chest.
'It’s not—usually done,’ Johnnie said, feeling her face flush up.

‘You just did it to—,’ Sherlock started, gesturing indignantly, so Johnnie said, ‘I mean. Most of the femmes I’ve been with didn’t like—.’

Sherlock sat up so fast it startled. Johnnie was surprised she had the coordination. Johnnie still felt sloppy and loose-limbed.

‘Who?’ Sherlock demanded.

‘Pardon?’

‘Who? Which person didn’t like you to ask that?’

‘Well, I—it’s not impor—’

‘The idiots,’ Sherlock said, ‘the bloody stupid fools,’ and Johnnie laughed, uncomfortably flayed-open as Sherlock collapsed onto her chest and held on tight.

Within minutes Sherlock's breath had evened out, and she'd gone warm and pliant on Johnnie's chest. Johnnie waited another five minutes before slithering out from under Sherlock's sleeping body, her skin itching with too-close, too-much, her breath short with disbelief, to curl up tight on the other side of the bed.

Chapter End Notes

1. Be advised that the second section of this chapter (the long sex scene) involves fisting. If you'll be squicked out, you might want to give it a pass.
2. I must admit that all information about the headquarters of the women’s division of the Met in 1955 is completely fabricated. I was unable to find any specific information about it, so I used my imagination. :-(
3. Diana Dors was a real movie star, billed as England’s answer to Marilyn Monroe. She really did patronize the Gateways in the 50s.
‘Tell me you didn’t rip those out of the archive copies at the British Library,’ Johnnie said, eyeing the newsprint sticking up out of Sherlock’s coat pocket.

Sherlock took a deep breath and, obnoxiously and as if by rote, said: ‘I didn’t rip these out of the archive copies at the—,’ so Johnnie whacked the back of her head, gentle with the flat of her hand. Sherlock smiled a bit. She rubbed at her scalp. She glanced over at Johnnie, quick and tentative, and Johnnie was already looking, and Sherlock glanced away with a flushed face. Heart beating double in her chest.

‘Really,’ she said, to cover the silence. ‘What ought I to have done? It was necessary to our investigation that Smithy’s memory be jogged. I’d wager Mary Sophia Allen would have noticed, had I nicked one of her collection.’

‘Smithy’s already seen the portrait of Erins,’ Johnnie pointed out. But she gestured for Sherlock to hand her the clipped newsprint squares.

Sherlock did, and shrugged, and said ‘Photographs are more precise.’ Her hand brushed Johnnie’s hand, which jerked back a little, away from the contact. To pretend she didn’t notice, Sherlock added ‘At least, we can hope they are.’

Johnnie nodded, looking over the clippings.

Sherlock felt it was to her credit that she had, at least, been selective. There were only four articles. Three were written by Erins, exposés of the criminal underworld penned in lurid tones between 1936 and 1939. All three featured a by-line photograph of a sturdy, commanding-looking woman in her early to middle thirties, with Cohen’s severe eyes and protruding forehead, but with a squarer jaw line and a larger, less snubbed nose. The overall effect was even more hawkish than, by all accounts, the living Cohen at the Gateways after the War.

The fourth article had been a find: a self-promotional piece from 1939 in which the newspaper filled inches by covering its own honours and awards. There was a full-length picture of Erins, turned three-quarters to the camera and shaking hands with a reedy man identified in the caption as “HC Vickery, Chairman of the London Press Club.” A woman in the background clapped grainily in opera-gloves and pearls; Vickery himself was wearing a suit; and Erins, the guest of honour, was in a dark skirt and light-coloured blazer. She looked awkward in it, her body a collection of blocks and jowls better suited to coveralls or labouring clothes, as she leaned forward to grimace into Vickery’s face. The headline read, CHRONICLE REPORTER ERINS SNARES PRESTIGIOUS JOURNALISM PRIZE.

‘I’m not saying she deserved what she got,’ Johnnie mumbled, reading over this last clipping, ‘but
the quotes in here don’t make me want to jump in bed with her, that’s for sure.’

Sherlock made a vague noise of assent. Erins seemed to have gone out of her way, in the quoted snippets, to run down her competition. She’d even claimed that she would be ‘endeavouring to improve the standards of this journalistic body,’ which, even to Sherlock, smacked of looking a gift horse in the mouth.

‘But I suppose,’ Johnnie said, coughing awkwardly, ‘there’s no law against being a git.’

‘No,’ Sherlock agreed. ‘And whether or not Ellen Erins was, as you say, “a git,” is largely irrelevant. What is relevant are, I think, two sets of questions. First, we know, in broad strokes, what Ellen Erins was doing before 1940, and what Sylvia Cohen was doing after 1953. But who was this woman during the War? And why, when she got back, did she need not just a different name but a different face?’

Sherlock looked out the window of the cab as it turned into Hyde Park Corner. Beside her, Johnnie shuffled the clippings; shuffled her feet. Sherlock chewed the fingers of her gloves, thinking about the War.

‘Was she doing reportage during the War?’ she said, thinking out loud. ‘If so, she must have been doing it under another name; and why would she? Not six months after winning this so-called “prestigious journalism prize,” I could find neither hide nor hair of anything she’d written. She would hardly have switched papers after being so lauded. So: what was she up to?’

‘Law enforcement?’ said Johnnie. Sherlock shook her head.

‘Why wouldn’t she have put it on her CV when she applied to the Met?’ she asked. ‘A woman like Erins, or Cohen, hardly seems likely to keep quiet about her own accomplishments. More like the type to sing her own praises to the rafters. That’s certainly what she did in that Press Club interview. Yet nobody at her current position had any idea what she was doing during the War. No, it was something…something else.’

‘Mmm,’ Johnnie agreed, distracted. Chewing on the inside of her mouth in that way she had when her mind was far away.

Johnnie’s hand reached down to fidget with a tear in the upholstery of the cab seat. It brushed Sherlock’s skin where her hand curled around the side of her knee, and then it withdrew, a little too quickly. Sherlock felt a momentary flare of heat, and frustration. The membrane preserving her focus was so tender, today; unfamiliarly paper-thin. She kept thinking of the way Johnnie’s voice had shaken when she’d said Will you do it to me? and Most of the femmes I’ve been with didn’t like—, and when the thought occurred it got mixed up, somehow, with a gold lamé dress and the careful six inches of distance Johnnie had preserved between them all morning, but all that was—later, she thought. To be put away for later.

‘What’s the other question?’ Johnnie asked. Sherlock started.

‘Hm?’ she said, digging her fingertips into the muscle at her shoulder.

‘The other question,’ Johnnie repeated.

‘Ah, yes, the, er. The other question. Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?’

Johnnie rolled her eyes. Sherlock cleared her throat, and said, ‘It’s the other half of the problem. The timing of the alibis for the other suspects present at the Gateways is too tidy to be a coincidence; someone was setting Smithy up. Presuming Cohen wasn’t selected randomly as the victim, there
must be some link between the two of them. Some reason the murderer would want to take them both down at once.’

‘Hm,’ said Johnnie, very dry. ‘I wonder who might want to do that.’

Sherlock ignored her for three blocks. Eventually Johnnie sighed, resigned.

‘So you’re hoping when Smithy sees these—,’ Johnnie said. Sherlock nodded.

‘At present,’ she said, putting them back in her pocket, ‘they’re the best we’ve got.’

***

June 1, 1955
2:05pm
The Gateways Club, 239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

‘What do you know about Ellen Erins?’ Sherlock asked. She and Johnnie were tucked into one side of the far booth next to the bar, finally touching all along their sides, though Johnnie was tense. Smithy, slouching on the other side, raised her eyebrows.

‘I—remember the name a little,’ she said. ‘But nothing very specific. Why, who was she?’

Sherlock passed the clippings over the tabletop, and Smithy looked from one to the next with an unhurried concentration.

‘Yeah,’ she said at least, ‘right. That—reporter, was she, who…damn, it was all so long ago now.’

‘How long ago?’ Sherlock said.

Smithy scrubbed at her face, hard. ‘Sorry,’ she groaned through her fingers. ‘God, I can’t remember. Haven’t been sleeping for shit.’

‘Do you have any sort of—of vague associations?’ Johnnie asked, sitting forward, distracted, some of the tension going out of her. ‘Ana—I mean a, er, friend—taught me this trick of just—thinking a name, and then saying the first few things that came to mind, without trying to think why I was linking them. Sometimes I could think back from there.’

Smithy looked dubious, but she shrugged. She closed her eyes, and took a few deep breaths, and then opened them again, and stared down at the clippings, at the photos heading them, and at the name Ellen Erins. Then she closed her eyes again, and said in a rush, ‘The War. Liverpool, I think in the spring? Leningrad, definitely in the winter. Coldest fucking place I’ve ever been. Nadya Ivanova.’

‘Nadya…’ Sherlock said.

Smithy screwed up her mouth. ‘That part probably doesn’t mean much,’ she said. ‘I usually think of Nadya, when I think of the War.’

Johnnie smirked, slid her eyes toward Sherlock, then back to Smithy. ‘You met her on a flying mission, right?’ she said.

Smithy nodded. ‘Yeah,’ she said, looking like she was fighting the slow grin spreading over her face,
and then: ‘Yeah, it was—I was on a recon mission outside Potsdam, and she was just. Well. It
doesn’t matter.’

‘No,’ Sherlock said. ‘No, go on.’

Smithy made a frustrated motion with her hand. Sherlock said: ‘It may elucidate the connections with
the other items on your list.’

‘I guess,’ Smithy said, looking doubtful. She didn’t go on until Sherlock gestured impatiently across
the table.

‘Well,’ she said, at last, ‘I was supposed to stay in the air and just bring back what intel I could, but
the visibility wasn’t for shit. I couldn’t fly all that way and come back with nothing useful, so I’d
landed in a field, a half mile or so from this supply depot I was supposed to be observing. You sure
this is relevant?’

‘Go on,’ said Sherlock, ‘go on,’ so Smithy went on.

‘I landed in the afternoon, so I figured I could sneak around, watch the comings and goings, and get
back to my plane before dark. I found a hiding place up on a bluff; I could see plenty, and they
weren’t going to spot me. Problem was, the Germans started doing drills. Right in the field between
me and my plane. So I was stuck there until they cleared out, which turned out to be just about
twilight. And then,’ she said, stubbing out her cigarette and leaning forward, ‘they brought out the
flak guns.’

‘Flak guns,’ repeated Johnnie, sounding surprised.

‘That’s what I thought,’ said Smithy. ‘This depot was camouflaged. I was there to confirm for the
States and England that it really existed, so it was a little surprising that they’d already be hauling out
flak guns. And searchlights, too. They brought them out after the guns. I had my binoculars, and and
my rain gear, and this was in June, so it was pretty warm. So I figured I would just stay put and see
what happened.

‘So I did,’ she went on. ‘It got dark, and I huddled down in my rain stuff, with my binoculars. It was
so quiet. Surprisingly quiet, with how many people I’d just seen doing drills in the field. And then,
around one in the morning, there was this faint noise of planes.’

‘Russians, I take it,’ Sherlock said. Smithy nodded.

‘Yeah, and I figured as much as soon as I heard them. But by the time I did, they were already
practically on top of me. Their planes were tiny. I mean. I found out later, just a hundred horsepower,
those things, to get all the way from Moscow. They were so small, and flying so low, I could hear
each of their engines separately. Two of them, and like I said, right on top of me by the time I
realised they were there. They flew so close I thought they were gonna graze my head.’

‘But the spotlights—,’ Johnnie started, and Smithy grinned, and held up her hand.

‘Yeah, I know. But listen, these tiny planes, the spotlights track on them right away, of course, and
the gunners swing the guns around. But as soon as the spotlights start tracking on these two planes,
they split off in opposite directions, right? And start dipping, and manoeuvring from side to side, just
crazy. I mean, they were slow, but they were so light, and they could get right next to the ground,
where they were next to impossible to see in the dark. I tell you, my knuckles on the binoculars! I
was holding my breath the whole time.’

‘It was a diversion,’ Sherlock breathed, not sure until a moment later that she’d spoken the words
aloud.

‘Yeah,’ Smithy said, her eyebrows raised, impressed. ‘Yeah, it sure was,’ she said. ‘Those two planes out front got the attention of the searchlights. Dragged them off to the left and the right. But there was a third plane behind them, and I almost sat up right into the propeller, it was that quiet. The pilot had cut his engine, and he just glided through the darkness between the spotlights, as they were pointed away. And he dropped his bombs, and turned around even before I’d worked out for sure what was happening.’

‘So the pilot got away?’ Johnnie asked.

Smithy grinned, eyes shining. Her manner was the easiest Sherlock had seen it since before the murder. A born storyteller, Sherlock thought.

‘You can believe,’ Smithy said, ‘that I lost track of the plane when the bombs hit. I ducked back behind my shelter, and protected my head, and felt the top of the heat blast hit the cliff and roll over the top of my head. But I’d shut my eyes as soon as I realised what the pilot was trying to do, you know? So once I could feel the cool air again, I sat up and looked around, with the binoculars, for that plane. I knew it’d manoeuvre out of a direct path with the blast, and eventually I spotted it over to one side, turning back to face the cliff.

‘Course, the gunners had the same thought I did. I don’t think I breathed for five minutes straight, but I could still see where it might go, and I was up and running back toward my plane. If one of those guns nicked that little tiny plane, the pilot would either be dead on contact, or shortly after, or, best-case scenario, would have to crash-land. And he was headed straight for the field where I’d landed a few hours earlier. And that’s—’

‘No!’ Johnnie said. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah,’ said Smithy. ‘Believe it or not, it went down just like that. They clipped the little plane’s wing, and the pilot had to put down in the field. Amazingly smooth about it, considering. Anyway, by that time I had my own engine primed. I knew the Germans would be sending troops up the bluff as soon as they could, to see if the pilot had escaped alive, and so I ran up to the plane as soon as it stopped moving, pointing at mine, and pulling at the pilot’s furs and leather jacket, and um.’

She laughed, shaking her head.

‘I may have lost a minute,’ she said, ‘when I saw the pilot I was trying to save wasn’t a man at all. She was the most beautiful Russian woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. Even in the dark, in just the light from the burning supply depot, she was—well. That was Nadya. I got her out of her plane, and she started my prop, and we took off toward Ramsgate before the first German cleared the top of the bluff.’

Johnnie sat back in the booth, letting out a breath. Sherlock realised, mildly surprised, that she was sitting on the edge of her seat. She scooted back just as Johnnie started talking.

‘Whew,’ Johnnie said, appreciative. ‘With a how-you-met story like that, you two should’ve set up house together after the War.’

Smithy’s smile faltered. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Well. You know how it goes with wartime romances.’

There was a silence. Then Johnnie said, uncommonly quiet, ‘I do,’ and for a moment Sherlock’s heart beat wrong, like it had skittered over to one side. Smithy and Sherlock both stared at Johnnie, and Johnnie stared at the table.
At last Sherlock wrenched her eyes away. 'You kept in contact with this—Nadya Ivanova through the end of the War, at least?' she asked. 'Were you together at any point, in the winter in Leningrad?'

'Um,' said Smithy, thinking back. 'We were, yeah. Right, we were. I was with Nadya in Leningrad for a few days in, um. Had to have been January of ’45.'

She nodded a few times, quick but far-away. Sherlock passed her a cigarette, and she lit up, and leaned back in her booth.

'Right,' Smithy said. 'So, the Siege was over. Obviously. Though there was one time in ’43 when I—but anyway, this was after the Germans were routed from Leningrad. But the city was still practically a ghost-town. Felt like half the population was dead, starved to death, and all the buildings all bombed-out or rotting away.

'And fucking hell, it was cold. Growing up in Alabama, it’s cold if it gets down to forty degrees. I thought I'd toughened up since then, but I’d never felt anything like that. All I wanted to do was huddle next to Nadya under her down comforters and—.'

She smiled, and cleared her throat, and shook her head. Sherlock’s face heated, a little.

'Yeah,' Smithy went on. 'Well, um. I guess you should know, I’d flown a courier mission into Leningrad, dropped off this package with my contact and was supposed to wait there for an answer. I’d thought it would be too much to hope that Nadya would be in Leningrad at the same time. The 588th was almost always flying missions. But it was like a—like a Christmas miracle, a month late. We had four days together, in this tiny, cold-water flat. The fucking window was broken, Jesus it was cold.'

But a brilliant wide grin spread across Smithy’s face, like the ones Sherlock had noticed her first night at the Gateways. A scene unfolded, palpably, behind Smithy’s eyes: one Sherlock couldn’t see but which she could almost deduce. The grimy city, post-siege, the bitter cold; trudging through the snow-packed streets to knock hard on the carved wood of a city door; the delighted intermingling of frosty breath in the January air as Nadya opened the door to her unexpected lover. And presumably, thought Sherlock, visions of everything after.

'She was a crackerjack, that Nadya,' Smithy said, far-away and fond.

Sherlock cleared her throat.

'Yeah,’ Smithy said, 'right. So. So, we were just—huddled in bed, really, between the freezing cold and not having seen each other in months, we really weren’t too tempted to leave, if you follow me.'

Johnnie snorted; even Sherlock smiled.

'But you did leave?' Sherlock prodded. 'Eventually?'

Smithy thought for a minute. 'I guess I did,' she said. 'Right, I—well. There still wasn’t all that much food, in the city. But there was this delicious sausage, you know? Sold from this cart down the street. And we’d—,' her smile was small, private. 'We’d brewed up some of her special black tea, that she saved for holidays. And we wrapped up in her blankets together drinking this tea and eating this sausage, and looking out over the city together through her broken window. And I ate at least half of it, without realising she didn’t have any more, and it was—right, it was still rationed. Yeah, I’m remembering now.'

'So you went out to get more,’ Sherlock said.
‘Yeah,’ said Smithy. ‘She told me there was no point, that she didn’t have another ration coupon until after I left. But I was, you know. Young, and cocky, and I felt bad for eating all Nadya’s food. And I thought I could convince this guy, being a brave American pilot and all that. And so I bundled up, and kissed her, and she gave me directions to his place.

‘It wasn’t far, but I remember the neighbourhood really changed, on the way there. Got fancy, you know, all of a sudden, or as fancy as you could find, in Leningrad in 1945. I think Nadya lived on the outer edge of the diplomatic area. I was walking as fast as I could, to warm up, and—,’ and Smithy stopped dead, staring ahead of her.

‘What is it?’ Sherlock asked.

Smithy drew the clippings to her, slowly, over the top of the table, staring at each in turn. She didn’t answer.

‘Smithy?’ Johnnie said, leaning forward to look in Smithy’s face.

‘I saw her,’ Smithy said, vacantly, still gazing at the clippings. ‘And I—I remember why I thought—Liverpool.’

‘Well?’ Sherlock said, sitting forward again in her seat. ‘What was it? Why did you think of Liverpool?’

‘Because I saw her,’ Smithy said, poking at the full-body picture of Erins. ‘I saw this one. She was walking down the street just ahead of me, with a big old duffel bag slung over one shoulder. And there was a minute where she turned to look at an address number, and. And I recognised her.’

‘From where?’ Johnnie asked.

‘From two years before,’ Smithy said. She sounded now like she was drifting, afraid the memories would take flight if she focused too hard.

‘I was on leave,’ she said, ‘in Liverpool, in, let’s see. May of 1943. The thing was, see, my leaves were…not exactly paid. They weren’t so much vacations, as, uh, periods when I didn't have a job.’ She chuckled, darkly. ‘So anyway, I was washed up in Liverpool, waiting for news about whether I should fly back to New York, or whether there was something for me to do on the Continent. But I was, um.’ She laughed again. ‘Stone fucking broke, to tell you the truth.’

Johnnie picked up her water glass, and made a motion like toasting Smithy’s health. Smithy returned the gesture.

‘So I had no idea how long I would be in Liverpool,’ Smithy went on. ‘And I was trying to find things to do cheap, you know? So every morning I would go to this tea shop, where they got all the papers delivered. And I would order a cup of coffee and a bun, and I’d sit there all morning, reading through every single paper. Every day.

‘God, it was dull,’ she said. ‘And nerve-wracking. For a person used to flying missions, rather than sitting by herself and reading about what everybody else was doing. But I remembered,’ and she poked at the clipping again with her finger, ‘all those years later, I remembered a story about this woman, about how she’d been some kind of hot-shot English reporter, and how it’d come out that she’d defected; she was working for the Germans.’

‘But she was—she was Jewish, wasn’t she?’ said Johnnie.

‘Erins?’ Smithy said, holding up the paper. ‘Name doesn’t look Jewish. Was she?’
‘Do you really not realise—,’ Johnnie started, but Sherlock put a hand on her arm, and she stopped. Smithy looked from the clipping, up at them, and back toward the clipping. She looked at it hard.

‘This is—,’ she said, ‘Ellen Erins is Sylvia Cohen?’

‘We believe so,’ Sherlock said, and Smithy whistled, long and high. She stared down, a bit more, at the clippings.

‘That makes, just. You know that makes no sense at all, right?’ Smithy said, at last. Johnnie chuckled.

‘We’re missing information,’ Sherlock said.

‘There’s a fucking understatement,’ said Smithy.

‘Look, it only seems nonsensical because we haven’t all the facts,’ Sherlock insisted, a little shortly. ‘The seeming contradictions here will either resolve themselves as we learn more to explain them, or remain contradictions and by their very existence illuminate the nature of our problem. So please, tell us: Erins was working for the Germans. Doing what?’

‘No idea,’ Smithy said, slowly, working past Sherlock’s fit of temper. ‘But I read about her in about four different papers, that day. All of ‘em ran different pictures, but in all of them it struck me that she looked like—like family, if you know what I mean.’

‘A friend of Dorothy,’ Johnnie chipped in, with a smirk.

Sherlock nodded. ‘Stocky, mannish, brash, with short hair, and a few of the articles may have even mentioned that she used to drink here. Oh yes,’ she said, seeing Smithy’s look of surprise. ‘Ellen Erins was a regular here, before the War. But go on. She struck you as one of your own.’

‘Right,’ Smithy said. ‘Which was—that much more revolting, you know? I think that’s why I remembered it, two years later. We hadn’t heard—,’ she cleared her throat. ‘We hadn’t heard details yet, of what they were doing at the camps. But people like us—it was pretty common knowledge, among travellers especially, what happened to life for people like us in Berlin after ’33. So why the hell would—,’ she gestured to the clippings, shaking her head.

‘A question that still bears asking,’ Sherlock mused. ‘If nothing else, Ellen Erins was hardly averse to bearding the lion’s den.’

‘Yeah, but why?’ said Johnnie. ‘Why would she want to? Some kind of, I don’t know, thumbing her nose at them? Proving she could work for the Fascists when they were putting people like her to death? It’s a bolloxed-up way to go about spiting someone.’

Smithy raised her glass again.

‘There’s that,’ Sherlock said, slowly, toying with the clippings on the table. ‘But also—Germany wasn’t the only lion’s den she ventured into. If she were working for the Fascists, it would be just as dangerous for her to show her face in newly-liberated Leningrad, surely.’

‘Exactly!’ Smithy said, waving her glass in Sherlock’s direction, as Johnnie sat back and whistled, low. ‘I mean, that’s what really got my attention. She turned, that day in Leningrad, and I recognised her. And I—I didn’t remember her name, or anything, but I remembered those newspaper stories and I was just—I thought it couldn’t possibly be the same person. I mean, why would she be there? Of all places?’
'Why, indeed,' said Sherlock.

'So I followed her,' Smithy said. 'I couldn’t believe I was doing it, I still just wanted to get this damned sausage and be back in bed with Nadya. But I followed behind this woman, away from the baker’s shop and down an even fancier-looking street. Like I said, she had this big duffel over one shoulder, but she still went pretty fast. You had to, you know? Or you’d freeze. She turned one more time, and then she knocked on the door of this high-toned looking building, and the door opened and she went in. And then I was—'

'Cold,' supplied Johnnie. Smithy and Sherlock both laughed.

'Well, yes I was,' Smithy said. 'And I knew Nadya would be wondering about me if I didn’t turn around soon, and maybe be mad at me if I didn’t get the sausage like I’d said I was going to do. But if I didn’t wait long enough to see what happened, then what was the point of following this woman all the way from Tashkentskaya Street?'

'So you stayed and waited,' said Sherlock.

'Yeah,' Smithy said. 'And it wasn’t easy, believe me, staying back in the shadows and trying to jump up and down at the same time, keeping warm. I thought about whether I should run and get the sausage, but then what if she came out in the meantime? Or what if she didn’t come out for hours, and the thing would be frozen solid by the time I got back to Nadya? And then I really just—what was I doing, anyway? I was giving up maybe hours of time with Nadya, to watch this house? It was completely—,' she laughed, shaking her head. 'I felt like an idiot. Some spy I was. I felt even stupider ten minutes later, when she came back out.'

'She was only in the building for ten minutes?' Sherlock asked.

'Around that,' said Smithy. 'And after she came out, she just wandered back the direction she’d come. Much slower now, smoking, seeming—thoughtful, maybe, I don’t know. And she walked to the train station, and caught the very next train out. Which—I can’t believe she had a burning need to go to Riga, of all places. My money’s on her just taking the first train that came along. I watched her go, and then I turned around, ran to the sausage cart, and was back with Nadya in half an hour.'

'So that was it?' Johnnie said, sounding incredulous. 'She visited this building for ten minutes, then left town?'

'There was one more thing,' said Smithy. She sat back in the booth, looking from Johnnie to Sherlock and back. 'When she came back out of the building, after? That big duffel she’d been carrying; it was gone.'

They all sat in silence for a minute, absorbing this. Smithy took out another cigarette, and lit it.

'And you don’t—,' Sherlock started. She frowned. 'You don’t know what was in the bag. Obviously. What was the building? You said it was in a diplomatic neighbourhood; was it an embassy?'

Smithy toyed with the ashtray.

'No,' she said slowly, 'it wasn’t an embassy. But Nadya said later—I told her this whole story, later that night—she said that she thought my description sounded like where one of the higher-ups at the British Embassy actually lived. You know, their private home. I never, um. Never confirmed that, though.'

Sherlock nodded, staring ahead of her at the table and the clippings and Johnnie’s hands. She could
feel Johnnie’s eyes on the side of her face.

‘Jews in the German army, and Nazis in the home of the British ambassador,’ she muttered. ‘Reporters at the Met, and coppers in the city’s dens of iniquity. Curiouser and curiouser.’

‘But was she actually—?’ said Johnnie, at the same moment Smithy put up a hand and said, ‘Dens of iniquity, I don’t know about that.’ Johnnie laughed.

‘To be fair,’ Johnnie said, smirking, ‘it did get a lot more iniquitous around here when Sylvia Cohen was starting fights left and right.’ Smithy snickered.

Sherlock stared in front of her, half-listening. ‘But was she actually…?’ she said, thoughtful, repeating Johnnie’s words.

She unfocused her eyes. Images swam before them: newsprint phrases, and imagined scenes narrated in Smithy’s deep American drawl.

‘Was she actually,’ she said again, nodding to herself. ‘Was she actually starting fights? Or was there some other motivation? Was she actually a Jew? If so, why the pre-War Irish alias and the undercover work for Germany? But then, was she actually working for the Germans? If so, why travel to Leningrad in 1945, and visit, of all people, the British ambassador? Was she actually friends with Mary Sophia Allen? Was she ever, really, a copper? It seems there’s very little we truly know about Sylvia Cohen.’

There was a silence, before Johnnie licked her lips. ‘She was—she definitely was a reporter,’ she said.

‘Exactly!’ said Sherlock. She slapped the table with the flats of her hands so that the silverware rattled. Smithy looked marginally offended, but mostly just confused.

‘A reporter?’ she asked.

‘She was definitely a reporter,’ Sherlock confirmed. ‘A prize-winning reporter. The first female crime reporter on the Chronicle, and one of the first in England. And she seems to have continued on as a reporter, even when she had ostensibly joined law enforcement.’

‘And…?’ Smithy said, but Johnnie was already groaning. The sound made Sherlock grin.

‘And reporters leave records,’ Sherlock announced, with great satisfaction.

Johnnie’s groaning increased. ‘You just came from there,’ she said.

‘Which makes a set of fresh eyes that much more valuable, doesn’t it?’ Sherlock said, and when Johnnie still made no move to shift her position: ‘Don’t be that way; we’re lucky. If Erins were England’s first female long-distance sprinter, we wouldn’t have any archives to go through.’

‘There’d be a tragedy,’ Johnnie muttered, but she was rummaging around on the bench beside her, getting her leather jacket together. Sherlock beamed, and swung herself out of the seat.

‘Not to worry,’ she told Smithy, who now looked utterly perplexed.

Sherlock could feel her mind shifting, moving toward the newspaper archives and how she would—she would give Johnnie the editions of the most incendiary papers, she was thinking to herself; Johnnie was less likely than Sherlock to catch a subtle clue. But amidst these thoughts her mouth was still moving, using a corner of her brain to reassure Smithy.
‘Yes, you’ve been a great help,’ she heard herself say, moving toward the door. ‘Having seen Erins, or—Cohen, in Leningrad all those years ago when she was a known German collaborator, certainly points to a further avenue of investigation. You’ve been in—,’ and then she stopped, halfway across the Gateways’s empty dance floor.

Before her eyes swam, not chairs flipped neatly on tops of tables, but tables upset, stuffing ripped out of upholstery. Gina Ware, standing up to six grown men on a night when Smithy had been off at a —.

‘Oh of course,’ Sherlock breathed, eyes wide, turning on her heel.

‘Who did you tell?’ she demanded, crossing back to the seat where Smithy was still only half-standing. She fell back on the bench.

‘What?’ Smithy said. ‘Who did I tell what?’

‘This story,’ Sherlock said. ‘It’s not the first time you’ve relived that particular Leningrad holiday in the last few months, am I right? You told it to somebody at that dinner, didn’t you?’

‘Dinner?’ Smithy said, plainly not tracking. ‘When?’

Sherlock very nearly stamped her foot. ‘When you drank too much,’ she said, ‘and got your picture taken despite your—your lack of a pension, and secrets were discussed that nobody in the government would want bandied about.’

‘The press dinner?’ said Smithy, and Sherlock made a mock-gracious acknowledgement with her hands.

Smithy’s eyes went wide. Her jaw dropped. ‘The press dinner,’ she said again, which Sherlock thought was really slower than necessary. ‘The night the place got torn apart! You don’t think— you don’t think something I said—.’ She stopped and rubbed at her face. ‘Dammit, that night cost Ted and Gina more than a grand.’

‘Oh for—,’ Sherlock started, impatient, but stopped speaking when she saw the warning look on Johnnie’s face. This was a time for sensitivity, apparently. She took a deep breath. ‘I’m honestly not sure whether there could have been any connection between the two events,’ she said. ‘If local toughs had been watching the bar for some time, waiting for you to take the night off, it could have been contingent merely on your absence, rather than on your specific behaviour once you were gone.

‘However,’ she added, managing not to grind her teeth in impatience, ‘you did speak with someone about this story that night, didn’t you? Who was it?’

Smithy closed her eyes, rubbed some more at her face. ‘I drank—kind of a lot,’ she mumbled. Johnnie said ‘Anything you can remember, anything at all.’ Smithy groaned.

‘I—yeah, I think I talked about that weekend in Leningrad,’ she said, ‘but just with people who already knew me, or Nadya, or both of us together. Jesus, I don’t remember. I mean, it wasn’t exactly a locked interrogation room, you know? Little round tables all around a busy ballroom, people coming and going with drinks, politicians shaking hands, photographers snapping pictures.’

‘Because the press was there,’ Sherlock said, nodding.

‘Well—yeah,’ said Smithy. ‘That was…pretty much the point of the whole evening.’
'Yes,' said Sherlock. ‘Yes, I can see that.’ A silence, and then she nodded, brusque and final, and leaned over to shake Smithy’s bewildered hand.

‘Good then,’ she said. ‘Thank you again. We’ll be in touch.’

And dragging after her a newly-groaning Johnnie, she headed for the stairs back up to King’s Road, a cab, and the British Library.

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June 1, 1955
8:45pm
221B Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

But by the time they’d spent another forty-five minutes corralled in the entranceway reassuring an anxious Gina, and made their way across town in the lengthening afternoon shadows, the Library had only been open for another hour and a half.

Sherlock had set her jaw when she realised; she could have sworn Johnnie looked almost gleeful.

The glee was short-lived, however. It had gone entirely a minute later, when Sherlock dumped a pile of ten-year-old Guardian editions on the table with a satisfied thwack. Johnnie had rubbed her eyes, and Sherlock had sat across from her and opened a copy of the Observer, and had settled in for an hour of silence just as Johnnie said ‘Well, I reckon that’s why next to nobody remembers Erins’s name, anyway.’

Sherlock looked up from her paper. ‘What’s why?’

Johnnie had arranged her hands on the front of the paper, then turned it around to face Sherlock. One hand pointed to the headline VICTORY IN NORTH AFRICA: AXIS POWERS DEFEATED. The other fingers were curled around the top to point to the date: May 12, 1943.

‘Would have been something like the day after the scandal broke over Erins’s betrayal,’ Johnnie said. ‘I’d wondered, a bit, why it didn’t make more of a stir.’ And she’d grinned, wide and open, and Sherlock had beamed at her.

After that, though, nothing more had surfaced. The papers all reported gleefully on Erins’s defection, but the reports were all based on the same two photos and one stolen telegram, and none of them offered any specifics of the woman’s wartime activities. It had occurred to Sherlock briefly, when the clark came by and whispered about ten minutes to close, that they might hide out in the washrooms until the clean-up crew had passed, and then sneak out to continue their researches. But one look at Johnnie had put paid to the idea. Johnnie wouldn’t stand for it, and Sherlock found she didn’t much want to, anyway.

So she’d let herself be manhandled back outside by Johnnie and the librarian. Then Johnnie had been so enthusiastic about stopping for soup at Mr. Finnegan’s corner café, that Sherlock hadn’t found it in herself to complain. There was an appeal, she’d thought, sipping her coffee by the twilit window, in watching the soup-steam curl around Johnnie’s lowered face. Johnnie’s eyelids had fluttered shut as her mouth closed around the first spoonful; she’d hummed in her throat with pleasure, and Sherlock’s stomach had clenched.

And now, an hour, perhaps, after they’d left the café, Johnnie was making that sound again, head tipped back on the sofa back so Sherlock could feel with her lips the vibrations of Johnnie’s throat.
She was making that noise, and then she was making one similar, and then the foundation of contentment slipped from her voice and was replaced by need. It made Sherlock feel greedy, and brave.

‘Tell me,’ she said, knees straddling Johnnie’s lap on the Baker Street sofa, mouth at her ear.

‘Tell you—ung,’ Johnnie said, and bared her neck for Sherlock’s exploring tongue, ‘tell you what?’

‘You must have thought about it,’ Sherlock said. She nipped Johnnie’s ear, and said, ‘You were holding back on asking me; you must have thought about it often enough, already.’

Johnnie stiffened under her, breath halting for a count of seconds.

‘Tell me how,’ Sherlock said again, into Johnnie’s neck. ‘What did you think about? What did you think about, when you thought about… me, doing it to you?’

‘I,’ said Johnnie, and licked her lips, and shook her head. ‘We don’t have to, Sherlock, I shouldn’t have—’

‘Please,’ Sherlock said. ‘I want to.’

‘Oh,’ Johnnie said. Her head fell back again on the couch back. ‘God.’

‘I do, I want to,’ said Sherlock, ‘I— very much want to—,’

‘Jesus,’ Johnnie said.

‘—but I’m not—‘

Fear, uncertainty in waves. But she bit them down, thinking about Diana Dors in her gold suspenders, and Margrit O’Brien with her Kensington flat, and mysterious Ana Vilaseca from the War, all three of whom had apparently, unbelievably, not wanted to, at all. ‘I want to,’ she said again, hiding her face in the couch cushions just above Johnnie’s shoulder, ‘but I don’t know how.’

Johnnie was still worryingly stiff underneath her. When Sherlock pulled her head back, Johnnie’s face was flushed bright red. She wouldn’t meet Sherlock’s eyes, though Sherlock was bent in half over her lap and very close indeed.

It was wrong, Sherlock thought, that Johnnie Watson should try to avoid anything.

‘Please,’ Sherlock breathed, into Johnnie’s ear, trying to think through the wanting. Petting over Johnnie’s shoulders so that they might unbend. ‘Please, you. You know how I hate not knowing things,’ she said, and her delivery was a little too quick, a little too breathy, but Johnnie laughed anyway. Her shoulders relaxed a very little bit, under Sherlock’s fingers. Sherlock felt herself glow with it.

‘You’re a slave to your scientific curiosity, then?’ said Johnnie, voice still tight but laughing a little bit, in the back of her throat. She ran her hands up under Sherlock’s blouse. Blunt, squared-off fingers. Sherlock shivered.

‘You know I can never let a thing go,’ she agreed, tipping back her head. ‘You may as well tell me now.’

‘Well, I don’t know’ said Johnnie, mock-concerned. ‘I’m not convinced of the, er, methodology of this study.’ She leaned her head into the exposed vee of skin at Sherlock’s throat. She inhaled, then
bit, quick, at Sherlock’s collarbone. ‘Your interest is purely impartial?’ she added, and tongued at the place where she’d bitten.

‘Oh Christ not remotely,’ said Sherlock, ‘Oh, oh.’ Her voice came out notes deeper than she’d expected.

Johnnie laughed again, and worried at that place on Sherlock’s collarbone again, and Sherlock felt herself vibrating, unraveling.

She shook her head and said ‘Come on, what did you—did you think about me doing it like you did to me, with my—my fingers, my hand in you, did you—’

Johnnie was holding her close, hands on Sherlock’s back, head pillowed on Sherlock’s shoulder, and Sherlock was imagining Johnnie imagining that. She was having trouble getting enough breath.

‘I have a—thing,’ Johnnie said, after a minute, face hidden in Sherlock’s shoulder. ‘I—but your hands, your hands are so lovely, I—’

‘Wait, you have a—a what?’ Sherlock said, genuinely puzzled. She heard her voice return to level, to skeptical, at the same time Johnnie’s shoulders tensed back up, anxious beneath the skin.

They were so close; that was the problem. The thin thread of Johnnie’s panic coiled into Sherlock, up through Johnnie’s shoulders into Sherlock’s hands and Sherlock’s spine and the space behind Sherlock’s eyes. She had to erase—erase—fix, but she couldn’t think, so she leaned forward and kissed Johnnie soft on the mouth, for a break in talking. She made her lips soft, and pleading, and her mouth wet and open like a little creature’s crying out to be fed.

She felt it was cheating, but it was the only thing she could think to do. And kissing Johnnie was always—was always—

Christ, Sherlock thought. To crawl inside and keep her, if she could.

The panic eased back, after minutes. They were so close; she felt it seep away. Sherlock’s hands in the spikes of Johnnie’s hair, and Johnnie’s hands back under Sherlock’s blouse, one at her waistband drawing her close and one slipped up under the strap of her bra, and Johnnie was kissing her now, sloppy and urgent and more, god, more.

And Sherlock could feel how easy it would be. Because she didn’t want to stop. She wanted to kiss and kiss and have Johnnie make those noises into her mouth, and let Johnnie’s blunt fingers run all over her, let Johnnie flip her onto her back on the couch like she was trying to do, let Johnnie put her mouth all over Sherlock’s skin. She wanted to just let it happen, delicious as it would be. But she thought of Diana Dors and Ana Vilaseca, and wanted, even more, to happen to Johnnie, as much as Johnnie was happening to her.

‘Show me,’ she said, breaking away from Johnnie’s mouth, gasping. ‘Please, I—I show me and I will. I want to, I want—.’ She didn’t know another way to say it.

But it seemed as though Johnnie could feel it, anyway. She ran gentle touches down the curve of Sherlock’s spine, though Johnnie herself was still red-faced and she was biting her mouth.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘All right, it’s all right, Sherlock. It’s all right.’

And she nudged Sherlock’s shoulders so Sherlock stood back on her feet, and kissed her backwards, gentle, all the way up the stairs, her hand at the small of Sherlock’s back to guide her, as if Sherlock couldn’t feel behind her with her foot to keep from tripping on the stairs. Which was—absurd, and so
endearing that Sherlock hurt in her bones.

‘All right,’ Johnnie was still saying, as the backs of Sherlock’s knees hit the mattress. ‘It’s all right,’ as she gentled her back on her back, scooting her up the bed, stretching out over her, propped up on her hands with one of Sherlock’s legs between hers.

‘Show me,’ Sherlock said to her. Deep breaths. ‘Show me, I want to be in—inside you, show me how,’ and Johnnie bit down a moan and her eyes slid shut, her forehead falling forward onto Sherlock’s shoulder.

It was heady, Sherlock thought, doing that with just her voice.

So she swallowed, and levered herself up on one elbow to work at the buttons of Johnnie’s shirt. She said ‘Were you—were you thinking about it the whole time you were f—fucking me?’

Johnnie’s hips hitched forward against Sherlock’s leg and she breathed out ‘Yeah.’

‘You were—were thinking about me putting my fingers inside you, and—,’

‘Yeah,’ said Johnnie, ‘yes,’ and then bit her lip and tugged at Sherlock’s blouse until it came off over her head.

There was starting to be a mark on her collarbone from where Johnnie had sucked and bitten. Johnnie made a noise when she saw it, and kissed Sherlock hard, first on the bruise, and then on the mouth, before diving off the bed and onto the floor. There was a muddle of limbs and movement.

Sherlock sat up, confused. Then Johnnie was back on the bed with both her hands full of—. Of something Sherlock couldn’t make out.

She peered around to look, but Johnnie got her knees on either side of Sherlock’s hips, and wrapped her arms around her with her hands behind Sherlock’s back, and didn’t let her see. Johnnie’s face was flushed. Her hair stuck up all over her head. She was straddling Sherlock’s lap and refusing to meet her eyes.

But she brushed her licked-dry lips over Sherlock’s. Sherlock tried to lean forward into the kiss, but Johnnie moved back just slightly, just out of reach. She sat back again and Johnnie’s mouth returned, teasing her, touching feather-light at her cheekbone and the tip of her nose and the fullness of her lower lip. Sherlock closed her eyes and forgot about anything but warm and light and maddening and then she whimpered and felt Johnnie smile.

‘Yeah,’ Johnnie whispered. ‘Yeah, I thought about your,‘ she swallowed, kneeling up over Sherlock’s lap with her hands on her trouser zip, ‘I thought about your gorgeous hands in me, all right?’

Sherlock tried to scoot closer, to bend enough to get her mouth on the skin of Johnnie’s chest or her belly. But Johnnie smiled again, and moved off her lap and over to the side, to suckle at Sherlock’s neck as she tugged, clumsy, at the waistband of her capris. Sherlock angled her hips to help, leveraged up on her hands. She kicked capris and knickers to the floor. Johnnie knelt back and looked down at her pale thighs and her hips; sucked in a breath.

‘Oh,’ Johnnie said, staring. ‘Oh, god.’

Johnnie only closed her eyes for the second when her shirt came off over her head. She left her trousers on. She moved forward again, knees on either side of Sherlock’s hips where Sherlock was sitting back up. Sherlock let her own hands run greedy, one around Johnnie’s waist and the other
hard up the inseam of her trousers. Johnnie’s moan was shocked, and sudden.

‘You think they’re gorgeous?’ Sherlock asked, digging her fingers in. One hand full of Johnnie’s arse and the other of Johnnie’s inner thigh. Johnnie’s breath caught.

‘God, almost more than I can—,’ said Johnnie, but her voice bit off when Sherlock’s hands clenched again, without her even deciding they should.

Johnnie let her breath out, slow and shaky, with her head tipped back. Then she unfolded her legs and wrapped them around Sherlock’s hips. Sherlock tilted her chin up and let Johnnie kiss and kiss at her mouth.

She still held Johnnie’s waist in her hands. She felt—a little frightened. Impossibly fond.

Arms down around Sherlock’s waist, now, and Johnnie’s hands were fumbling with something at Sherlock’s back. Sherlock didn’t try to look. She felt Johnnie’s muscles tense again, but this time quivering, throbbing, not like earlier on the sofa but more like just before she—.

Johnnie was saying ‘That time at the. At the hotel, in Chelsea. You put up your hand to—to pull back the curtains and I couldn’t think.’

Sherlock couldn’t think now. It was difficult just breathing and sitting up at the same time.

‘You were telling me about,’ she said. ‘About moving the cabin, yes?’

‘Jesus,’ Johnnie said, and kissed her. Sherlock’s mouth felt raw and open, hungry. ‘Did I?’ said Johnnie. ‘Did my mouth keep—keep making words? I really couldn’t—god, Sherlock,’ and she ran a hand up Sherlock’s spine to the back of her neck, and let her down gentle onto her back on the pillows.

‘You were—you could oh,’ said Sherlock, squirming against Johnnie, biting at her lips. ‘Haley said you were strong enough to—to move the cabin around all night, but you shook a little, when you. Took my wrist, you had to—oh, oh,’ because Johnnie had sucked in a breath again, and made a noise rough in her throat, and pushed something cold and hard and wet just against Sherlock’s skin, between her legs.

Which was—unexpected. She felt her eyes go wide, surprised, the cool sensation slick against her. It was unexpected but it made her restless, too; she wanted to understand and at the same time to bear down, to rut and take. Johnnie was braced over her on one arm, looking down with something almost like pleading, almost like—almost like fear.

‘You had to—think. About the cabin,’ Sherlock stuttered. Johnnie’s eyes closed; her moan sounded like relief strung tight, so Sherlock—Sherlock kept talking. ‘You must have done it hundreds of nights but you—oh Christ,’ as Johnnie’s thumb moved against her, above the cool, hard surface, so sensitive, all the nerves in Sherlock’s body. ‘Christ, oh. Christ. You had to think about it.’

‘I couldn’t,’ Johnnie said, breathless, ‘I couldn’t think, I looked at your hands on the curtain and I wanted—I wanted you to just shove those fingers into me, bloody hard.’

‘Oh,’ said Sherlock, and her hips twitched up into the shaft that was just barely breaching her, gentle and foreign, mismatched to Johnnie’s rough and snarling voice. Johnnie’s whole body was taut, tensed along Sherlock’s side where she was stretched out, still in her trousers. She was trembling with restraint; a compressed spring. All but in her gentle, patient hands where she rubbed and rubbed and rubbed at Sherlock. Heartbreaking gentle pushes deeper into Sherlock’s body. Quivering, and so quiet, so still, and Sherlock wanted—she wanted motion like Johnnie’s voice, she wanted—
She moved her hips up, restless; and Johnnie growled even as her hand soothed Sherlock. Careful. Too careful, tracing the flesh where Sherlock was stretched, wide and hot and wanting.

‘The curtain was—,’ gasped Johnnie, stroking gentle with her thumb, ‘was that horrible dark turquoise colour, and your fingers were so pale against it, so—so fucking long, Sherlock, Jesus, I wanted you to—,’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock, restless on the sheets, ‘yes,’ and she shifted closer against Johnnie’s side, to feel the spring-coiled tension of her seeping through Sherlock’s skin. It meant Johnnie’s hand wasn’t reaching as far, and the thing between her legs nudged further inside, just a little, a very little, nowhere near enough, and she whined.

Johnnie heard it, and groaned, and said ‘God, oh god.’ She moved up over her, Sherlock’s right leg between Johnnie’s thighs and Johnnie’s right thigh nudging, gentle still, at the hard shaft nudging into Sherlock’s body. A little bit, and a little bit, and Sherlock felt greedy with it, and Johnnie said, ‘You made a fist in the curtains, and I. I wanted you to split me open, I wanted your joints and your fingertips and your knuckles just fucking me open, I—.’

‘Oh god, Johnnie, yes,’ she said. ‘I will, Christ.’

Panting into Johnnie’s mouth when Johnnie bent and tried to kiss her. Still gentle, gentle, the gentleness was driving her mad, and she got Johnnie’s bottom lip between her lips and tugged, hard. Johnnie snarled, but her thigh was still soft between Sherlock’s legs. Sherlock shifted, and keened, and then breathed deep to steady herself, and put her hands on either side of Johnnie’s hips.

‘I will,’ she said again, staring up into Johnnie’s eyes.

Sherlock thought it shouldn’t be possible, but when she said that Johnnie’s legs and shoulders tensed even further, and she broke contact with Sherlock’s eyes.

Sherlock breathed again, and again, and said ‘I’d never felt—never, Johnnie, I was holding to the curtains so I wouldn’t—so I wouldn’t make a noise when you touched me, I—oh, god, more, please, more,’ for Johnnie’s hips had twiched forward and her hand between their bodies had hardened for a moment, digging into Sherlock’s hungry swollen straining skin. All the nerves in her body felt concentrated under Johnnie’s rubbing thumb.

And the hard material was warmer, now, inside her. She twisted her head to the side; the pillows smelled of Johnnie’s hair oil and Johnnie’s scent and Johnnie’s skin.

She bucked her hips up, but Johnnie drew back slightly, her hand sealing the base of it against her own thigh so she pulled the thing out a bit instead of pushing it further in. Sherlock cried out at the feeling of movement against the inside skin of her.

She fell back, panting. Johnnie looked down at her and panted and said ‘I want you in me up to the wrist, I want you to—I want it so hard the windows rattle, I—fuck, fuck,’ and Sherlock wailed, and Johnnie pushed the thing so incongruously gently back inside Sherlock’s body, but she made a broken noise and her thumb hardened down on every nerve in Sherlock’s body and Sherlock felt herself contracting and expanding all at once, arching up under Johnnie’s hands and her wondering gaze.

And far away, above her, the tension coiled in Johnnie’s arms and her hips and her thighs was making her shake. Far away she was saying ‘Sherlock, oh, god, you’re beautiful, you’re beautiful,’ and Sherlock groaned, slamming her hips up into Johnnie’s thigh, and said, ‘Hard, let me—hard, hard,’ so Johnnie pushed, finally, hard into Sherlock’s body with her own thighs clenching hard
around Sherlock’s leg, and they shook and shook together.

Johnnie was gentle again, immediately after, pulling the black rubber thing from Sherlock’s body and soothing her when she sighed, one of Johnnie’s hands on her shoulder and the other on her hip.

Sherlock was floating. A little woozy. She put her hand up to Johnnie’s neck, just under her ear, and Johnnie’s heart was still going like mad, and Sherlock said ‘I will, you know. If you want me to,’ and Johnnie closed her eyes, and turned her head, and laid a gentle kiss on Sherlock’s palm, the expression on her face looking strangely unmoored.

Sherlock tried to turn over and kiss Johnnie back, to smooth over the rawness in her expression. But she was sleepy and sated, and when Johnnie shook her head, eyes still closed, and spooned up close behind her instead, it didn’t occur to Sherlock until the next day that it was because Johnnie didn’t want to meet her eyes.

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July 2, 1955
9:45am
Cab outside 221B Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

‘Tell me as soon as you find anything,’ Sherlock called, but Johnnie had already slammed the door of the cab, midway through pronouncing ‘239 King’s Road, Chelsea.’ Sherlock stood on the pavement, watching after it as it pulled into traffic, but Johnnie didn’t turn round.

She hadn’t wanted to meet Sherlock’s eyes, in fact, all morning. Sherlock thought about it, impatient, as she turned back into the flat for her coat and her notebook.

June, now, and under her window passed stubborn young girls shivering in their summer frocks, and clerks in their shirtsleeves walking off the chill, determined to bring on summer through the very force of their wills. But Sherlock still took her coat, and thought about Johnnie, not meeting her eyes.

She thought of Johnnie all the way along the familiar route down the Marylebone Road toward the British Library: of Johnnie panting, thrusting too gently inside her (as Sherlock passed Great Portland Street); of Johnnie (as Sherlock turned into the entranceway of the Library), turning away from her, looking gutted in a way strangely different from how she’d looked in Portloe; of Johnnie (as Sherlock looked up Guardian archives from 1944) going all the way through breakfast refusing to look at Sherlock, when normally it was Sherlock, always Sherlock who had to be reminded to chat and look over and smile.

She felt, somewhere in the pit of her stomach, that it was scandalous to be so distracted; that she ought to be furious with herself; and yet the concern remained theoretical. She paged through ten-year-old newsprint, and her gloves got smeared and soiled; and she saw almost nothing for thinking about the nape of Johnnie’s neck as she’d faced away from Sherlock on the bed; and she heard nothing except two-faced, two-faced, two-faced, repeating inside her head.

It was only by accident, really, that she caught it, tucked away in the periphery of a yellowed photograph.

Sherlock squinted at it for a span of seconds, then turned back to the first page of the article to read the headline. BEHIND ENEMY LINES!, it read, and in a sub-heading: First-Hand Reports: Looting and Godlessness in the Nazi Ranks! The photo, aged but clear, showed a city street captioned Marszalkowska, Warsaw, and a trio of young blond soldiers clustered around a tank. Two
stood on the ground, looking up, bulging satchels of goods slung over their shoulders. The third soldier stood up above, hands raised high in an effort to manoeuvre what looked like an antique broadsword down through the hatch.

It was, thought Sherlock, a brilliant piece of propaganda. Even in her own distraction it had arrested her attention: the exhilaration on the soldiers’ faces; the framing and dynamic pose of the uppermost man, holding fast to a symbol of obsolete warcraft; and the contrast between their golden opportunism, and the rubble and devastation surrounding them on all sides. Encapsulated in one frame was an eloquent condemnation of callousness, and of profiting via the misery of others, and its emotionalism triggered the viewer’s disgust without needing to provide much actual information.

Even Sherlock, involved as she had been in the interaction captured among the three men, had almost overlooked the woman.

She was undeniably Erins, though the photograph was aged and yellow. It was the posture that gave her away: the bullish stance and the short hair, seemingly grey even then, and the prominent bones of her forehead above her hollowed eyes. She stood with her arms crossed, feet braced apart, looking straight at the tank with her mouth twisted open, as if—

—as if giving orders, Sherlock realised. As if supervising.

_War profiteering_. A kind of supervisor of somebody’s wartime profits: that was the secret identity Erins had wanted to keep safe.

Sherlock’s stomach sank through her seat. She sank her head in her hands.

She hadn’t realised, until Johnnie’s reaction was the first thing in her thoughts, how much she had hoped to discover something different.

Chapter End Notes

1. The London Press Club was established in 1882, and HC Vickery really was the Chairman in 1939. I’m fudging on the chronology of the Press Club Awards, though; as far as I can tell, they didn’t start up until 1970.
2. I’d have loved to have read a whole book about the Night Witches (or Nachthexen, which sounds even more badass), but alas, I had neither time nor resources. Most of my information comes from the Wikipedia entry and from this site. They were a real regiment of night-flying Russian female pilots, and the tactics described in this chapter were their forte.
3. The Siege of Leningrad was the deadliest siege in history. There were over a million civilian casualties, most of them from starvation. The population of Leningrad was decimated. What I’m not sure about, is how accurate a lack of food would still have been by year after the lifting of the blockade. But with such severely compromised resources throughout the whole of the Soviet Union, especially given the reduced population and the ongoing war effort, it doesn’t seem like too much of a stretch. Particularly if Nadya is hardly ever home, and so wouldn’t know quirky or black-market tricks to securing rations.
It was because they’d thought, that night, they would most likely die.

Later they had a name for the new bombs; a disarmingly silly name and a set procedure, and Haley Murray’s gallows humour to see them through. That night the word ‘doodlebug’ would have seemed cute; not like the angry night creatures tearing the roofs off all around them.

A woman asked questions, caught in the dark with her lover away from her base, on the night when the sound of the bombs went frighteningly wrong. Johnnie Watson and Ana Vilaseca, sandwiched between hay bales in a farm outbuilding, keeping their voices to a whisper, asked each other questions. And it had seemed the war would never end, so Johnnie had whispered ‘How will it be, then? After the war?’

She hadn’t really thought about that, before; but now she’d expected—what? We’ll go to Lambeth, perhaps. We’ll open a bike shop. Or We can live in your auntie’s old pensione. Or we’ll have to save for a few years before we can afford America. But:

‘There’s a beautiful cabaña in Santa Sofia,’ Ana whispered. ‘Up in the mountains above Santiago. It is a little bit away from everyone. For years it has been standing empty.’

The cadence of Ana’s voice was always so lovely. Even in a whisper, Johnnie felt the Latin softness around the edges ease the corners of her mind. She imagined herself, as the sky fell around them: buying lumber and bolts in her broken Spanish, and driving them back up the mountain in a borrowed truck; fixing up a cabin in the sun in the thin mountain air.

‘My mother is dead, now,’ Ana said, ‘and my father will not live much longer. With my pension and what they leave me I can buy it, and a new motorbike. I can ride into the city to work, and no one will know who cooks my supper.’

A crash, hard by the barn where they sheltered. They both jumped. They both breathed.

‘Going to keep a maid, then?’ Johnnie asked, because the one time she’d made stew for them at the base it had all burnt horribly to the bottom of the pan.

‘Not at first,’ Ana said. ‘But my mother never minded, when she was young, doing the house and food on her own. It is a beautiful little house. At night the city shines out from the darkness down the mountain. But if you turn away, you can also see the stars. My girl will be glad.’

Johnnie was quiet. She watched, quiet, as two images broke apart inside her: Johnnie Watson, after the war; and Ana Vilaseca’s girl. She observed them diverge with a kind of removed surprise, rather than with pain. She felt she would most likely die tonight. There was an eerie silence, outside.

Johnnie cleared her throat and breathed into the darkness.

‘You will go back to London?’ Ana said. ‘You will fix cars?’

Johnnie saw in her mind’s eye, clear in the darkness, Ana’s Chilean sweetheart, waiting in their
cabaña on the green cliffside, long black hair tied up behind her head. Ana wouldn’t be able to come home for siesta, living so far outside the city, so the girl would know to expect her early, as early as half six.

‘My dad was a veterinarian,’ Johnnie whispered, licking her lips. ‘Animal doctor.’

The girl would bake bread. She would give Ana careful orders about what to buy, in the valley. She would stand at her window and look out at the city below, and at twenty past six she might untie her apron, and hang it on a peg, and wander outside to watch the road for Ana’s motorbike, flashing up the twisting mountain road.

‘You have no training at animal doctoring,’ Ana whispered. ‘You will drive an ambulance, perhaps? As you did in France?’

Johnnie blinked into the night. She saw the girl’s wide smile as she spotted Ana’s bike; and her house-proud welcome, and her stern reprimands about how Ana should wipe her shoes and sit right down to supper before it got cold. She saw Ana laughing with her sweetheart over fish stew and bread, and the special red-pepper cheese Ana had told Johnnie about. She saw the girl’s bashful look after she’d cleared the table, and how Ana would smile and whisper in her ear.

‘No,’ Johnnie said. ‘Nah, I won’t. Won’t want to work the nights away, once all this is over with. No ambulance driving for me.’

The girl would flush all down her chestnut neck, as Ana whispered. Johnnie knew the way Ana would smile into the girl’s hair. She wondered, in the ominous dark wartime quiet, if Ana had longed for that long hair when she’d smiled against Johnnie’s neck, or for that toasted chestnut skin when she’d stripped off Johnnie’s ATS-issue kit. Johnnie saw in her mind’s eye the lovely nut-brown girl, sweeping Ana’s floors; taking her needle to Ana’s shirts; spread out on Ana’s ticking mattress with Ana licking into her as she’d licked into Johnnie, as she’d thrust into Johnnie for the first time. Johnnie felt shorn, and pale, staring into the blackness of the barn and seeing the full hips and the silky black hair of Ana’s beautiful wife. She realised, dimly, that an English butch with eccentric preferences in bed would be a good enough substitute for exactly as long as the war lasted.

‘No,’ Johnnie said again. ‘Best I stick to doctoring cars, and bikes. Get a flat in Chelsea; that’s where most of the girls like us live. I know a—the owner of a garage.’

‘Yes,’ said Ana. ‘You will meet a pretty blonde English girl, after the war.’

Johnnie drifted further away in her mind. She thought of living in a flat, in Chelsea, with an English rose who made spotted dick and cried listening to royal funerals on the BBC. Another weird, buzzing bomb screamed overhead. They were probably going to die.

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June 2, 1955
11:20am
The Gateways Club
239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

The cab pulled away from the pavement at Baker Street, and Johnnie slumped in the seat, half in relief, and half in defeat. She could swear she felt Sherlock’s eyes on the back of her head as the cab trundled off, though she did not look round.
Her breath shivered in her lungs. She couldn’t smooth it out. All night, and all morning, she’d felt she was on some uncontrollable descent down a steep incline. She was gathering speed all the time, and hadn’t any brakes besides turning away, getting away, putting distance between her body and Sherlock’s body, and Sherlock asking her for things that she—.

Between herself, and Sherlock asking her for things.

She went to roll down the window, but it stuck. There was an odd satisfaction in bullying the hand-crank down past the resistance, and then even more in feeling the cool air rushing past her face.

It wasn’t that she regretted the night before, not exactly. It was only that Sherlock’s stridency, her insistence, had chafed away all Johnnie’s protection. And what did that mean? she wondered. Sherlock wasn’t exactly—well, she wasn’t exactly like anyone Johnnie had known before. She was ever spinning around some central point that Johnnie could recognise when she saw it, but never quite describe. And Sherlock said she—she said she wanted to, and God knew Johnnie wanted to believe her.

The cab skirted Picadilly. Johnnie looked out across the Park, her forehead to the cool metal of the window-frame, and breathed in the rushing air.

Sherlock lived in the motion of becoming one thing, and then becoming another. Johnnie had told herself that every day for months. But Johnnie had always been well-settled in her skin, on the battlefield and on the dance floor of the Gates, and it wasn’t—disposable. If there was a time when she’d been shown up as a stand-in for another butch’s wife, and another when she’d been ridiculed for failing her girl, she wasn’t signing up to repeat the experiences, however much she lusted after Sherlock’s lovely hands.

Especially not if.

In the Brompton Road, she closed her eyes. They’d slowed in traffic. On her face, now, there was hardly a breeze.

Especially not if Sherlock would be disappointed in her, after. If she didn’t know what she was getting into. (And how could she?) Not if it was up to Johnnie to protect her.

Johnnie sighed, as the cab pulled up in front of the Gateways’s familiar green door. She wasn’t sure, getting out and paying the driver, whether walking down the long staircase in her current mood would reassure her, or disconcert her even more.

Either way, she squared her shoulders.

Thursdays weren’t officially open nights at the Gates, but there were sometimes private parties. Gina had phoned that morning to say the band had been engaged to play that night. It meant that both Leslie Matthews, who had fought with Cohen that first night with Sherlock, and her girl Bess, the bassist in the band, would be present setting up for the show.

And there they were, as soon as Johnnie rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs. Neither the Wares nor Smithy were around, so Johnnie just walked up and shook hands with Leslie. Leslie was happy enough to see her even if she was surprised.

‘Johnnie Watson,’ she said, raising unkempt eyebrows. Leslie had a pale-skinned complexion that turned splotchy at the slightest bit of physical exertion. Toting Bess’s bass and bits of the drummer’s kit down the stairs, meant that her face and neck clashed brazenly with her orange suit. Horrible clothes, thought Johnnie, with a shudder. And they had to be bad, she reflected, if even she noticed.
Leslie,’ Johnnie said, nodding. ‘I’m here asking after that butch found murdered, last Saturday.’

Leslie gave a low whistle, mopping her brow. A curvy, oak-skinned woman in a sky-blue skirt suit and matching hat, came up behind her and put a hand on Leslie’s shoulder. Leslie started, then turned her head and quickly smiled.

‘Johnnie,’ she said again, ‘do you know my Bess? Bess, this is—,’ but Bess had already put out her hand.

‘I’d have to be quite unobservant not to know Johnnie Watson,’ she said, raising her eyebrows. ‘Pleased to meet you personally, at last.’

Johnnie hadn’t realised, before this past week, quite the extent of her own reputation at the Gates. She shook Bess’s hand and smiled, sheepish, into the femme’s deep, twinkling eyes. She could feel Bess’s finger-picking callouses against her palm as she pulled back her hand.

‘So,’ Bess said, her smile fading. ‘You’re here about that Sylvia Cohen.’

‘I am,’ said Johnnie. She turned to Leslie. ‘My—,’ she drew up short; cleared her throat. Her what? How to describe the shifting miasma that was Sherlock? ‘I happened to be here the night of the ninth,’ she said, instead. ‘I saw you fighting with her.’

‘She was hardly the first one,’ Bess said, stepping closer to Leslie with a scowl. Johnnie smiled.

‘No,’ she said. ‘She certainly wasn’t. I know Cohen picked fights with almost everyone in here. I’m surprised she never picked one with me, to be honest. And I’m, er, I really don’t think Leslie was responsible for Cohen’s death. I’m just trying to get a sense of why, and how, Cohen got into it with people.’

Bess still looked skeptical, but Leslie was nodding. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘it was about like you’d expect.’

She didn’t say any more, so Johnnie said: ‘Try me.’ Leslie sighed.

‘Bess and the group were on their set break that night, and this Cohen tried to make a pass at her. The bad part is, she had to walk right past me to do it, and I was headed straight back to Bess’s seat with two drinks in my hands.’

Bess nodded. ‘And we’ve been together for ages. Everyone knows I’m Leslie’s girl.’

‘Yes,’ said Johnnie, who did in fact know this, as well. ‘So all signs were that she knew Bess was your girl, and she moved in anyway. And so you fought.’

‘Well,’ said Leslie, shrugging. ‘Yeah.’

‘Do you think,’ said Johnnie, pulling on her hair a bit, ‘that Cohen could have been picking a fight on purpose? I mean to say, she punched Cass Thorssen in the stomach without so much as a by-your-leave.

‘She what?’ said Bess, her eyes going wide.

‘Yeah,’ said Johnnie. ‘Didn’t even say hello first, and Cass with her bad health and all. And Chester, too,’ she said, gesturing toward the piano. ‘She walked up to him, started calling him names, provoking him about being a Negro: he’d never seen the woman before in his life.’

‘Er,’ said Bess, at the same time Leslie blurted out ‘Course he had.’
‘Pardon?’ said Johnnie, completely derailed.

Leslie and Bess looked at each other; for a minute they didn’t speak. Then they seemed to reach some kind of unspoken agreement; Bess nodded, and Leslie rubbed a hand over her mouth.

‘I know the fight you mean,’ Bess said, slowly, still looking at Leslie rather than at Johnnie, ‘and Chester had known that Cohen at least a couple of months before it happened. We, er.’ She looked away from Leslie at last, meeting Johnnie’s eyes. ‘We saw them, together.’

‘Really?’ Johnnie said, all amazement. ‘Where? When? Did they talk together here?’

Bess and Leslie both shifted their feet, looking around.

‘No,’ Leslie said, at last, ‘they were always careful not to, when they were here. We noticed that, of course, once we’d seen them so cosy together at the—,’ and she broke off, her neck going all splotchy again over her green collar.

Johnnie looked, puzzled, from Leslie to Bess, and back. ‘At the where?’ she said, when neither of them spoke up.

Bess sighed. ‘This is all confidential, right?’ she said. ‘And it’s, you know. Important. For catching the killer.’

‘Well, right,’ said Johnnie. ‘I mean to say, I’ll have to tell my—Sherlock about it, but it sounds bloody fishy to me.’

Bess nodded, and sighed again. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘The truth is, there’s this bisexual girl we know.’ She paused, and looked significantly at Johnnie, and Johnnie raised her eyebrows.

‘Party house?’ she said.

Bess nodded, not quite meeting Johnnie’s eyes. ‘Yeah, she’s got—she lives above her shop, yeah, and the parties happen after closing. So it’s—sort of a meeting place, if you know what I mean.’

‘Yeah,’ Johnnie said, hand on her mouth to cover up her smirk. ‘I think I do. Though I have to say, Leslie, I never figured you for the type to swing a cat. Or tie anyone up come to that.’

Leslie’s face coloured up so fast that it skipped splotchy and went straight to solid red.

‘As a matter of fact,’ she said, and coughed, and Bess said ‘You don’t have to—,’ but Leslie put a hand on her arm and she stilled.

‘As a matter of fact,’ she said again, voice quavering but meeting Johnnie’s eyes, ‘Bess is the one. Who, er. Who does the tying. So.’

Johnnie was frozen to the spot. Bess stepped in front of Leslie, and nothing about her was quavering at all. Her eyes flashed and her stance said Johnnie should think about next words. A small, detached part of Johnnie’s brain found it funny, Bess thinking Johnnie inclined, in that moment, to do anything besides thank her, and thank her, and thank her.

‘Is she,’ she heard herself say. ‘And that’s—well. No, I mean to say, that’s lovely, I—I’m glad you said.’

The words felt dull, and lame, in the face of the wonder rising in her. Bess and Leslie were one of the longest-lasting couples at the Gates. Leslie fought other butches for Bess, and bought her drinks,
and toted her stand-up bass down the steep Gateways stairs, and then Bess—.

‘I’m glad you said,’ Johnnie repeated. She nodded, quick and sure, looking Leslie in the eyes.

Leslie was taking deep breaths, smiling a little. Bess was relaxing back into a position at her side, reversing her puffed-up mother-hen routine and looking conciliatory.

‘Well,’ Leslie said, her voice mostly back to normal. ‘This girl’s business is just a normal tea-shop. Middle-class, respectable place, so you can see why we all might try to keep a low profile if we get there early for the parties after hours. There’s a separate entrance, even, through the back. Bess and I wear hats, and different, er.’ She blushed a little, again, but soldiered on with a little cough.

‘Different clothes. And we come in through the back way, and keep to one of the booths kind of back a bit, in the shadows, until Linda closes up for the night. Which is why they didn’t recognise us.’

Johnnie had almost forgotten the original point of this recital. Leslie stopped, expectantly, and it took her a moment to muster a response.

‘Er,’ she said. ‘Chester, you mean?’

‘Chester and Cohen both,’ Bess cut in. ‘We noticed them, of course, since I play in the group with Chester, but I never expected to see him at Linda’s place, of all the shops in London.’

‘Wait,’ Johnnie said. ‘Do you mean to say that Chester Davis and Sylvia Cohen were—were involved? They were waiting for the party?’

‘Oh Christ no!’ said Bess, covering her mouth and giggling in a horrified way. ‘Oh my god. Why would you even suggest a thing like that?’

‘I thought it’s what you meant!’ Johnnie protested, starting to chuckle herself.

‘He’s about eighty years old,’ Bess gasped, on the edge of hysteria, putting out her hand to steady herself against Leslie. ‘And I work for him! Oh god, I’ll be imagining it all through our set tonight, I won’t be able to stop myself.’

‘Let’s just forget this whole part of the conversation happened,’ agreed Leslie, straight-faced. ‘Cohen wasn’t exactly a peach, either.’

Bess shrieked, and doubled over, one hand coming up to keep her hat from falling on the floor. ‘Oh!’ she said. ‘Oh lord, Lee! Imagine Chester on the St. Andrew’s Cross!’

‘You lack all human decency,’ Leslie said, deadpan.

‘All right,’ said Johnnie, laughing, her hand in the air. Secretly grateful for the moment of levity.

‘Okay, so the last two minutes never happened, right? And you’re telling me about spotting Chester and Cohen, talking together in Linda’s tea shop.’

Bess nodded, eyes still wide, and gasped herself back into silence. She took a deep breath, and nodded.

‘They were in a booth in the middle of the main wall,’ she said, ‘sitting across from each other. A couple of different times, mind you, so I assumed it was their regular spot. The first time we saw them was maybe, what would you say, Lee? Six months ago?’

Leslie nodded.
'And they definitely knew each other,' Bess went on. 'I mean. We couldn’t hear what they were talking about, and we didn’t want to be noticed, so we didn’t get any closer. But they were leaning toward each other, and both talking very—very intensely, you know?'

'They kept at it for a good twenty minutes one time about a month ago,' Leslie put in. 'They seemed surprised, when Linda came over to tell them the shop was about to close.'

Johnnie nodded, thinking, her hand in her hair again.

If this was true, it meant that Chester had been meeting Sylvia Cohen in secret. That he’d been doing it for months, at least, prior to her murder, despite having told Sherlock and Johnnie that he’d never exchanged a word with her before she picked the fight with him in the corridor of the Gateways a few weeks before. But if they hadn’t gone up to the after-hours party, then why lie? There was nothing wrong, was there, in meeting for a cup of tea in a public place, even if the companionship of a middle-aged white martinet with an elderly black pianoplayer was, admittedly, unexpected.

For some reason, thought Johnnie, Chester Davis didn’t want a private investigator to know that he knew Sylvia Cohen.

An obvious explanation suggested itself. But Johnnie saw Mary Sophia Allen in her mind’s eye, and shied away from drawing conclusions. There were other reasons, surely, that a person would want to hide a connection. Perhaps they really were involved, and—well, there was the age difference, for one thing. And the difference in skin colour, though both the Gates and Linda’s place seemed friendly to Bess and Leslie.

Johnnie looked from one to the other.

'I know you said they didn’t,’ she said, slowly, ‘but there’s no way you could have missed it if Cohen and Chester really had been at Linda’s parties, is there? I mean. How large is the space?'

But Leslie was already snorting.

'There’s no way at all,’ she said. 'A couple of those times, Bess was even giving a demonstration. If Chester had been watching, we certainly would have seen; and if anyone hadn’t been watching, we would have noticed that, too.’

Johnnie felt her eyebrows go up, despite her best intentions. ‘You were giving a demonstration?’ she repeated.

Bess shrugged. ‘I’m good with fibre,’ she said, dismissively. ‘Silks, woolens. Ropes. Wires. I trained as a milliner, you know.’

‘I—,’ Johnnie said, and licked her lips. ‘I didn’t know that, no.’

‘She’s an excellent knitter,’ Leslie chipped in.

Bess made a face. ‘Lee always wants to wear the most awful colours,’ she said. ‘Makes me look bad.’ She punched Leslie on the orange-clad arm. Leslie smiled down at her, proud and fond, and Johnnie looked between them, smiling.

'No,’ she said, so quiet she wasn’t sure if they could hear. ‘I really don’t think she does.’

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November 14, 1944
‘But you don’t need to enroll me anywhere else,’ Sherlock was saying, for what felt like the hundredth time. ‘I’m perfectly capable of continuing my studies on my own.’

‘As ever,’ said Mycroft, in his shiny new Oxford drawl, ‘you overlook the point of the discussion.’

Sherlock curled her hands into fists in her lap on the brocade Queen Anne sofa in the high-ceilinged drawing room. She knew he’d only wanted to talk to her in here in order to make her feel small, and she fought it like a wild beast. She felt small anyway, but at least she was fighting.

‘If you’re so awfully concerned about my education, Mycroft,’ she said, ‘if you really think I’m not to be trusted, hire me some tutors. You are, for lack of a better word, the patriarch, now. I’ve no doubt you could afford it.’

Mycroft leaned back in his desk chair, slow smile curling his lips. Patriarch perhaps, but the baby fat still showed at his cheeks and his chin, and the moustache he’d tried to grow last Christmas had come in wispy. Newly come down from Oxford, and his educated worldliness stretched over his face like an expensive new skin. He lifted his chin. That smirk, thought Sherlock, cost a thousand pounds.

‘You mistake me,’ he said. ‘My concern is not for your mastery of mathematics and German.’

Sherlock let out a frustrated breath. She slumped back against the hard sofa back, and brought up one leg in front of her chest for protection. No sooner was it done than Mycroft barked ‘Sherlock Holmes, put your foot down.’

She rolled her eyes, and kept her leg where it was. Mycroft’s glare made her skin tingle, all along her knee and the outward-facing edge of her calf.

‘This is precisely why I’m concerned,’ Mycroft said, gesturing to her pose. ‘None of the young ladies I met with in Oxford would have made such a mistake, and some of them were only a few years older than you.’

‘They sound fascinating minds, these young ladies you met at Oxford.’ Sherlock said, half to herself.

‘Some of them,’ snapped Mycroft He tightened his mouth into a hard line. ‘Regardless of what you might think, Sherlock, there is no direct correlation between intellectual integrity and a disregard for social mores. You’re shaping up to be unfit for polite society, at the rate you’re going, and I won’t have that on my conscience.’

Sherlock’s foot came down, at that: both of them, hard, on the floor. She sat forward, breath like yelling in her throat.

‘And what do you expect I’ll be doing in polite society, Mycroft? Coming out? Being presented to the Queen? Dancing a cotillion at a—,’

‘You could do,’ Mycroft said. ‘You do realise, most young women would lie, cheat, and steal for your connexions.’

‘Would you? Would you live like that?’ Sherlock spat, and Mycroft narrowed his eyes and said ‘I do,’ and Sherlock scoffed.
'I did and do,' he said again. ‘I fulfilled the actions and expectations marking the transition from adolescence to adulthood, as dictated by my class and my sex. Just as you must do.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, ‘only those transitions, as dictated by your class and sex, dictate the hardship of three years of Classics and Law at the most prestigious university in the world, followed by a voyage through Greece and Italy with a few of your best mates. You would never—you would never, Mycroft.’

Tears started in her eyes, which was horrifying.

‘Oh don’t feel so put-upon,’ he said, rising behind the desk, looking disgusted with her. She blinked, disgusted with herself, though differently. ‘You could be a pauper selling hyacinths in Picadilly,’ he went on, strolling to the window. ‘You could be an East End whore in a garret. I’d say you could be a chambermaid, but frankly I doubt the establishment that would hire you, with those manners.’

‘You would never make asinine conversation over a punch bowl,’ said Sherlock, humiliated, starting to cry. ‘You would never—never give up your office, and your g—government contacts, to go flouncing about after a middle-aged barrister husband, for god’s sake.’

‘Where do you think my government contacts come from, Sherlock?’ he asked, laughing without humour. ‘Thin air? Of course I endure uncomfortable social events, in order to maintain them.’

‘It’s different!’ she shouted, standing too, but still feeling the disadvantage of his height, and his composure. ‘You know it is! For you it’s—it’s something you have to do, in order to finesse all the rest of it. There’s a reward, for you. But for me it’s—that deadly dull nonsense is supposed be all there is. It’s supposed to satisfy me.’

Mycroft sniffed, looking down at the gardens, between the mullions of the floor-to-ceiling window. ‘It doesn’t much matter whether it satisfies you or not,’ he said. ‘Or whether it satisfies me. We have a duty to this family, a duty to our country.’

Sherlock laughed. Something hardened in her. ‘A duty to my country,’ she said. ‘To sit up in my seat, and husband-hunt.’

‘The empire is built of all its subjects together,’ he said, waving a hand. ‘Use him as he uses thee, as the poet says. You’re a gifted dissembler, if prone to dramatics. Find a limp-wristed first son with an extra wing to his house, and a willingness to order in a thousand pounds of beakers and a bohemian serving girl. For heaven’s sake, it’s nothing that hasn’t been done before.’

It felt like a slap, but she nodded. For a moment he looked pleased. She crossed the room, and shook his hand, and looked in his eyes.

‘I’d rather be a whore selling hyacinths in Picadilly,’ she said, and she turned her back and closed the door behind her.

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June 2, 1955
7:33pm
Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

Use him as he uses thee, Sherlock thought, trailing down the pavement back toward 221B.
Overlapping images filled the space behind her eyes, all of the same woman. Erins, laughing with Mary Allen in the Gateways bar. Erins, accepting with poor grace a journalism prize. Cohen, taking a swing at Chester Davis in the back corridor of the Gates. Cohen, dead on the floor of the washroom.

And some other nameless woman, an indeterminate shade between Erins and Cohen, standing by a tank in a grainy photograph, a bureaucrat of war profiteering.

Perhaps it was a side effect, she thought, in one of her more egregious flights of fancy, of going to bed with Johnnie Watson: the ability to see events through Johnnie’s eyes. She thought the callousness of Erins would not have touched her, if it weren’t for Johnnie; would not have made her drag her feet, and turn an unnecessary corner off Chiltern Street, and put off for another few minutes the moment when she would push the flat door open and explain to Johnnie what she’d found.

How Cohen’s two-faced-ness had shown itself for what it was, in the end. How Johnnie had been right.

For Sherlock, back in the archives, had caught glimpses of Cohen—Erins—again. And again. And again, once she knew which kinds of stories to search out. It was always in reports of sacking and looting, of the German attachments following on the heels of the shouting, invading regiments who ran riot over city streets. Erins stood quietly on the edges of image after image: unassuming, stalwart, diverting the best of the plunder to parts unknown.

Erins was never named; never mentioned; and sometimes Sherlock wondered at her own growing ability to spot the woman’s tell-tale ramrod spine, or the corner of a shoulder held just so. Erins seemed not to avoid the camera, but simply to blend into the background of image after image. Chameleon-like. Her business, it seemed, was dull, and constant, and so banal that she caught nobody’s eye: transforming the impulsive smash-and-grab into someone’s empire. Yet she had returned to England with a different name, and a cut-up face.

Sherlock had cut herself loose at sixteen, and never much thought of herself an idealist. But neither had she thought of her disguises as—she scuffed at the pavement with her toe. Use him as he uses thee, Mycroft had said. Perhaps that’s what Ellen Erins had done. Profiting from the hatred of a friend, and profiting from the desolation wrought by hatred, and profiting by the combination of a clean slate and old connections: it was all, thought Sherlock, turning into Baker Street at last: it was all profit.

And had Sherlock, turning up her lip at Mrs. Patrick down the shops, been doing the same? And, in any case, would Johnnie Watson say she had? She found she couldn’t hate herself for caring about the answer.

It was just her luck that Johnnie was already ensconced in her armchair when Sherlock came through the door, still shuffling. Her joints felt sore. She took her coat off like it hurt to do, as Johnnie turned around to look at her and Sherlock looked away.

‘It’s getting pretty warm for that,’ Johnnie said, her voice so gentle that Sherlock looked up, surprised.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘It, er. It comes in useful. At times.’

She didn’t quite know what to do with her hands. Johnnie was looking at her oddly.

‘You’re afraid to tell me something,’ Johnnie said.
Sherlock breathed in, nodded.

‘What is it?’ asked Johnnie, levering herself up. It seemed to Sherlock, even through her anxious haze, that Johnnie, too, moved gingerly.

‘Erins was a war profiteer,’ Sherlock said in a rush. ‘You were right, she was—certainly not admirable, if you want to break down the world into, into admirable and not admirable, she definitely wasn’t, she was, er. Diverting the spoils of German occupation into, er. Somebody’s hands.’

Johnnie took her by the elbows, so gently that Sherlock flinched. She bit her lip and looked over Johnnie’s shoulder. There was a spider building a web in the crook of the doorjamb, and a trail of mouse-droppings near the door, and Sherlock had thought she had cleaned the ceiling of the last stains from that experiment with corrosives, but apparently—and Johnnie put up a gentle hand, and turned Sherlock’s head.

Her eyes were so, so blue.

Blue, and strangely bright.

‘Cohen knew Chester Davis, too,’ Johnnie said, very quietly, very gently. ‘Leslie Matthews and her—and her femme, saw them talking regularly together in a café owned by a friend. But I—,’ she cleared her throat. ‘I don’t. Chester is performing tonight and we obviously can’t talk with Cohen, and I.’

Her hands on Sherlock’s shoulders were trembling. Sherlock could feel it through the knit cotton of her shirt. She stepped closer, catching her shoe on a divot in the floorboard. Feeling that all her angles were so unnecessary. But Johnnie made a tiny noise at her motion, and folded Sherlock into her arms like something precious, and broken. Sherlock bent her spine, so that Johnnie was breathing into her hair.

‘I don’t want to talk about Cohen and Chester Davis,’ Johnnie said.

‘All right,’ said Sherlock.

‘I want to take you to bed,’ said Johnnie, ‘and just—not do anything, just—be close to you, is that. Is that all right?’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, her throat tight. Tears starting in her eyes. ‘Mine’s closer,’ she said, and Johnnie nodded against her neck, and for a moment they just stood there, swaying into each others’ warmth.

Sherlock’s back was starting to hurt, but she didn’t want to move. Finally she shifted some tiny amount, and Johnnie moved around her to the side, until suddenly Johnnie was tucked neatly under Sherlock’s arm, her arm around Sherlock’s waist, and their swaying was motion, and they were walking together toward Sherlock’s bedroom.

She’d stayed up all night once, trying to match the buoyancy of a fluid sample. She had run test after test, floating lighter liquids across the stretched-taut surfaces of heavier ones, angling them light and careful so they skimmed across the top of water. Sherlock felt like that now, like she was floating together with Johnnie in a delicate suspension. Any sudden movement and she would break through the soft liquid cushion, be drowned.

They swayed into her room. They undressed silently, slow and close together, to only the light of the streetlamp across the way.
And they slid together, silent, into Sherlock’s bed. Skin on skin on cotton sheets; it felt fragile. Sherlock breathed, and Johnnie twined their bare legs together. She held Sherlock warm, and safe, and was close to her. Sherlock burrowed against her skin.

In the end, of course, it wasn’t only closeness. Not quite.

Nor was it quite not doing anything, because Johnnie’s hip was warm and solid between Sherlock’s legs, and her fingertips in the dark stroked obsessively from the beauty mark on Sherlock’s neck to the rough spot just behind her ear, like the path between them was some connection secret and vital to preserve. And Sherlock tried, she tried to float poised on the surface of things, to keep her breathing even as her skin got hot, as her nerves sharpened under the slow, warm drag of Johnnie’s skin.

She tried to keep herself steady, and hold—and hold—and hold herself still, as long as she could, but in the end she had to push just a tiny bit with her hip into Johnnie’s skin, her lips parted so her breathing could be quiet. Johnnie felt it and made a tiny sound like ‘oh,’ deep in her chest, and shifted against Sherlock, who pushed up again—and again, as little as she could, breathing quiet through her mouth. She tried to stay still, suspended on the surface of things, but all in a rush it felt as if her whole skin gathered into a sharp, hot point, and her throat drew taut in the silence and she said ‘Johnnie,’ as the gathered edge of her pierced the surface of stretched-hot liquid and she tumbled down, and down, and down.

It wasn’t that the spell was broken, after that. But the silence felt more flexible, more familiar. Like a warm and muddy pool, thought Sherlock, muzzily. Or a leather strap with a crease. Johnnie collapsed against her, breathing hard.

‘I have,’ said Johnnie, clearing her throat into Sherlock’s neck, ‘I have. Things you should probably know. About. About the War, and Ana, and. And things.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said. ‘I was thinking earlier about—about family—things, that you should maybe —.’ She rubbed her eyes. ‘You first.’

And they opened their mouths to each other in the quiet of Baker Street, and started to speak.
By the time they stepped forward at last to ring Chester Davis’s doorbell, it was almost two in the afternoon.

It had taken all of an unexpectedly aggravating morning, bleeding into an equally exasperating afternoon, to track down Chester’s place of residence. Gina had mentioned that the group generally arrived at ten sharp to collect their week’s pay. But this morning, despite Sherlock donning her best bohemian chic—peasant blouse and wrap skirt and chivvying Johnnie out of Baker Street by 9:15, they’d ended up whiling away hours to no avail. Ted Ware had fed them coffee and leftover biscuits, looking progressively more apologetic the longer they sat at the bar.

At half eleven Gina had come downstairs in a fury, which was not alleviated when Sherlock had pronounced the name of Chester Davis. On the contrary. Her eyebrows had drawn together, and her manicured talons had dug into the fabric of her black dress where it stretched over her hips, and she had treated them all to a lengthy diatribe about certain pianoplayers abandoning their paying engagements without a word of warning to certain hard-working club owners. She’d gone on for several minutes before Sherlock had been able to slow her down enough to start asking questions, such as ‘Davis hasn’t been coming in?’ and ‘When did this begin?’

Gina had glared, but Sherlock made her face a mask, and stared back.

‘It has been nearly a week,’ Gina said at last, waving a hand. ‘We have not seen him since Saturday. As if we hadn’t enough to worry about, with Smithy out on bail and the whole club thrown into confusion. He was not here on Sunday, or on Wednesday. We had a special engagement yesterday, and he was not even here for that.’

‘But—,’ said Johnnie, thinking back, though yesterday seemed improbably long ago. ‘But Bess and Leslie were here, and they didn’t—,’

‘Yes!’ said Gina, eyes flashing. ‘And it was lucky Bess Taylor was here. She saved the whole evening. Pat took over for her on bass, and Bess sang along with her own piano. Not as good as Chester, mind you, but good enough. If she hadn’t stepped in, the Lanleys might have wanted their money back.’

‘So Davis,’ said Sherlock, ‘Davis hasn’t been back to work since…the murder, then?’

Gina took a step back, looking stricken.

‘I,’ she said, and stared, mouth working like a fish’s. ‘No, that’s precisely when he—why didn’t I think—?’

‘You’ve a lot on your plate,’ said Johnnie, stretching out a hand to pat Gina’s elbow, but Gina shook it off. She looked disgusted with herself.
‘I should have realised,’ Gina said. ‘He was never so much as late to work, before. Never a day ill.’ She looked up, from Sherlock to Johnnie and back to Sherlock. ‘You came looking for him,’ she said. ‘Already, even before you knew he was missing.’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock. Gina put a hand to her mouth, though Sherlock noted she was careful, even in her shock, not to smudge her cherry lipstick.

‘I ought to have told you,’ Gina breathed. ‘What if he has escaped? What if he killed Sylvia Cohen, and framed our Smithy, and now he has escaped because I was too stupid to—,’

‘I don’t believe Davis killed Cohen,’ Sherlock interrupted her.

Johnnie gaped at her.

‘You what,’ she said. Not even a question.

‘I don’t believe Davis killed Cohen,’ Sherlock said, her tone making it apparent that she begrudged the repetition. ‘But we do need to talk with him. Where is he?’

Gina stared, and Johnnie stared, and nobody said anything.

‘I—am not sure,’ Gina said at last, curling her fingers down so she wasn’t speaking around them. And then, a little defensively in response to Sherlock’s incredulous look, ‘He comes here to collect his pay. I never knew his home address.’

The next two hours were spent in following up infuriatingly paltry leads in order to track down the residence of a single missing pianoplayer. Johnnie kept asking whether they weren’t on the wrong track, bothering to look for Davis’s home at all; and Sherlock kept having to reassure her, even while knocking up the members of Davis’s group, that she didn’t believe he would have run.

‘Simplest by far to check first at his known residence,’ she said, for what felt the hundredth time, just before Leslie Matthews opened Bess Taylor’s door with a surprised look on her face. Soon after that, at last, Bess was writing out a Stepney address on a scrap of newsprint, and Johnnie was thanking her, more profusely than Sherlock could really account for.

Bess gave her a weird, overly understanding smile as she showed Sherlock and Johnnie out. Sherlock looked to Johnnie for an explanation, but Johnnie’s gaze was fixed resolutely in the opposite direction, a puzzling little skip in her step.

Thus it was that the sun was already starting its decline, when Sherlock put out her hand and knocked three times on Chester Davis’s weathered door.

There was no answer. Johnnie cleared her throat.

An aeroplane flew past, far overhead, and Sherlock let her mind flit to Smithy and Nadya, that winter in Leningrad. Johnnie cleared her throat again. Sherlock stepped forward, hand raised to knock again, just as the door opened a crack with the sound of a sliding chain behind it, and a slitted, red-rimmed eye looked out at them.

‘You’re that detective,’ Davis said. ‘I’m not home, I told you everything I know.’

‘Just a few questions, Mr. Davis,’ Sherlock said, sticking her foot into the cracked door as she had done to Mary Sophia Allen. Davis huffed, and swung the door slightly further open, then slammed it back again hard on Sherlock’s toe. Her eyes watered. She didn’t remove her foot.
‘Mr. Davis,’ Johnnie said, ‘Gina Ware sent us to ask you some questions about—,’

‘I told you, I got nothing more to say,’ Davis said. He swung the door into Sherlock’s toes again, and she couldn’t repress a grunt of pain.

‘Mr. Davis,’ Sherlock said, pushing forward so her whole calf was wedged into the open door, ‘we know that you knew Sylvia Cohen. We know that you—ouch—that you lied to us about not having spoken to her before your altercation, and we know that—bloody hell!—we know that you didn’t kill her, so would you please open the door and tell us just exactly what you were doing.’

Her nose was running now, and the pains were shooting up to her hip, but Davis seemed to have stopped slamming the door on parts of her body. He glared at her, a single bloodshot brown eye through the crack in the door, and she glared back at him until he nodded, just slightly.

‘Get back out of my door,’ he said.

Sherlock tilted her head in warning. ‘I’ve identified four different ways to break into your flat, in case you’re considering—,’

‘I just need to unbolt the bloody door, don’t I?’ he said.

She squared her shoulders, and stepped back, and the door went almost shut before it opened again, wider and without a chain. Davis himself stood behind it, so that Sherlock stepped into a darkened, empty-feeling corridor, the air close, and stale. She could sense Johnnie following behind her, from the rubber treads of Johnnie’s boat shoes on the creaking boards and the heavy feeling of Johnnie’s eyes behind her, scanning the hall. They moved together halfway down the short passage, and then Davis swung the door to and bolted it again. They were encased together in gloom.

Sherlock kept her eyes straight ahead and walked, pursued by the sound of Davis’s shuffling slippers on the hardwoods. When she was almost to the end of the corridor, he grumbled ‘On your left’; she turned into a sitting room equally dark and stuffy as the entranceway. Or—she peered into the shadows, making out a large wood panel forming the majority of the near wall. Not a sitting room, she realised. A bedroom, with a Murphy bed. And there, against the far wall, was a single stovetop burner. She supposed that the only thing across the corridor must be the washroom.

‘So, what?’ Davis said, pushing past them both where they’d stopped in the doorway. ‘What’s so important that you came hunting me down? ’

‘What’s so important,’ countered Sherlock, ‘that you passed up three days of work and your week’s pay, to hide out in this godforsaken hole?’

‘This is my home,’ Davis said, very cold.

Johnnie looked over at Sherlock with caution in her eyes.

Sherlock huffed, and grumbled, and, when she saw no way around it, said ‘My apologies.’ She held out her hand. Davis shook it. The three of them stood awkwardly in the darkened room until Johnnie cleared her throat and Davis muttered, gesturing at the sofa, ‘You may as well sit down.’

They sat. The sofa was dusty, and too soft, and some indeterminate shade of brown. Johnnie turned her head to the side and sneezed.

‘Mr. Davis,’ Sherlock said, ‘Bess Taylor and Leslie Matthews saw you, multiple times, at the tea shop known as The Raven’s Nest, in deep discussion with Sylvia Cohen. Your meetings apparently took place over the course of several months. Would you care to—.’ At this Davis snorted again.
Sherlock revised her wording to: ‘Please explain to us what the two of you were discussing.’

Davis turned his head, and spat into a dish in the fireplace.

‘I guess you *would* appreciate that,’ Davis said.

‘Oh come now, Mr. Davis,’ Sherlock said, losing patience. ‘I know you didn’t kill Sylvia Cohen, but a jury full of white greengrocers who weren’t there that night will hardly find it difficult to imagine you up a set break which didn’t exist. You lied to us the night of the murder, and you probably lied to the police as well—’

‘I didn’t;’ Davis said, and Sherlock snapped ‘Only because you scarpered before they got a chance to ask you, no doubt.’

Davis didn’t reply. Johnnie sniffled, sitting next to Sherlock on the sofa.

‘Look,’ Johnnie said, ‘we’re just trying to understand, yeah? What would *you* think, Mr. Davis, if you heard about a murder happening in a place one night, and then one of the employees picks that night to take off and not show his face again? And then he doesn’t come back for his only pay-cheque? I mean, what would you think?’

‘Wasn’t my only pay-cheque,’ mumbled Davis, seemingly unable to stop himself correcting misinformation.

‘You have another position,’ Sherlock said, sitting forward on the sofa. Davis chewed at his cheek, looking furious. Then he nodded. Then he shook his head.

‘Did have,’ he said. ‘Doubt I do anymore.’

‘You stopped showing at that job, too?’ Johnnie asked. Davis nodded again, like he couldn’t help it. Johnnie opened her mouth again, but Sherlock heard it and put a hand on her arm. They sat there in silence, watching Davis chew at the inside of his cheek.

At last he sighed, and twisted his mouth into a sour shape. ‘’S not like I can afford it,’ he said, ‘but I was—I was. I can’t be sure he doesn’t know I was in on it.’

‘In on—,’ said Johnnie. Sherlock dug her fingers into Johnnie’s arm.

‘I was on the night cleanup crew at the *Chronicle,*’ Davis said at last, like he was doing his best to speak without moving his lips. ‘It’s how I met Sylvia Cohen.’ He looked across at them through baleful eyes, gauging their unsurprised reactions, and added ‘I guess you know about how she was the *Chronicle*’s mole on the force, then.’

Sherlock nodded. ‘And we know about her reporting work from before the War, and what she got up to during it.’ She stared back at Davis. ‘Did *you*?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ he said. There was something so bitter in the word. ‘But she told me that not too long ago.’

He sighed again, then turned to face them.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘All right, here it is.’

He gathered his thoughts a moment, then began.

‘I work,’ Davis started, and then moved his mouth in that sour way again, and corrected himself: ‘I *worked,* for ten years, on the graveyard cleanup crew at the *Chronicle.* Playing the piano is what I
love to do, but the pay’s for shit. Even paying for a place like this,’ and he gestured around at the
darkened, dusty room, ‘I couldn’t make ends meet. So I took this second job, three times a week on
nights I wasn’t playing. It was cleaning toilets and sweeping floors, you know, and mucking out the
rubbish bins in the reporters’ offices.

‘It had to have been maybe, I don’t know, six years ago, I started seeing this lady copper around. I
didn’t really notice at first. Lots of strange people come and go, at a paper. Some guys, their offices
never got clean because they were always still there at two, three in the morning, working on stories,
and I couldn’t make ends meet. So I took this second job, three times a week on
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didn’t really notice at first. Lots of strange people come and go, at a paper. Some guys, their offices
never got clean because they were always still there at two, three in the morning, working on stories,
and I could never get in. But this lady cop, she was very—very striking, if you know what I mean.
God knows she wasn’t pretty, not what you might call attractive, but she was—she was intense,
somehow.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, drily. ‘I imagine she must have been.’ Davis shot her a glance, then nodded and
kept talking.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Well, I noticed her. Just in passing, you know. She was usually hanging around
outside the big governor’s office, that Townsend-Farquhar.’

Johnnie shifted by Sherlock’s side, and Sherlock thought it, too: Townsend-Farquhar’s hand-picked
star reporter, still feeding him secrets after the War. And if she’d done his bidding before the War,
and sold out the police for him after the War, it only made sense that her crimes during the War—

‘Well, it wasn’t any of my business,’ said Davis, ‘but I had this—this weird feeling. Well, I don’t
know if it was only looking back, you know, how you make yourself smarter than you maybe really
were at the time. But I had this weird fucking feeling about her, that she noticed me too. Which is—,
he looked at Sherlock, and then at Johnnie, and shook his head.

‘You wouldn’t understand,’ he said. ‘You’ve only seen me at the Gates, with all those girls standing
around buying me drinks, singing along. That’s why I like—why I liked it so much. Because at the
paper it was like being invisible, right. Nobody notices an old black man who comes in to empty the
bins. It was—it gave me the creeps, a little bit, that she seemed like she might. But I reckoned I was
just imagining things.’

‘Mmm,’ Sherlock said, sitting forward. ‘Reckon you weren’t.’

‘No,’ said Davis. ‘But I’m trying to tell in order. And I didn’t know that right away.’ He chewed on
his mouth, and Sherlock waited, and then gestured for him to continue.

‘There was this one night,’ Davis said. ‘I’m out in the corridor, outside his office. The door opens,
sudden, like someone’s about to come out, and I see it’s this lady cop. Then she turns back, like she
remembered something else she wanted to say. She closed the door again a little bit, but not all the
way, so I could still hear what was going inside. And she starts talking to him about an idea for a
story, right, because she and some other coppers had been down in Brixton, putting down that riot
got up by all the West Indian kids down there. And she said, they were living rough, practically on
the street, and that might make an interesting story.

‘And he says “Interesting story?” in this voice like she’d, I don’t know, grown another head. “Those
Negro kids’re stealing good British jobs,” he says. “That’s the story. Loss of law and civilisation, in
the face of the encroaching savage.”

“Savage,” she says, “well I don’t know about that, Harry. They looked like just regular kids, to me.”

‘And he says, making up nice to her now, “Come on, Sylvia, what is this all of a sudden? You know
how it is. Just like in the War. You want a pay rise. Met’s gonna be better funded with an enemy to
fight against. The paper’s gonna sell better, too. West Indian fuzzies were never going to amount to shit, anyway, you know that. Just out for what they can get from any white woman they meet.”

“‘I don’t know, Harry,’” she says again, slow. “Some of those kids looked real hungry.”

‘And there’s this bang, almost a crash, like he’s put something down hard, and he says “You’re talking to me about hungry kids? Why the sudden scruples, Sylvia?”

“‘Well, Harry,’” she says, in a voice like she’s keeping herself from saying something else, “We’ll have to agree to disagree.’ And she opens the door back up the rest of the way, and walks away from me in the other direction, didn’t say a word. That was so normal, to have her do that. I should’ve seen it coming.’

‘She approached you,’ Sherlock said, steepling her fingers in front of her lips. ‘Later on.’

Davis nodded. ‘Waited about a week,’ he said, ‘and it was just the right amount of time, I’ll give her that. It’s not like it was anything new, hearing that kind of thing whispered behind my back, or even two white people talking when they thought I wasn’t listening. Like I said, near nobody notices me, at the paper.

‘But—you should know that my mother was West Indian, right. And I never had any kids, but my sisters did, and their kids did, so I have grand-nieces and nephews now, right there in Brixton. And when I was growing up, there wasn’t so many of us, there sure wasn’t a whole neighbourhood of angry West Indian kids tearing up the streets. But hearing how it is now, how it’s starting to be, how even this white woman cop can see it’s starting to be, and then hearing her shot down about it, and then having to go in half an hour later to empty his rubbish bins, I don’t know. Something snapped in me.’

Sherlock nodded. ‘So Cohen approached you,’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘and I was ready to listen. She said she had a grudge against Townsend-Farquhar, too. I thought she had a funny way of showing it, calling him Harry and hanging around in his office at one in the morning, but she said it was all part of the plan. “The plan?” I said, and she said yes, she had a plan to disgrace him, to take him down. And she told me—’

Davis shifted in his chair, and sighed. ‘She told me some of it.’

‘What’d she say?’ asked Johnnie, in a surprisingly congested voice.

Sherlock glanced over; Johnnie was on the edge of her seat, following Davis’s every word, but breathing through her mouth, and with puffed-red eyes. The dust, Sherlock supposed. And all in a rush she felt so fond of Johnnie, wheezing there on the sofa with her wide-open face while Davis told them about Cohen’s plan.

But there was nothing to be done with the feeling, not just then. So she smiled a very little, and put it away.

‘She said this Townsend-Farquhar had something on her,’ Davis said, ‘and that she had something on him too, but she couldn’t use it unless she could prove it. She’d worked for him all through the War, she said, doing...things. She wouldn’t tell me about the things, not then. But she said they made him rich, and made her hunted, and she wanted it to be other way round. Or at least, she said, she wanted to bring him down to her level.’

‘Seems like they were both pretty low to the ground,’ Johnnie mumbled. Sherlock elbowed her, but lightly.
‘How was she planning to do that?’ she asked.

‘Two different ways,’ Davis said. ‘She said something about, he took her down in two different ways, and she was going to do the same to him. Full of herself, she was,’ he added, and spit again in the dish in the fireplace.

‘Anyway, she said, for one thing, there were records of what he’d got up to in the War. Evidence, of where his money’d come from. And she’d been hanging round with him in his office so much, she’d got a pretty good idea of where he was keeping them. Her idea was, that since I was in there cleaning anyway, and he was usually gone after about four in the morning, that I could take a look around while I was cleaning. And I could find these records and sort of copy them over, and then put the originals back. Then, when they were all copied, we’d be able to take them to a different paper, or to her contacts at the Met, and prove what he’d been up to.’

‘So that’s what you’ve been doing?’ Sherlock said. ‘Copying out records?’

Davis nodded. ‘I said I’d give it a try. Like I said, she timed it just right. Sounded good to me to get some of my own back on this Townsend-Farquhar, and it wasn’t too hard to find the records she meant. Sylvia’d reckoned more or less where he’d put them, and once I knew where to look it was pretty obvious which ones he’d wanted to hide.

‘Was the kind of shit people with a grain of sense would never keep,’ he added, rolling his eyes. ‘Sales records and certificates of authenticity and whatnot for all this expensive loot he’d picked up in Poland and Norway and Greece during the War. I know some blokes, hell, he could’ve gotten plenty for that stuff without those pieces of paper, but Sylvia said people are magpies. I said people are idiots.’

Sherlock couldn’t help a snort of laughter. Davis didn’t smile, but his eyes looked like he thought about it.

‘But I went through it all,’ he said, ‘piece by piece. And I copied out anything with a date, or a serial number, or names or locations or anything that might be useful.

‘The thing was, I could only work for about twenty minutes at a time. Because I already had a full night’s work, right, and people would notice if I stopped doing it. And there were reams of the stuff to go through. So it took months. I’d been working on it three months, and then—then I stopped.’

He cleared his throat. Sherlock raised her eyebrows, listening to Johnnie wheezing next to her.

Chester spit in the dish again. The silence mounted.

At last Sherlock said, ‘This would have been, oh, about a month ago?’

Davis looked up at her. ‘Yeah,’ he said. Then his face cleared as he realised the connection. ‘Yeah,’ he repeated. ‘You’re right; you’re smart; you heard about the fight. That’s the why of it. I’d heard her, drunk at the bar one night. Sometimes she made like she was drunk when she wasn’t. Sometimes she started fights for distractions, so everyone would remember the fight, and wouldn’t remember her and me having a talk in a corner just before. But this night she really was pissed. And she was talking to some poor kid down from the country, and I heard her say—.’

He screwed up his mouth again, biting at the inside. ‘Let’s just say her real thoughts on Brixton, were a lot closer to her pal Harry’s than she’d let on that day in his office.

‘Hell, I don’t know why it took me so long to figure it out, that she’d been winding me up on purpose. Staged the whole damn thing, all that talk about the West Indian kids and whatnot. With all
her talk about pulling old Harry’s strings, I should have thought that she’d be pulling mine too. But I didn’t think of it until that night, and then I was just. Finished with her. Just. Why should I bother? She was a stone bitch. She was just as bad as old Harry, and the two of them could go hang.’

He spit in the fireplace again, his mouth twisted up bitter and ugly.

‘But you started up again,’ Sherlock said, quiet. ‘You didn’t stay away for good.’

‘No,’ Davis bit out. ‘She found out I’d stopped copying out the records, and she came to the Gateways and threatened me about it. I told her she was a liar and a bitch, that she was no better than her old friend Harry. She punched me in the shoulder and I said it again, and she pinned me up against the wall and told me to meet her at the Raven the next night, and she’d explain. I wasn’t gonna go,’ he added, and then stayed silent for a minute and a half.

Sherlock and Johnnie waited.

‘I wasn’t gonna go,’ he said again, at last. ‘But for some goddamned reason I did. I can’t tell you why. Maybe I just wanted to cuss her out some more. I met her at the Raven, and she told me—enough. Enough that I went back to her Harry’s file cabinet the next night, when I was cleaning up his office.’

‘She told you enough of what?’ said Johnnie, sounding very stuffed-up indeed. Sherlock had the unexpected urge to fetch her a cup of tea.

Davis sighed. ‘Said she was a liar,’ he said. ‘Said she was a bitch. Admitted it right out, and didn’t apologise. But said she still wasn’t anywhere near as bad as Harold Townsend-Farquhar.

‘She said she didn’t give a shit what happened to her, as long as in the end she got to take him down. Told me—told me a story. About coming with her dad, from Poland, as a little kid.

‘Her dad died, but all his family was still there. She told me she’d always been ashamed of them. That she took a fake name and worked to get rid of her accent, and worked to get herself higher up, always higher up. She never liked old Harry, she said, but she had no problem scratching his back if he wanted to scratch hers. She was out for number one, she said. She never wanted anyone dragging her down.

‘But you know, she was a reporter, she heard things. Rumours. And when she heard what was happening, in Poland in ’39, she didn’t want—. It was one thing pretending they hadn’t existed, but she didn’t want them slaughtered like swine, she said. And that Harry was so well-connected. She said he was going on and on about all the money to be made, and that he just needed an agent on occupied ground, to shift goods around so it wouldn’t be noticed. And she said she’d do it, if he’d agree to use his clout to protect her family. And he said he would.’

Johnnie sucked in a breath. Sherlock hummed.

‘I infer,’ she said, sitting forward in her chair, ‘that he did not.’

‘No,’ echoed Davis. ‘He did not. That’s what she told me. And she found out about it—,’

‘In January of 1945,’ breathed Sherlock. Davis looked a little disconcerted, but he pressed on.

‘—sometime in 1945, anyway. When her little unit was ordered to the same village she’d told old Harry about, four years before. She said she didn’t even worry, on the way there. She said she’d made a rough bargain, made herself into a monster, all the people she’d beaten and killed and stolen from, but she knew she’d bought something for someone by it. She said she took a nap on the train
on the way there. She said she knew for sure her family was safe, right up until she walked into their house and saw it gutted.

‘So she deserted,’ said Johnnie, leaning so far forward that she might as well be squatting on the floor. ‘She grabbed as many things from her own family as she could, and put them in a duffel, didn’t she? And she took a train to Leningrad.’

‘That, I don’t know,’ said Davis, looking over at her, ‘But she said she swore revenge that day, and it sounds like something from a penny dreadful, but believe me. If you’d have seen her face, you’d have bought it too.’

Sherlock thought of Ellen Erins, throwing her lover to the wolves in order to further her own career; of the hawkish lines of her body as she stood rooted, barking orders up at golden-haired pillagers; of her choked, scarred face on the washroom floor, and how she’d punched a cripple in the solar plexus as a convenient diversion. Sherlock could well imagine the woman’s declaration of revenge.

‘So we agreed,’ Davis said. ‘We agreed that she was a hard, cold bitch, and headed straight for Hell. But that Harry Townsend-Farquhar was worse.’

Johnnie gave a whistle, quiet in Sherlock’s ear. Sherlock exhaled at last.

‘The next time I was at the paper,’ Davis said, ‘I went back to copying out the records of all the things he took. I was almost done, too, by the time—well.’ He coughed, and chewed at his mouth. ‘I was just about done.’

‘And you still have these copied records?’ Sherlock said, trying to keep the glee out of her voice.

Davis looked at her out the corner of his eye. After seconds he nodded, slow and wary.

‘I do,’ he said. ‘S the reason I haven’t been back to work, since. Or even to the Gates.’

‘But I thought you said,’ Johnnie piped up, ‘that nobody ever noticed you, at the paper. Why would they, now?’

Davis snorted. ‘Sylvia didn’t think he was on to her, either,’ he said. ‘Didn’t stop her ending up cold on the floor by the Gateways toilet.’

Sherlock sat back, fingertips at her mouth. ‘But nobody’s come looking for you?’ she asked at last. ‘Before Johnnie and me, obviously.’

‘No,’ Davis said. ‘Not yet.’

‘So Townsend-Farquhar might not know of your involvement.’

‘Or he might just not know where I live,’ Davis said. ‘I ain’t too eager to test which it is, to be frank.’

Johnnie gave a kind of snuffling laugh through her stuffed-up nose, and Sherlock looked over at her again, her lips drawing up into a smile. Then she looked back at Davis.

‘You said Cohen had two plans to bring down Townsend-Farquhar,’ she said. ‘Could it be that he discovered one, but not the other?’

‘Yep,’ Davis said, in the tone of someone who had spent the last four days doing nothing but considering the possibility. ‘Sure is. But I don’t even reckon there’s a way to know which plan he’s onto and which he’s not.’
‘Whad whas te odder ode?’ said Johnnie. Davis, for the first time that afternoon, cracked a smile.

‘You wanna switch places?’ he asked. ‘You’re not breathing too well.’

‘Thadk you,’ said Johnnie. She stood up to cross to the straight-backed wooden chair as Davis crossed to the sofa. Sherlock turned her back to the armrest, to face him.

‘So,’ she said. ‘What was the second prong of the attack?’

‘Sylvia thought,’ Davis said, ‘that the things he’d done, that she’d done, during the War, were the worst. That’s what she really wanted people to know. But she said she thought nothing that bad would happen to him, even if they came out. She told me, “Nobody likes to think about the War, anymore.”

‘And I reckon she was right,’ Davis added, looking down at the floor, nodding. ‘People don’t like to think about it. Seems like it was all a bad dream, and easier to believe that way.’ He shook himself, staring down at his knees.

‘Anyway,’ he went on. ‘She said we needed something about the present day. Something that would make people mad in the here and now. Something that would affect them, right? And she’s been working all this time as her Harry’s ace in the hole, his mole in the police force. She’d been doing that for four, five years already, plus what she’d done for him in the War.

‘So she said, her idea was to start feeding him bad leads, on top of the good. Lead him on a false trail, and get him so far along that he’d have the Chronicle running a big, front-cover story, only we’d be able to prove it was flat-out wrong. He’d think he was getting this big scoop on all the other papers in town, but he’d really be tying the noose around his own neck. Ruin his reputation.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, nodding. ‘And once he was professionally disgraced, it would be easier to prosecute for his war profiteering, as well. Much simpler to pursue a known reprobate, than a model citizen. The public would already be after his blood.’

‘Yep,’ Davis said. ‘That’s what Sylvia said. So the whole time I was copying out these records, she was slipping him leads. Most of them still good; some of them bad.’

‘The bad leads were concerning…?’ Sherlock prodded. Davis waved a hand.

‘Concerning Sylvia’s own DI at the Met,’ he said. ‘Lestrade, is his name. The way she figured, if the Chronicle ran a muckraker piece about corruption on the part of a high-ranking police officer, which then turned out to be false, there would be one officer at least guaranteed to be gunning for old Harry once it all came to light. And given that this Lestrade is a bit of a darling of the Met in general, the rest of the force wouldn’t look too kindly on him, either.

‘We were set to finish up around the same time,’ Davis added. ‘I’d copied out almost all the records, and Sylvia—she had the whole fake story ready to go. Only thing left, was to give old Harry the signal to run it.’

There was a few minutes’ silence. Then Sherlock said, ‘Signal?’ and Davis, very slowly, reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out a thin envelope, and held it up. From her perch on the straight-backed chair, Johnnie gaped.

There was a thrum of excitement under her skin, but Sherlock made herself sort through it all in her mind, thinking: in amongst the wreckage of two plans, there might be the salvageable remains of one.
‘Tell me more,’ she said at last, leaning forward on the sofa. ‘Tell me everything.’

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June 3, 1955
10:33pm
Baker Street, Marylebone
London, England

They’d made Davis run through the details of it, over and over until his threats had moved from
reporting them to the police, to walking out of his own home, and finally to braining them both if
they didn’t leave him to get some rest. Johnnie had laughed, but Davis’s nostrils had flared and there
had been a gleam in his eyes, and Sherlock had thought it really might be best to be going.

She was sure, anyway, that she had most everything she needed.

They walked home in the misty June evening under the yellow street lamps of London, because they
were both too transported to shut themselves back up in a cab.

‘How does it feel,’ Johnnie said, crowding up next to her and smiling, ‘to have solved your first
murder investigation?’

And despite the illogic of it—because she had solved it, and now all that was left was to put her plan
into operation—Sherlock hadn’t wanted to say. It had seemed bad luck, somehow. So she just
grinned, and spread her arms, looking up at the sky with her neck stretched out and the slight drizzle
on her face, and let out a wordless yell.

Johnnie had laughed. She had tackled her around the middle, and Sherlock had gasped and drawn in
her arms to grip at Johnnie’s canvas-clad shoulders, and they’d tussled to one side of the pavement in
the light rain. And as it was a side street, with no one else about, Sherlock hadn’t pulled away when
they ended up backed against the wet brick of a run-down townhouse, but had pressed her mist-
damp face to Johnnie’s and sucked the dew from her lips until Johnnie was panting hard, and
pressing Sherlock back into the wall like their first time in the Gateways alley.

Heels, then, clicking down the pavement. Johnnie had peeled herself off Sherlock’s front with a little
groan, and only after her hand had gone did Sherlock realise that it had snaked its way under the
white cotton of her peasant blouse, to cool her sweat-damp skin. And they had run on.

The night just felt that way. Bursting at the seams. She couldn’t help it. It was better, she thought:
better than the time would be after everything was all neatly tied up, because now her brain still
hummed; and skittered; and parsed through all the multifarious contingencies of tomorrow.

And layered on top of that was the sheen of success; of having delved into the knots and tangles of
the world, and understood their sequence. Within every shape, and every surface, there seemed a
deep warmth of meaning, a vibrating hum that went all the way down to the atoms. And within
herself, too, she felt it; and it made her hungry to move, and touch.

‘Let’s—let’s go out for a drink,’ she said, spinning on the ball of her foot and walking backwards, in
front of Johnnie, so she could look at Johnnie laughing at her. ‘Let’s—Oh, let’s not go home. What
should we do, then? Supper? A show?’ and Johnnie shook her head and glanced side to side, and
leaned in to growl ‘I want to kiss every inch of you, Sherlock Holmes,’ and Sherlock threw her head
back again and yelled up at the sky.

So in the end they were drunk enough, without ever setting foot in a pub. They passed an alley off
Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and Sherlock pulled Johnnie to her and kissed her once, hard against the stone, and then bolted off down the twisting passage. Johnnie chased her, cursing all along it, and kept up over fire escapes and back stairways, and when she finally caught her up on a rooftop off George Street, she tackled her to the slate, one hand in her wet hair, and kissed the breath from her lungs.

Gasping, they half-walked, half-crawled to the edge of the rooftop. Sherlock thought, with the thrill of a gift well given, that Johnnie seemed surprised to be looking down on the windows of Baker Street.

Fire escape; back alley; and they were crowding together through the inside door of 221B, laughing against each others’ bodies as Johnnie at Sherlock’s neck under the collar of her heavy winter coat. Sherlock pushed Johnnie’s canvas jacket off her shoulders. Johnnie kicked her loafers off her feet so one hit the wall, and Sherlock jumped, and Johnnie laughed and bit at her ear.

‘Christ,’ she said, into Sherlock’s hair, ‘The flush on you when you’ve been running in the cold. I think it has to be in the—mmm—I in the top ten reasons I thought I’d go mad, these last eight months.’

Sherlock laughed. Delighted. Skin singing.

‘Do you have a list, then?’ she said.

She thought everything in the world felt good. It felt good when the back of her head hit the wall behind her. It felt good not to get enough breath.

‘You’re damn right I do,’ said Johnnie, and then: ‘Yeah, pull,’ because Sherlock’s fingers were petting through her hair. Sherlock made a fist, and pulled. ‘God,’ Johnnie said, pressing up against her. ‘That’s, mmm, number eighteen.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Sherlock giggled. Giggling so hard she had to stop pulling on Johnnie’s hair.

‘You don’t believe I like it when you yank on my hair?’ Johnnie said, amused, eyes shining up into Sherlock’s face, leaning close to her ear again, dropping her voice. ‘You should, you know,’ she said. ‘I really fucking like it, Sherlock.’

And ever since Portloe the crisp, brutal shape of Johnnie’s mouth around the word fuck had stopped Sherlock’s breath; and it did it again now. So even though she suspected Johnnie knew that and had done it on purpose, she still fastened down hard, and twisted her fist, hard, and Johnnie still moaned and ground their hips together and said ‘Christ, yeah, Sherlock, I really fucking do.’

‘Number eighteen, is it?’ Sherlock said, but her words came out uneven. She was grinning, gasping, up against the door.

She yanked again, a little more. Johnnie twisted down a quarter-turn, her knees bending so her head was at a level with Sherlock’s chest. She ground out ‘Something like that, fuck, fuck’; Sherlock’s nerves sparked. Hot, and protective, and joyful through all her limbs. She laughed again. She let go. She grabbed at Johnnie’s shirt; hauled her up for another kiss.

And oh: smarting blood; and rushing, humming brain; and Johnnie’s dear rough lapping tongue at her lips and her teeth and the inside of her mouth. And all that meaning still vibrating beneath the surface of things. She wanted to feel every thing. She grabbed harder to the front of Johnnie’s shirt. She slammed her own back up against the wall, for the sensation, and felt how the impact echoed through Johnnie’s body, too.

Johnnie broke away. She was panting; smiling; wiping her mouth. Sherlock schooled her face to be
‘I believe you like it when I pull your hair,’ she said, grave.

‘Yeah, well,’ Johnnie panted. ‘You should.’

‘I don’t believe you have a numbered list,’ Sherlock clarified.

‘Ohhh,’ said Johnnie, grinning, leaning up against her. ‘The genius detective,’ and she nipped at Sherlock’s mouth, ‘doesn’t believe,’ and nipped again, ‘that I have a numbered list.’ And she sucked Sherlock’s bottom lip into her mouth.

Sherlock felt her whole skin might shiver off her frame.

She couldn’t stay still. She shivered, and her coat slid to the floor, and she pushed Johnnie by the shoulders back and back and back until they hit the wall next to Sherlock’s bedroom and it was Johnnie’s back up against it. She caged Johnnie, her arms on either side of Johnnie’s head.

Johnnie bit back a grin and said, ‘Hmm, number thirty-one,’ and Sherlock laughed, and kissed her rough and kissed her rough and kissed her gentle.

Then she pulled back, feeling spread across her face the shark-smile she’d seen in a long-ago mirror. ‘Your mouth on every inch of me,’ she murmured.

‘Christ,’ said Johnnie. ‘Er, nine, number nine.’ She yanked Sherlock’s peasant blouse up over her head. Pulled Sherlock to her, sternum to Johnnie’s mouth while Sherlock giggled, still shaking the shirt down one arm. Johnnie scraped her teeth into the hollow just below Sherlock’s shoulder, Sherlock’s bra strap slipping down her arm, and said again ‘Christ,’ and Sherlock gasped.

‘As high as that,’ she said then, breathless. One hand still bracing her on the wall and one undoing the buttons of Johnnie’s button-down; unbuttoning and unbuttoning all the way down until the flies were open on Johnnie’s trousers and Sherlock’s hand had nowhere else to go. She watched Johnnie staring down at Sherlock’s long fingers hovering in front of her open trousers, so close Sherlock could feel the heat coming off her. Not touching.

‘Oh,’ Johnnie said. ‘Fuck. Fuck, your.’ Her hips twitched toward Sherlock’s hand, not quite close enough, but Sherlock felt the potential for it along all her nerves. Sensation.

‘My hands,’ she said. Johnnie moaned. Needles down Sherlock’s spine; she laughed.

‘Touch me, fuck,’ Johnnie said. She rolled her head back and forth, on the wall behind her.

‘My hands,’ Sherlock repeated, grinning, her fingertips half an inch from the white cotton of Johnnie’s briefs. ‘Give me a number and I will.’

Johnnie laughed, high up in her throat, wild and unbelieving. Then she breathed deep. Sherlock waited. Johnnie’s shoulders went pliant at last, against the wall.

Then: ‘Three,’ she said, and in the same instant Sherlock’s fingers slid past her flies, under her briefs. Cupped her between the legs, fingerprints to feverish wet skin.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock said, surprised. More surprised than Johnnie, who was cursing again, her head twisted to one side on the flocked wallpaper. ‘Oh,’ Sherlock said again, and moved her fingers, and shivered.
It must be down to that deep vibration, she thought: that sympathy through all things in the world. Because nobody was—nobody was touching Sherlock. But touching Johnnie where she was wet, and swollen, and hitching her hips into Sherlock’s palm, was making Sherlock’s blood sting all through her veins.

‘God, you. You feel so good,’ Sherlock panted. Panting, which was—was stupid, but she was. She was panting, just from standing still in the Baker Street sitting room, moving her fingers. ‘It feels so. So good, to touch you.’

‘Oh Christ,’ Johnnie said. She put out her hands, suddenly, one palm flat against the wall and the other forearm braced on Sherlock’s shoulder. Johnnie said, ‘I need to, I can’t stand up anymore, Sherlock,’ which was—heaven, bloody heaven. Too much.

So she crushed Johnnie back against the wall, holding her up while she sucked hard on Johnnie’s tongue, one hand still twisted awkwardly inside Johnnie’s trousers and the other one, trembling, pulling on her hair.

Sherlock had solved a murder. She held the solution sharp on her tongue, the proof of it a waiting feast. And now Johnnie Watson was actually shuddering, with Sherlock’s hand down her trousers and Sherlock holding her up. Of all the days, Sherlock thought, with Johnnie arching into her hand, this must be the best.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock said, breaking away, trying to breathe, ‘that’s on my list, I think.’

Still holding Johnnie up. Her face an inch from Johnnie’s face, and she could see Johnnie pulling her brain back into focus. Grinning like she’d been hit over the head.

‘What number?’ Johnnie slurred. Sherlock laughed outright, and forgot to keep hold of Johnnie’s front, and Johnnie stumbled to the side a bit and sat down hard on the floor.

‘God,’ she said, her legs all tangled, leaning back against the wall and looking up at Sherlock. ‘Get me into your bed.’

Get me into your bed. ‘Mmmm,’ said Sherlock, looking down, hand on the wall, ears ringing with it. ‘Well, that’s…twenty-one, I’d say.’

Johnnie straightened her legs out, feet flat on the floor. She put her head in her hands, and scrubbed at her face, and laughed.

Sherlock stepped over to her with her hand out, meaning to help Johnnie up, but somehow when Johnnie took it she pulled Sherlock down on top of her instead. The folds of Sherlock’s wrap skirt tented around Johnnie’s knees; Sherlock’s knees hit the floor on either side of Johnnie’s legs. The tie on her skirt was coming undone. The air was cool on her left thigh, where the fabric parted and her skin showed through. Johnnie ran one hand up the exposed skin, between the flaps of cotton and up to Sherlock’s hip. Staring into her face. Sherlock felt hungry all over her skin.

‘Get me. Into your bed,’ Johnnie said again, brushing a curl out of Sherlock’s eyes with a wondering look at whatever she saw in her face. Sherlock shivering, probably. The skin of Sherlock’s face and her arse coming up all gooseflesh where Johnnie was touching her.

Sherlock shifted, restless. Restless against Johnnie’s knees. She rubbed herself against her own damp cotton knickers, against the khaki fabric covering Johnnie’s legs. Just a little friction; maddening. Johnnie’s knees were pressed more against her arse than anything. She wanted more, she wanted—.

She made a little whimpering sound. Johnnie made it back; and Sherlock’s whole skin, her whole
skin, she couldn’t—.

She wanted to touch. Johnnie’s button-down still hung off her, unbuttoned, so Sherlock pushed it down over her honeyed shoulders and her biceps and her tensing forearms and her wrists. And she leaned forward in Johnnie’s lap and put her mouth on Johnnie’s skin.

‘Your freckles,’ she said. ‘The freckles, on your shoulders, they. They disappear in the winter and then come back in the spring, I.’ They were hot, salty under her tongue. ‘I want to live on them, John.’

‘You calling me John,’ Johnnie gasped, fingers digging into Sherlock’s arse under her skirt, pulling her closer, ‘has to be—fuck, twelve, call it twelve, get me into your bed, Sherlock Holmes.’

‘Yes,’ Sherlock said, and sucked, and kissed, and: ‘yes.’

So she made herself kneel up, away from Johnnie’s body. Her skirt flopped limply down her waist. She undid the tie, impatient, and tossed it away.

Johnnie lifted herself off the floor, weight on her hands. It forced her hips up. Just for a moment, but Sherlock looked down in that moment and saw Johnnie’s body arching to fill the space between her legs, and she groaned and blinked and still wanted to touch; and she reached down and slid her thumbs under the waistband of Johnnie’s briefs. Warm, so warm, and dusted in light-gold hair, and Sherlock scuffled back on her knees on the hardwoods to pull briefs and trousers down together over Johnnie’s hipbones and Johnnie’s thighs and Johnnie’s knees and Johnnie’s lovely curling toes.

‘Oh Sherlock,’ Johnnie said. ‘Christ.’

Johnnie’s neck was at an odd angle. Sherlock could hear her swallow. She’d slid down the wall as Sherlock had pulled at her trousers, and was splayed out on the floor now with only her head propped up on the wall, looking down the full length of her own body at Sherlock, in just her own bra and knickers, looking up it. Johnnie grabbed her discarded trousers and bunched them up beneath her neck, propping her head up without ever looking away from Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock blinked. Blinked. Johnnie’s breathing was loud, ragged in the empty room.

‘Bed?’ Johnnie said, just as Sherlock said, too fast, blinking again, ‘I want to taste you,’ and opened her eyes again. Johnnie’s were rolling up. There was Sherlock, kneeling between Johnnie’s legs, gripping her calves, skin so tender she thought she could distinguish each soft gold hair beneath each fingertip.

‘Just a,’ said Sherlock, and swallowed, and Johnnie stared down at her. Her skin prickled. The vibration, still; the meaning; but much of the lightness had gone.

‘I think it’s, er,’ she said. She tried to laugh. ‘Something like fourteen, just. Tasting you, just a. Just a little bit.’

‘Jesus,’ said Johnnie.

Which meant yes, so Sherlock crawled up Johnnie’s body, curls falling all in her face.

She sucked at the sandy-rough skin of Johnnie’s knee. Johnnie made her hands into fists by her sides. Johnnie cursed, and Sherlock crawled up to suck on the softer skin of Johnnie’s thigh; Johnnie moaned. The wet place on her knee caught at Sherlock’s nipple through the thin slick fabric of her cheap bra. Sherlock pressed harder with her chest into Johnnie’s knee, quivering. She bit, just a little, at Johnnie’s inner thigh.
Johnnie’s hand came up to push Sherlock’s curls away from her eyes. It was shaking so much that a lock slipped free over her forehead just as she crawled up another step. She put out a hand then, not thinking. Just wanting to feel, again, where Johnnie was hot, and leaking, and swollen for her.

‘Fucking Christ, Sherlock, Jesus fucking Christ,’ Johnnie said. And she bucked, and gasped, and was God, everything; so Sherlock bent her head and replaced her hand with her wet and hungry mouth.

She had no idea—no idea what she was doing; but in a way, that made it better. Like walking out over a precipice, she thought, and she suckled at Johnnie, moving her tongue against the tip of her like Johnnie had done to Sherlock. It was like walking out over a precipice, to the very edge, and spreading out your arms in the stinging raging air, and with your eyes open into the wind, taking one more step.

And she couldn’t—she couldn’t stop herself. Her blood was on fire with Johnnie letting her, letting her; and the taste of her, light and briny and like the earth.

Sherlock got lost in it, a bit. Thinking not of her own body, humming and aching and positioned ridiculously with her arse in the air and her knees rough on the bare floor; or even of Johnnie’s drawn-tight and desperate noises; but of the simple sensory wealth of it all. The feel of Johnnie’s wiry-soft hair against her lips and her cheek, and how mad, how different to the smooth slickness just inside her. The way Johnnie’s skin at the outer folds of her was ever so slightly cool, so that Sherlock could warm it with her suckling mouth; but how, by contrast, when she tongued back the skin at the peak of her, and licked at Johnnie where she was hard and straining beneath, it was hot, hot, so hot that Sherlock’s mouth felt chill. She wanted to—she wanted to devour her, to make a space inside and stay.

She licked, and licked, and sucked at Johnnie where she was so unbearably hot. Johnnie was restless, under her tongue. Saying words Sherlock didn’t hear through all the wet-slick vibrations of Johnnie’s muscles and her own brain.

And then she could—she could feel her get harder right against her tongue. Sherlock moaned and Johnnie was moaning too, continuously in her chest. Johnnie said ‘Oh God oh God Sherlock your voice,’ and Sherlock felt wetness actually trickle down her chin, and she had to—. She had to. She couldn’t stop suckling with her mouth and so without thinking she shifted her weight onto her left elbow, and with her right hand reached down between her face and Johnnie’s hot skin where she was leaking against Sherlock, just to feel how wet she was, how open, and she nudged into Johnnie’s body with two cool fingers and everything—

Everything stopped.

Johnnie had frozen up under her with held breath, her eyes squeezed shut. Sherlock pulled back, gasping. She was nothing—nothing but clouds of cold horror. But she said ‘I’m. I. Did I do something wrong, I—.’

Johnnie shook her head, fast, side to side on the pillowed trousers. She breathed very deep.

Sherlock’s fingers were still petting between her legs.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ Sherlock whispered. Johnnie whined. She didn’t answer. Sherlock’s chest felt like it was squeezing down on her heart.

‘I want—,’ Sherlock said. Her voice broke. ‘If you wanted,’ she tried again, ‘if you wanted me to feel inside you, what you—,’ and Johnnie was panting now, still squeezing her eyes hard shut, with
Sherlock petting compulsively along the outside of her body.

‘I’d very much—I think it might be something like—.’

Sherlock felt like she was about to pass out, but she kept touching—touching—talking. ‘I think it might be number, er, seven or—or eight, if you—,’ and finally Johnnie’s eyes came open, and she laughed. It was high, and tight in her throat, but she was laughing, looking into Sherlock’s wide open eyes.

‘That high,’ Johnnie whispered. Sherlock nodded, too quick, too many times. Her hand stilling between Johnnie’s legs.

‘It’s only—since you said. I’ve thought about how it would be if I.’ She swallowed. ‘Only if you want to.’ A whisper so quiet even she could hardly hear.

Slowly, staring into Sherlock’s open eyes, Johnnie nodded.

And Sherlock, kneeling untouched on the sitting room floor, moaned aloud.

‘All right,’ she said then, gulping air, shuffling forward again on her knees. And she pushed with the flats of two fingertips, so they pressed just inside Johnnie’s body, the insides of her knuckle-joints still bracketing the blood-hot nub she’d been suckling. The same transition, now, on her fingers, that she’d mapped with her lips and her tongue: looser and rougher skin parting into oh, hot-slick and tensing.

And Johnnie’s breath changed, too, the moment Sherlock felt that give. It turned from deep and laboured to outright gasping, staring down her body at Sherlock’s arm and her wrist, and Sherlock herself could hardly breathe.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. Her voice cracked, high in her chest. She swallowed. She curled her wrist and her two fingers so she could press deeper inside and still keep her line of contact.

‘You can—Johnnie, you can trust me, you have to—,’ and Johnnie’s inside muscles clenched around her fingers, and Sherlock felt her eyes go wide.

‘I want to,’ Sherlock said, and shook her head, and scissored her fingers like Johnnie had done to her. Johnnie writhed. She banged her head gently against the wall behind her, through the makeshift trouser pillow. Sherlock did it again, and again, and Johnnie hit her head again, so Sherlock crawled forward with her fingers still moving gently inside Johnnie’s body, and cradled her skull in her other hand, and kissed Johnnie’s mouth until Johnnie twisted her head away, making desperate whining noises.

‘You’re beautiful,’ Johnnie panted. ‘Christ, do you really want—are you really—?’ and Sherlock said ‘Yes,’ almost panicking, and pushed with her thigh against her own wrist, so her fingers went deeper, with the ball of her palm pressed up against Johnnie’s pubic bone. Johnnie said ‘Fuck’ in a lovely, ragged voice, so Sherlock pulled back and pushed forward again, and bit at Johnnie’s mouth, and pulled back, and did it again.

‘Sherlock,’ Johnnie said. God, she sounded like she was dying. Sherlock pulled back again. Johnnie said ‘Sherlock, stop, stop,’ and Sherlock pushed forward before she could process the words, and then she stilled completely, panting, flushed with disbelief and arousal and shame.

‘Sherlock, I don’t—know if I. If I can,’ Johnnie said. Her hands were fists to either side of her legs. She wasn’t meeting Sherlock’s eyes.
‘We can stop,’ said Sherlock, though she felt it would be easier to peel off her own skin. Her voice came out choked. She sat back, her fingers still buried inside Johnnie but still, waiting.

Johnnie chewed the inside of her mouth. Her breathing levelled out a tiny bit. Sherlock wanted to—she wanted to just push, just a little, just a—.

But she waited, hardly breathing.

‘Is it really all right, you’re not—,’ Johnnie said. She cleared her throat. ‘You’re not just doing this to, er. Because Sally Donovan told you tall tales about me, or—.’

Sherlock could tell she’d made a face, because Johnnie gave a weak giggle, looking up at her. She felt the movement from inside Johnnie’s body, and bit her own tongue, hard, to keep still.

‘I’ll thank you not to bring up any officers of the Met while we’re less than fully clothed,’ Sherlock said.

Johnnie giggled a little more, which was worth the revulsion. And when she stopped giggling Sherlock hadn’t room in her body for the intensity of the fondness in Johnnie’s eyes.

‘Move,’ Johnnie whispered.

Sherlock was afraid she’d misheard, so she stayed still. Johnnie breathed, and un-fisted her hands, and reached out to dig her fingers into Sherlock’s hips.

‘C’mon,’ she said. ‘Move in me.’

And a hungry noise came from Sherlock’s chest. She pressed forward with her hand and her hips, and Johnnie pulled Sherlock down harder against her, and cried out.

‘Oh, curl. Your fingers,’ Johnnie panted. Sherlock curled her fingers. She watched Johnnie arch up. Her eyes felt like she hadn’t blinked for about half an hour.

‘And press up, like—like—,’ Johnnie said.

Sherlock tried, but Johnnie made a breathless little dissatisfied noise in her throat, so Sherlock tried again, but she didn’t know, she was at sea, but she had to—

And then Johnnie was saying ‘It’s all right, look, I’ll. I’ll show you, just, stay.’

Sherlock stayed. Still. Breathing hard. Balanced, leaning over Johnnie’s body with one hand on the floor by Johnnie’s shoulder keeping her up, and the other barely scissoring between Johnnie’s legs.

Johnnie took one hand off Sherlock’s hip, and wet her own fingers in her mouth, and reached down and down Sherlock’s body, inside her cotton knickers, two fingers pressed into Sherlock like her two fingers pressed into Johnnie.

‘Oh,’ Sherlock said. Harder now, to keep still. Breath faster. Twitching into Johnnie’s hand.

But Johnnie smiled. She scissored her two fingers in an imitation of how Sherlock was scissoring her two fingers, and Sherlock said it again, ‘Oh,’ and again. She couldn’t help pressing forward just a little bit, pressing with her hip so her hand nudged deeper, and when she did Johnnie’s hand nudged deeper too.

‘Oh god,’ Sherlock whispered. ‘Yes, oh, god, it’s—.’
’Can you just. Follow me.’ Johnnie said, watching Sherlock blinking the sparks out of her eyes.

’I think. I. Yes,’ Sherlock said.

So Johnnie curled her fingers inside Sherlock, and Sherlock moaned but she somehow remembered, too, to curl her fingers inside Johnnie.

’Fuck,’ Johnnie said. ‘Yeah, all right, like. Like that, and then.’

And she twisted her thumb into the palm of her hand, and pulled Sherlock down into it with her other hand still on Sherlock’s hip.

’Hnnnnh,’ Sherlock said, panting—panting, but she still managed to get her own thumb wedged under her hand so that Johnnie could push up into it.

Johnnie pushed up, and up, and groaned.

Sherlock was breathing so hard she was dizzy. She pulled back a little, and Johnnie pulled back a little, and Sherlock angled her wrist and pushed back in so her thumb slid against Johnnie’s stretched wet skin, and Johnnie pushed back in, sliding against Sherlock, and Sherlock bucked her hips forward without thinking and Johnnie bucked her hips forward and Sherlock’s vision tunnelled.

’I just,’ Sherlock said, her voice sounding far away to her own ears. ‘I want to make you, I want to—.’

’Fuck,’ Johnnie said, and crooked her fingers again, hard, and Sherlock crooked her fingers.

—Yes,’ Sherlock said. ‘I want to—to see you, please, you can—oh,’ because Johnnie had twisted her hand out, and in, so Sherlock had to twist her hand out, and in, and she could feel Johnnie’s body start to spasm around her fingers.

’Yes,’ Sherlock said, ‘You can—Johnnie, you can trust me, I want—.’ Johnnie clenched her hand, panting, fingers toward palm, so Sherlock did the same and said ‘you’re essential, I want—,’ and Johnnie’s back came up off the floor and her mouth came open and she beat, and beat, and beat around Sherlock’s clenching hand.

Then Johnnie melted. She was breathing hard, her head still pillowed on the trousers, which had slid down the wall and onto the floor. Sherlock moved to pull her hand out, but Johnnie took her hand off Sherlock’s hip and reached down to stop her wrist. Sherlock stopped, waiting, only half-realising she was still fretting her hips ever so slightly against Johnnie’s hand.

’I do, you know,’ Johnnie said.

’Mmmh?’ said Sherlock, rocking against Johnnie’s fingers, and Johnnie squeezed her hand again: sparking pressure, inside, outside; Sherlock rocked, and rocked.

’Trust you,’ Johnnie said.

Sherlock panted. Sherlock nudged her hand forward and Johnnie said ‘Mmmm,’ slow and luxuriant, and nudged her hand forward. Sherlock gasped.

’You can,’ Sherlock said, not sure that even made sense, but she nudged her hand back, and forward, so that Johnnie would do the same, smiling up at her slow and lazy.

’I do,’ Johnnie said.
Sherlock held her breath. Her vision was going black again; she nudged-nudged-nudged with her hand, quicker, quicker, so Johnnie did it back to her quicker, and quicker, and Johnnie did it quicker, and then she couldn’t anymore, she couldn’t, she grabbed with her free hand onto Johnnie’s shoulder and thrust with her hips into Johnnie’s hand, over and over as Johnnie said ‘Oh Sherlock,’ and her blood just sang and she shook and shook and collapsed shaking onto Johnnie’s chest.

When the rushing stopped in her ears she still couldn’t be sure, for seconds on end, that she wasn’t shaking. Then it seemed Johnnie was shaking instead, so she opened her eyes, and levered herself up, and Johnnie was—was laughing.

‘Christ,’ Johnnie said. ‘I thought—I’d hoped we’d make it up to my bed, with the—the box, and all, but. Forget the stairs; we never even made it to yours.’

Sherlock giggled, exhausted. She pulled her hand free at last, and knelt up herself, and flexed her sore wrist.

‘I’m sorry about your—your neck might be sore, tomorrow,’ she said. But Johnnie pulled her back down, and held her close to her chest, hands around Sherlock’s shoulders, breathing into Sherlock’s hair.

‘Thank you,’ she said. Sherlock started in her arms, but she held tighter. ‘Thank you; and I do, you know. I do.’

Chapter End Notes

1. The hysteria about the influx of West Indian immigrants to Brixton and other London-area neighborhoods around this time is sadly historical. Some of Townsend-Farquhar’s language is taken from actual opinions of Met officers and other officials. Davis Kynaston, in *Family Britain*, writes:

   Police attitudes seem to have been mixed. Officers in the Met, to judge by their reports, were generally hostile toward West Indian immigrants, described as ‘loathsome creatures’ and as ‘cunning unprincipled crooks living on women and their wits’. The Chief Constable of Sheffield described to the Home Office how the Jamaicans in his city ‘use face cream, perfume etc. to make themselves attractive to the females they meet at dances, cafés, etc.’ but his counterpart in Middlesbrough, also reporting in October 1952, was adamant that ‘on the whole the coloured population are as well behaved as many local citizens’, with no evidence of unduly high rates of criminal activity.”
June 3, 1955
10:26pm
Offices of the Daily Chronicle
16 Francis Street, Westminster
London, England

Johnnie stood in the gathering fog outside the Chronicle offices, clenching and un-clenching her hands.

Hour three into their surveillance, and she probably ought to have been running over proposed events; ought to have been reviewing floor plans and schedules; ought to have been listening to Chester Davis’s voice in her head, rehearsing her and Sherlock on what and how and when. But in the event all she was thinking, when Harold Townsend-Farquhar finally emerged out the carved double doors, was how the hell it could still be this cold three days into bloody June. She actually spared a moment to worry whether the Vincent would start back up again, hidden as it was in the chillest dark corner of the back alley.

And how Sherlock wasn’t shivering all to pieces, in the ridiculous getup she had on—Johnnie hadn’t even known she owned such clothes. Johnnie had seen her go out in less—once, she thought, only once—but she’d still choked on her coffee when Sherlock had come downstairs looking three shades too disreputable for anyplace but Picadilly.

She’d been hours about it; Johnnie had to admit it was a production. Her hair was over-curled; then snarled, piled on top of her head, and pulled half down again. Her flimsy rummage-sale dress was leagues too young; too short, yet too roomy, the red rayon torn on one side and mended with thread just a shade too orange. Her lipstick, on the other hand, was slightly too blue for either the dress or the thread, and her shadow and rouge made her eyes and cheeks into ghastly hollows.

She looked consumptive, and all of fifteen years old. Johnnie had swallowed the impulsive ‘No’ that had sprung up in her throat, but the look Sherlock gave her was a reply to it, anyway.

‘Really, Johnnie,’ she’d said, standing at the bottom of the stairs. It was Sherlock’s same old arch tone, which destroyed the illusion of fragile youth to some degree. Though Johnnie was still left with the incongruous desire to spoon-feed her porridge and cradle her in her arms ’til morning light.

‘Did you expect me to carry out Davis’s plan while dressed in ermine and pearls?’ Sherlock asked. ‘Or perhaps as Gonzalo the station master?’

‘I—. Never knew the station master had a name,’ Johnnie said, caught off-guard.

Sherlock gave her a pointed look.

‘You don’t think you’ve overdone it a bit?’ Johnnie said. ‘Christ, you’re about to freeze.’

‘Because ladies of the evening are known for their well-insulated raiments.’

‘Subtle, Sherlock,’ Johnnie had said, sighing, shrugging on her leather jacket. ‘Very subtle. I’m surprised you didn’t smear your lipstick halfway across your face, make yourself even more pathetic.’
She’d looked down at herself for a moment then, adjusting the lay of her jacket. The next thing she knew, Sherlock was slithering up her front.

‘I was hoping you could do it for me,’ Sherlock cooed, with her whole demeanour transformed. This was Sherlock no longer, but every inch the simpering, abused young girl making up to her evening’s bread ticket. This girl was hard, and broken, and doing everything in her power to break herself more thoroughly yet. It was like something out of a nightmare, a vision of a Sherlock gone horribly, horribly wrong.

Johnnie shoved her off, backed off a step before she could think. She felt ill.

‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘I can’t, Sherlock, I’m. I can do it when we’re out in public, but don’t. Just. Don’t, please.’

She stood there in their entryway. Hot and ashamed, staring at her boots, the weight of Sherlock’s eyes on her.

‘Just,’ Johnnie said. She didn’t continue.

Then Sherlock’s fingers were on her cheek. The touch was matter-of-fact. Johnnie could feel that it no longer belonged to the wastrel Sherlock had been, which is why she could stand it. But she still didn’t lift her head.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sherlock said. It startled Johnnie so much that she did, at last, look up into Sherlock’s face.

‘I know it’s not really you, I just. Can’t,’ Johnnie said, lamely.

‘I know,’ said Sherlock, very steady behind her eyes. ‘It’s why I can, because you don’t want to.’

And Johnnie wasn’t sure what that meant, exactly. But she noticed that when they left the flat, Sherlock took, after all, her second-best heavy winter coat.

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Still, she must have been cold. Johnnie was shivering in a jacket, trousers, scarf, and hat; and Sherlock was in high strappy heels and her ragged dress, letting one side of the coat hang off her shoulder as she giggled and squirmed against Johnnie’s front for the benefit of the passers-by. Pedestrians were few and far between at this hour, but Sherlock had still made good on her threat to have Johnnie smear her lipstick halfway across her face. Johnnie suspected, uneasily, that she was now sporting strategic blue-red smears on her jaw and her collar.

Anything got easier, though, with hours of practice. Johnnie’s acute moral discomfort had given way during the first hour to uneasy intrigue, and in the second hour to increasing recognition of the real Sherlock underneath the vulnerable young facade. Halfway into the third hour she had to admit that her feelings verged on unalloyed boredom. Townsend-Farquhar’s appearance was, therefore, welcome indeed.

‘That’s him,’ Johnnie murmured into Sherlock’s ear. She felt Sherlock’s hand tighten on her waist, vibrating with excitement.

Townsend-Farquhar paused just outside the circle of one of the street lamps. The fog was starting to gather in earnest now, but Johnnie could still make out the scene across the street: the large newsman in his camel overcoat and his gloves, lighting a cigarette, and the two shadowy shapes Davis had told them about, taking up positions on either side of the front door.
'Do you see his guards?' Sherlock murmured into Johnnie’s ear, reaching up to twirl a spike of Johnnie’s hair between her fingers. Johnnie turned her face into Sherlock’s hand to disguise her mouth moving.

‘Both of them, yeah,’ she said. ‘Pepper and salt, just like he said. Or one like a devil, and the other some kind of fairy-prince gone wrong. Now Townsend-Farquhar’s headed this way.’

Sherlock giggled, and squirmed, and actually—overdoing it, thought Johnnie—kicked up one heel. Johnnie buried her face in the crook of Sherlock’s neck, one eye on the camel-coated figure now crossing the street. Just before he stepped up onto the pavement, his eyes flicked over to their alcove, and he smiled a little.

‘He’s noticed us,’ Johnnie said into Sherlock’s hair.

‘Grab my arse,’ Sherlock whispered. So Johnnie grabbed her arse, feeling equal parts awkward and guilty, and Sherlock wiggled closer.

‘Take it inside, son,’ Townsend-Farquhar said, passing them by, his cigarette bright in the mist. ‘Beat copper’ll be by in a mo.’ And he continued on by.

‘Interesting, him knowing that,’ Sherlock murmured into Johnnie’s ear. ‘Another minute and you’ll be up.’

Johnnie pulled away. She straightened her jacket; but Sherlock, with a critical eye, reached out and jerked it halfway back out of alignment, then looked mildly affronted when Johnnie rolled her eyes. She took a flask from her coat pocket, and uncapped it.

‘Oi,’ Johnnie said. ‘I wouldn’t have said no to some of that while we were standing in the freezing cold for three hours.’ But Sherlock just squirmed up next to her and tipped the flask into Johnnie’s mouth and over her lapel, before doing the same to herself.

Then Townsend-Farquhar was turning the corner; then he was gone. Johnnie stepped out of the shadows, fervently hoping that she was, for all the world, the picture of an inebriated young late-reporter, pulling his giggling conquest behind him.

They made their way, stumbling for show, around the side of the building. Davis had said Old Harry kept a pair of his personal henchmen at the front doors of the Chronicle whenever he wasn’t there himself; that would be the glowering dark Pepper and his vacant blond companion. But the young ginger at the north entrance, was, according to Davis, very new, and very simple, and very much besotted with the romance of working at a famous paper. His name was Danny, and in the month he’d been with the paper he’d let Davis in twice when he’d been late from a special engagement at the Gates. Now Johnnie made for Danny’s door, lurching a little, her hand around Sherlock’s wrist.

‘Robbie, no!’ Sherlock screeched, as Johnnie pulled her into Danny’s range of sight. ‘No, we mustn’t,’ she said, and hiccuped, and executed an impressive little move that must have looked, to the boy watching, as if ‘Robbie’ had pulled his girl sideways so that her back came to rest neatly against the lamppost. Johnnie reflected that the next time they danced, she was dispensing with all pretence and letting Sherlock lead.

‘I’ve just got to go in for a minute, Livvy love,’ Robbie wheedled, trying to get in a kiss. ‘Got to turn in my papers, you know, Livvy.’

Livvy turned her head to the side, pouting, but Johnnie caught a gleam of Sherlock’s mischief in the curl of her mouth, and didn’t feel quite as sullied as she might have done.
'You wouldn’t want your young man to get in trouble, would you?’ she said, in Robbie’s deeper voice, her hand on Sherlock’s chin.

Livvy started smiling a little, reluctant and coy on top of Sherlock’s smirk. It was a frankly disconcerting visual effect, but Johnnie didn’t have too much time to think about it. Sherlock had subtly rearranged them both for greater appeal to Danny’s line of sight; Livvy hooked her leg around Robbie’s leg, and drew him in for a thoroughly cinematic kiss. She was warm, and wiry. Livvy’s tongue went halfway down Robbie’s throat for show, but on the side faced away from Danny, Sherlock ran her nails up Johnnie’s side under her leather jacket. Johnnie and Robbie were both breathing hard when she released them.

‘Okay, Robbie,’ Livvy said, in her best baby-doll manner, pillowing her lips. ‘I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble.

‘Jesus,’ Johnnie muttered, too quiet for Danny to hear. Livvy’s face was wide open, miming childlike innocence, and under that she was scheming visibly about rolling Robbie for a few pounds later, and under that Sherlock’s shining eyes were absolutely delighted. Johnnie cleared her throat. She felt a little dizzy.

‘Right-o,’ Robbie said. His jacket was falling off one shoulder, but Johnnie let it. It was the opposite shoulder Livvy was showing, so Johnnie put her arm around Sherlock’s waist and imagined they must be picturesque, staggering together toward the door. Danny seemed riveted enough.

‘Oi,’ Robbie said, loud, ostentatiously spotting Danny at the distance of a few dozen feet. ‘Hullo there, listen, I. I did a stupid thing. I was supposed to drop this copy off with my governor, and I utterly forgot ’til now. Let me in, yeah?’

At his side, Livvy giggled, and nibbled on Robbie’s ear. Danny stared at her.

‘I’m not, er. Not supposed to let anyone in,’ the kid mumbled.

‘Come on, mate,’ Robbie said. ‘You know how it is. They’ll report me if I try to get in the front way.’

Livvy nipped at Robbie’s neck, and Sherlock tickled Johnnie’s side under cover of both their coats, with the result that Johnnie started away from her, laughing quite convincingly. Sherlock let go of Johnnie’s arm, a hair late and timed perfectly, surreptitiously pushing her hand down in a neat little manoeuvre that made Robbie smack Livvy smartly on the arse. Livvy squealed, shrill, and said ‘Robbie!’ as she twisted away from him, giggling.

Johnnie wasn’t sure whether to be impressed, or queasy.

She looked down. Somehow the flask had ended up in Robbie’s hand. Johnnie decided to be impressed.

‘Look, er. What’s your name, anyway?’ said Robbie, tousling his own hair in what Johnnie hoped was an abashed yet public-school manner. He uncapped the flask, and handed it to Danny, and the kid reached out hesitantly and took it, but didn’t drink.

‘Daniel,’ he said, holding the flask. ‘Danny.’

‘Listen, Danny,’ Robbie said, making a bottoms-up gesture, ‘This is an important story I’m working on. You seem like the kind of bloke who understands that, you know? I think—well, I shouldn’t tell you this, Dan, but I think it just might be my big break. Yeah,’ Robbie added, ‘that’s the good stuff,’ because the kid was sputtering and choking a bit around his first mouthful.
Livvy sidled over to Danny. She plucked the flask from his hand, making her eyes big and round as she took a swallow. She winked as she put it back in his hand.

‘The good stuff,’ she repeated, in her candy-floss voice. Johnnie made her eye-roll into a moment of jealousy, as Robbie reached out to haul the giggling girl back to his side.

Anyone with a modicum of sense, thought Johnnie, could spot trouble like that a mile away. ‘Livvy’ was the last kind of person anyone should be letting in through a side door at eleven o’clock in the evening.

Luckily, sense was one thing young Danny seemed to be without.

‘As big a story as that?’ the kid was saying, fiddling with the keys on his heavy ring.

Robbie nodded gravely. ‘It’ll blow the lid right off this town,’ he said, making Johnnie feel like a badly scripted character from an American cops-and-robbers film.

Danny’s eyes were almost as wide as Livvy’s had been.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘I really shouldn’t, but. Just this once, right?’

‘Oh right,’ Robbie said, nodding his head seriously. ‘Definitely. Scout’s honour, Dan, really.’

And as Danny fiddled with his keys in the lock, Livvy turned to Johnnie and gave her such a delighted and Sherlockian smirk that Johnnie couldn’t help but smile back. By the time Danny turned back round, Livvy was leaning up to giggle something in Robbie’s ear, and Robbie was blushing because Sherlock’s tongue was in Johnnie’s ear and she was whispering ‘Ask who’s on cleaning duty tonight.’

‘Ta, mate,’ Robbie said, his arm round Livvy’s waist, pulling her through the now-open door with Danny gaping after them.

‘Oh, by the by,’ Robbie added, turning about too suddenly. He stumbled, his balance compromised by the drink he’d been at all afternoon as simulated by a push on Johnnie’s back by Sherlock’s hidden elbow. He righted himself, hand against the wall. Livvy giggled, lifting her skirt slightly to adjust her suspender.

‘By the by, who’s on cleaning duty tonight, on six?’ Robbie said. ‘Only I’d like to know where to send the consolation card after I disturb his hard work.’

‘That’s, er, Mr. Pinkas,’ Danny said. His voice had a distant quality; he was watching the hem of Livvy’s skirt, where she was still fussing with her stocking. ‘August Pinkas, big bloke with a—’

‘Oh yes,’ said Robbie, elaborately casual, gathering Livvy to his wing. ‘I know the man. Thanks ever so, Danny boy.’ And he tipped a wink at Danny and set off down the hall, shushing Livvy as she broke out spontaneously into a chorus of ‘Danny Boy,’ ”’Tis I’ll be here in sunshine or in shadow,” she hollered, arfully off-key. He put his finger on her lips, and hugged her to his side, and Sherlock smiled and snickered and bit the tip of Johnnie’s fingers as they rounded the corner.

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As soon as they were out of sight of Danny’s outpost, though, she shed Livvy’s wobbly strut like shaking off a cloak.

‘Right,’ she whispered. ‘Employee cloakroom first, then. You can keep watch while I search the
lockers.’

Johnnie could only thank her lucky stars that Sherlock had so much practice engraving maps and building blueprints directly onto her brain. She never hesitated on the way down to the locker room Davis had told them about; she turned corners and took stairwells with the confidence of the long-time reporter. It occurred to Johnnie to wonder how many lady reporters were on staff now, and whether Livvy and Robbie could manage a convincing reversal of roles. She was preoccupied enough that it took her a moment to notice Sherlock putting out a hand to stop her.

‘Wait here,’ Sherlock hissed. ‘Start, I don’t know, weaving about and singing “Danny Boy” if someone’s coming.’

Johnnie smiled; rolled her eyes. She was caught off-guard when Sherlock darted in for a single quick, hard kiss. By the time Johnnie put her fingers up to touch her own tingling lips, Sherlock was gone.

It was really remarkable, Johnnie thought, waiting in the dank basement corridor of the Chronicle offices, trying to look like a half-drunk cub reporter recovering his sea-legs, what a difference context made. Back in Baker Street, with Sherlock in costume and out of character, Johnnie had almost refused to go along. Sherlock had looked so fragile, so ready to be broken. But having spotted the hard shining steel of Sherlock’s eyes under the fluttering of Livvy’s lashes, Johnnie’d become more or less comfortable even playing along with her mad game; and now, by contrast, with Sherlock returned to her customary affect, Johnnie hardly noticed the flimsy dress, or the meticulously mussed paint on her face.

And that had only been what? Johnnie pulled up her cuff to glance at her wristwatch. Four hours? Four hours of play-acting, and it was like a second skin.

What must it have been like, Johnnie thought then, for Ellen Erins? She’d played one game, and another, and yet another, and had kept it up for years. What had been left, Johnnie wondered, of the woman, the girl she’d been before it all began?

Thus Johnnie Watson was lost in thought. Sherlock rolled her eyes when she came out of the cloakroom and spotted her. Johnnie could only assume she had looked a good deal more melancholy than Robbie had any propensity for. So she straightened up, and said ‘Got what you were after?’ and Sherlock nodded, and headed off down the corridor.

‘I think,’ Sherlock whispered, stopping Johnnie on the landing of a concrete stairwell, and handing her her winter coat. ‘I think it’s best if you stay in the shadows, this time.’

Johnnie opened her mouth to mutiny, but Sherlock gripped her wrist, hard.

‘It seems Mr. Pinkas is the eldest of several children,’ she said, ‘and has two young daughters at home. Stay close, by all means, but I believe I—well. I believe Livvy will be most effective on her own.’

Johnnie let out a long breath. Then she nodded, slow.

Sherlock smiled, and kissed her again before she sprinted off. Johnnie followed on, half a flight behind, keeping back as Sherlock had asked, as they came out onto the shadowed corridors of the sixth floor.

For a Friday night, and still just shy of midnight, it was surprisingly dark, and silent. Green-glass shades of bankers’ lamps shone on desks here and there, where stubby greying men sat punching
copy into clacking typewriters. But the typing sounds felt oddly muffled to Johnnie, as she moved along the corridor in Sherlock’s wake. And the pools of light cast by the bankers’ lamps made a negligible dent in the larger blackness surrounding them.

Sherlock slunk past the large common floor, toward the west wall of the building where the senior editors and bureaucrats had their offices. Johnnie followed behind her, the light getting inkier all the while. The dark muffled quiet spread out around them.

And then Sherlock’s hand went up like a railroad signal. Johnnie stopped; slid herself into a niche formed by the corner of an office and a drinking fountain. A second later she heard it, too: the repetitious husk of a broom on hardwood.

Sherlock moved forward. Even from Johnnie’s niche, and in the darkness, she could make out Livvy’s sidling strut, Livvy’s nervous birdlike way of holding her arms. For a breathless moment those arms overwhelmed Johnnie with the memory of Sherlock, nervous and overwhelmed on the bed in Portloe, and it was almost impossible not to run after her.

But she blinked, hard. When she opened her eyes again Sherlock was gone, and the stranger Livvy was making her way with naive daring down the deserted passage.

Johnnie shifted from one niche to the next, keeping out of sight. A solid, middle-aged man hove into view, sweeping the detritus of the day into a weighted receptacle.

‘P-pardon me, sir,’ said Livvy, with a little quaver in her voice.

Johnnie, tucked back by the drinking fountain, dug her bitten nails into her palms and wondered how Sherlock managed to make herself look so fucking frail just by changing her voice and her posture.

Not that the torn glad-rags hurt her cause.

‘Yeah?’ said the man whom Sherlock had presumably identified as Mr. Pinkas. ‘Yes? Can I help you…?’

‘Yes, I.’ Sherlock’s voice was barely less than steady. ‘I do hope so. Are you the man in charge of the night cleaning for Mr. Townsend-Farquhar’s office?’

Johnnie had to hand it to Sherlock: the whole performance was at once maudlin and subtle. East-ender Livvy, still smelling of gin, was elevating her diction just slightly; had Johnnie met the girl on the street, she would have called it nerves, unintentional.

‘Well,’ said Mr. Pinkas, stopping his sweeping to look the girl over. Livvy stood and tried not to wring her hands. You could tell by they way she was worrying, just slightly, at the torn place on her skirt. ‘Well,’ Mr. Pinkas said again, ‘I’m just filling in, really. Until the regular man gets back.’

Johnnie thought this was overly optimistic of Pinkas, assuming he was implying Davis might still have a job.

‘Oh, that’s not important,’ Livvy said, all in a rush. ‘I just, er. I just need the man on duty tonight.’

‘Do you,’ Mr. Pinkas said, after an awkward pause. Johnnie didn’t even have to look; she could hear him eyeing Livvy. ‘I can’t let you in there, you know. May as well just go back the way you’ve come.’

‘Oh no!’ she said. She giggled a little bit, then seemed to realise how inappropriate it was, and got even more flustered.
'No no, nothing like that, I saw quite enough of—that is. I wouldn't want to, anyway.'

Johnnie chanced a glance around the edge of her sheltering niche. Pinkas was looking taken aback. Livvy, in a testament to Sherlock's physiological control, was blushing furiously, chewing a hang-nail on the side of one thumb. In her thin red dress, the bruises all up her arm and shoulder from the Baker Street stairs and the alley fight, stood out dark and ugly.

'I only need you to slip a bit of a letter onto his desk,' Livvy said, taking her thumbnail out of her mouth and rubbing her shoulder, not meeting his eyes. The position showed off the scrapes from the stairs. 'It's nothing bad, I swear, I would do it myself, only—,'

Mr. Pinkas, as if mesmerised, reached out to almost-touch Livvy's blue-black shoulder.

'Did he—did he get you in trouble?' he said.

Livvy rolled her eyes. 'That's all done with,' she said. 'Doesn't matter, anyway, 's not like I'm a blushing schoolgirl, is it?'

She laughed, hard and casual and dismissive. Johnnie twisted at the fabric of Sherlock's coat, gripped hard in her hands. She could only hope Mr. Pinkas was thinking of his daughters.

'It's only.' Livvy went on, 'It's my little brother, see. Brian. He's a good boy, sir, he's just. A bit high-spirited, if you see what I mean. It's only—he's been picked up once already, and—'

Pinkas grunted. A note of panic entered Livvy's voice as she went on: 'Well, all right, a few times, but not for anything very bad. It's only, once they know to watch for you, it's like a black cloud, isn't it? Follows you around for the rest of your life. I don't want that for Brian. He only thought he was striking a blow for my honour, you know, silly as that sounds. I know too many blokes as made a mistake or two as lads and are still paying for it now, paying and paying. I don't know if you've seen it, sir, but it's—'

'M brother,' Pinkas said, as if unplanned and unintended. 'I had a younger brother, once.'

'Oh,' said Livvy. She chewed her mouth, taking a half-step forward. It was, thought Johnnie, masterfully done. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Well,' Pinkas said, after a moment of thought. 'Like you said, isn't it. Water under the bridge.'

'Yes,' said Livvy, taking back her tentative forward step. 'Yes, for me it is, but—but not for Brian, not yet. But I'm afraid, sir, if this Townsend-Farquhar man finds these papers missing, I'm afraid for what will happen to my brother, and I—it wouldn't be stealing, would it, just to put the envelope back where Brian found it?'

Pinkas took a long look at her. They had shifted about during the exchange so that Johnnie had a near-perfect profile of them both: Pinkas with his hands folded on the top of his broom, and Sherlock making Livvy try her damnedest not to fidget. She was twisting Cohen's envelope between the fingers of her left hand.

'And were was that?' Pinkas said at last. Livvy's shoulders lost a bit of their tension.

'On Townsend-Farquhar's desk,' she said. 'Just right on his desk, only—only, the thing I've been thinking of is, what if Townsend-Farquhar has—has realised already, that the papers have gone?'

Livvy still twisted the envelope, worrying it back and forth between her hands. Johnnie was getting nervous she would tear or mark it; that Townsend-Farquhar would be able to tell. Livvy didn't
exactly inspire confidence; Johnnie had to remind herself that Sherlock most emphatically did.

And just as that thought occurred, Pinkas at last reached out to rescue the abused envelope from Livvy's twisting hands.

'Well,' he repeated, in his plodding voice, 'things do fall behind the desks, sometimes.'

'You mean—you mean he would think you'd just, I don't know. Found it under his desk?' said Livvy. She chewed on her lip. The picture of hopeful skepticism.

'He will if I write him a note,' Pinkas said. 'Telling him that's what happened.'

'Oh!' Livvy gasped. 'Oh sir, would you?' Johnnie smothered her mouth in her sleeve, trying not to laugh in relief. She resisted the urge to check her wristwatch; surely it was a record, planting an idea in someone's head in five minutes flat.

'Oh I can't tell you how grateful I am,' Livvy was saying, and Mr. Pinkas was hushing her, and getting out his ring of keys, and they were walking together back toward Townsend-Farquhar's office as Johnnie listened. There was a sound of a lock clicking. Two sets of feet sounded on the floorboards, and (was Johnnie only imagining the faint scratching?) a pen on paper on wood.

Minutes later, Sherlock came back out of Townsend-Farquhar's office. Pinkas had plainly stayed behind to tidy up the room, because Sherlock had shed all the trappings of Livvy: her defiant shoulders, and swishing, swaggering gait. She clicked down the corridor with her usual long strides, headed back toward Johnnie’s hiding place, and the wild shark grin on her face lasted just shy of the moment when the Salt and Pepper henchmen emerged from the stairwell ahead of them.

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It was a narrow thing. Sherlock must have heard something out of the ordinary, because by the time Johnnie turned her head and saw the two men coming into view, Livvy had turned about and was sashaying back toward Townsend-Farquhar's office. Halfway there, she ducked into the ladies’ washroom, where the guards, hopefully, would not follow.

Johnnie, of course, got up as Robbie the fresh-faced cub reporter, could hardly join her, either. She shrank back against the dark wall of the niche, listening to the pace of the guards’ footsteps, fingering the knife in the lining of her jacket.

Their paces slowed and then stopped in front of the ladies’.

They’d plainly spotted Livvy, then, but probably not Robbie. The niche was shallow, though; they could still look around. Johnnie tried not to breathe. Even with a knife, she didn’t fancy her chances against two muscled guards, were she set upon by both at once while backed into a tight corner.

And what, she wondered, were they about, lounging in front of the sixth-floor ladies’ washroom without exchanging a word? Had they been alerted to the presence of intruders in the building? Did they know who Livvy and Robbie really were? She thought back, desperately, to the memory of groping Sherlock in the frigid June alley as Townsend-Farquhar strolled by; had he given any sign that he knew them? Had he exchanged words with Salt and Pepper as he was leaving the building? Johnnie cursed herself for her poor memory.

Townsend-Farquhar had said—had said that the beat cop would be round in another few minutes, and Sherlock had said it was—it was interesting that he knew that. Was that significant? Was it some kind of code? Johnnie’s brain just spun, blank and useless.
Sherlock’s was undoubtedly working, though. Johnnie pressed her back up against the solid wall separating her niche from Sherlock’s washroom, wishing futilely for a doorway to open up, like something out of a fantastical children’s story.

From her hiding place she could just make out Salt and Pepper, leaning against the wall. Salt slouched down a bit further, like his back itched. Faint sounds of objects on hard surfaces filtered down the corridor from Townsend-Farquhar’s office, where Mr. Pinkas was carrying on with the cleaning. Pepper scuffled his feet.

Then, from inside the washroom, came a bang and a crash of shattering glass.

Johnnie jumped about a foot. She was sure she would have been spotted, had Salt’s and Pepper’s attention not been riveted on the closed washroom door. She drew back into the niche, her heart beating in her throat, and watched both men hesitate a few blank seconds before storming the washroom. They both moved at once; Johnnie had a weird moment of hilarity, imagining that their shoulders would block each other getting through the door.

The next second there was cursing from inside the washroom, in which the words bloody and airshaft featured prominently. The second after that, Johnnie realised that Sherlock had just as good as screamed at her to run.

She bolted.

The corner. The stairwell. Her empty panicked brain was still spinning and spinning. She retraced their steps back toward Danny’s entrance, then secreted herself in a broom closet hard by the door. She felt like screaming, but she stayed quiet.

Quiet.

Quiet.

And then: low whistling and almost inaudible footsteps, coming toward her from the centre of the building. And it was—Johnnie’s knees almost went out from under her in relief—it was ‘Danny Boy.’ She took huge breaths, once, twice, and gathered her wits, then stepped out of the broom closet just as Sherlock was about to come level with it.

‘Jesus, what did you—,’ she said, at the same moment Sherlock’s face broke into a wide grin and she whispered ‘I knew you’d know to bolt; there was a ledge in the airshaft and I managed to—,’ but she didn’t get any further, because somewhere along the corridor a door slammed, and running footsteps pounded down the hardwood. Johnnie looked at Sherlock as her eyes went wide. She took Sherlock’s hand, and ran: out the door, back past Danny and the streetlamp and the corner of the Chronicle building, and back into the alley where the Vincent was waiting, praying all the while please God please God let it start.

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June 3, 1955
11:30pm
Lot’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

It did.

And so Johnnie squinted into the night, body held tense on the bike as it took another corner at
speed. She tried not to think about the black car following hard on their tail.

The fog was heavy, too heavy—she was overriding her visibility by leagues. Her heart was in her throat. A solid grey blanket over everything; a white rushing cloud before her headlight; and only a narrow strip of tarmac directly in front of her tire. Out of the unchanging grey-black her brain invented a host of obstacles: a concrete barrier; a stray dog; a stumbling drunk. They reared up out of the mist, fast, too fast, faster than Johnnie could avoid them. Her hands tensed on the bike’s handlebars, itching to swerve or brake. Phantoms, each one, vanishing back into the mist; but the next one might be real.

And there was Sherlock behind her, twisting about like a bloody eel. Johnnie thanked God for Portloe; without those long stretches on the curves, she’d have been sure Sherlock was about to fall off and break her skull. As it was, she still gritted her teeth every time she felt Sherlock’s right arm leave her waist; every time she felt Sherlock twist to look behind her.

‘We haven’t lost them,’ she heard now, in her ear, as Sherlock turned back around. ‘About a mile back and gaining, but slowly.’

Johnnie bit her tongue. She stared into the grey, feeling hounded, her fingers aching. Trying to think. She couldn’t go any faster, it was—even during the War, even under fire, it would have been suicidal in conditions like these. It was already suicidal, said a voice in her head, but she didn’t roll off the throttle.

It was also infuriating. How could it possibly be that the Vincent, with any decent rider, could fail to outmanoeuvre a bloody four-door family vehicle?

An old woman swirled up before her, a black huddled shape in a hollow of mist, and Johnnie rode right through her before she had time to react. Christ, she thought to herself. The next one could be real. And the car behind them, gaining. She swallowed hard.

They weren’t going to make it out of London.

Not without being caught up, or without Johnnie killing them or making them guilty of manslaughter. There was no way. The whine of panic intensified in her chest, like a swarm of insects, like bees.

They weren’t going to make it out; they were going to be caught. But she’d heard stories. From Pat, and Eddie, and that butch Mireille used to see. About what happened to their kind when they were brought in for questioning, and those salt and pepper goons weren’t even—they weren’t Met officers, surely? The whine increased. Johnnie didn’t know if she hoped they were, or weren’t. She saw in her mind’s eye Pat’s purpled eye socket; the way Eddie limped for weeks though neither of her legs had been damaged.

And Sherlock, Johnnie thought. Sherlock on the back of the bike.

Johnnie couldn’t—she couldn’t let them be caught up. She downshifted, turned hard into King’s Road. She used the turn and the lowered speed to yell over her shoulder to Sherlock:

‘Get me to a construction site. Someplace with an open pit foundation.’

She was thinking back, furiously. Thinking back to the War, to walking out with Ana and Cass, pushing that old Royal Enfield through the mud to the open Margate field. Ana laughing down at her, making Johnnie lift the bike back up out of the ditch, covered in mud. Doing it again, and again. Jesus, but it seemed lifetimes ago.
Johnnie’s throat was so tight, and she was hardly breathing anyway. She sped through a phantom cat, hardly even registering her own vision. Sherlock hadn’t said a thing.

‘Sherlock!’ she yelled back, fighting the urge to swerve around the cat even after the fact. ‘Construction site; tell me!’

And Sherlock’s voice came thin and tight over the wind: ‘Turn left!’ so Johnnie turned left, tight into a narrow side-street. Sherlock’s arms tightened around her middle, secure. She had to keep Sherlock that way, she thought. Safe, and whole. She had to—.

‘There’s one near the Embankment,’ she heard Sherlock say. ‘They’re still excavating the foundation. Turn right, now.’

The turn was wide, and there were no other cars. Johnnie hardly slowed. She felt Sherlock start to loosen her arm again, to look around, and she bit her mouth, staring into the fog and laying on as much throttle as she dared. She was trying to think, trying to remember, was it—Johnnie’s problem had always been kicking out at the right moment; the Margate mud in April had been soft and slimy, but a concrete pit foundation—

‘Another right at the one-way,’ Sherlock yelled in her ear, and ‘Jesus,’ Johnnie said, a second later. It was one way in the wrong direction.

Johnnie made the turn anyway. A narrow space, with crates and boxes piled high on the sides, but Johnnie got the bike up on the pavement and went as fast as she could, and trusted Sherlock would get them there. Sherlock had maps and routes and intricate plans in her head; there was no space in Johnnie’s for anything but fixation on the road (the pavement! she thought wildly, the please God deserted empty pedestrian pavement) and the fog, and a single tiny corner of her mind that was held in reserve, that was rehearsing, that was listening to a long-ago voice in her ear.

‘Left at the next throughway,’ yelled Sherlock, ‘and it’ll be a mile up ahead.’

Johnnie breathed out, first time in ages. She took the turn; felt Sherlock shift again to look behind them. Sherlock didn’t report back, and Johnnie, at this point, hardly wanted to know. Back on a two-way street she rolled the throttle on, and minutes later the site loomed up, black and eerie on their right.

It would do, she thought, brain still buzzing. It would do. Earth-moving equipment, but only at the far end. The entrance chained, but it should break. (It must, she thought. It must.) She slowed as much as she dared, thinking back and back: a ditch in Margate, a hole in the ground on the Chelsea Embankment.

It was their best shot, anyway.

She pulled the bike into the alley across the way from the chained entrance. She would have to—the henchmen have to be close enough, she thought, to see something more specific than just lights in the fog. Which meant they had to see—Sherlock. On the bike.

Johnnie took a breath. Kickstand down, and she turned on the seat.

‘Give me your coat,’ she said. But Sherlock was impossible. She sat there staring, and Johnnie couldn’t believe—there was no time. The insect swarm was loud, loud in her ears.

She had known Sherlock blank and immovable like this, and Johnnie had never been able to sway her. The thought sent her throat completely dry. To see Sherlock trapped like a dog in this alley by those murderers; to have Sherlock watch while Johnnie was beaten or—. It couldn’t happen, Johnnie
thought, it couldn’t. She was saying words, but still Sherlock just sat there, immutable, refusing to give up her coat.

‘They are not going to take us in for a civil fucking q-and-a, all right?’ Johnnie heard herself shout, and ‘I am under no bloody circumstances letting them at either of us.’

But she realised, as Sherlock just sat there, uncompromising, that she didn’t understand. Sherlock knew about the purity of the puzzle, and about wanting to win, but she had no conception of what could actually happen were they to get caught.

It wasn’t the kind of thing that could be explained.

The insects were swarming still, louder and higher in Johnnie’s ears, and she could think of nothing else to do. So she pushed Sherlock off the end of the bike by her shoulders, and caught her when she stumbled, and pressed her back against the alley bricks and kissed her, hard enough to break.

She thought frantically, as she kissed her, that there had to be a better way through Sherlock’s panic, but she needed—in, and goddamn being Johnnie Watson anyway, since this is the shit way she knew to get there.

So she bit at Sherlock’s stone-cold lips, and thrust her shoulders against the bricks, and after a few shocked seconds Sherlock came to life under her hands, suddenly warm, suddenly twisting and whimpering, sucking pleadingly on Johnnie’s tongue, arching up against Johnnie’s body. Johnnie felt her heart might stop, Sherlock was so essential to her.

Essential to her. Her brain skipped back a day.

She pulled back, panting, though Sherlock’s mouth followed her like a hungry blind bird. Johnnie’s chest ached with it.

‘Remember when we, what we—,’ she said, and swallowed.

Flash back to the sitting room area rug, herself nodding and struggling to breathe, neck crooked against the wall, and Sherlock’s beautiful bird-bright chest, heaving like she was dying, saying You can trust me. You have to trust me. Now, in the alley, she could see a mirror image behind Sherlock’s eyes.

‘Remember you kept telling me I could trust you?’ Johnnie asked, and Sherlock, unwilling but like she couldn’t help it, nodded her head.

A vast something shifted in Johnnie’s chest, and she thought: thank God. Out loud she said, ‘Now I need you to trust me.’

And she could see in Sherlock’s face that she still thought she was making up her mind; that she felt only her arms tightening around Johnnie’s waist as she rebelled against the idea, and not the way they’d already loosened, half a minute before. Johnnie knew the decision was made but still she held her breath; feeling at her back like a tangible force the black car drawing closer.

Sherlock nodded. She let go Johnnie’s waist, and there wasn’t a moment, not a moment. Johnnie was back on the bike, kicking up the stand, getting her lighter out of her jacket pocket and then stuffing her jacket inside Sherlock’s coat. Tying the coat-arms around her waist, to look like Sherlock from a distance.

But not too much of a distance, she thought, breathing hard.
Flipping the engine switch, walking the bike back out to the alley entrance with the lights off. Unscrewing the gas cap. She would have one chance, one chance. Her tongue felt huge in her mouth.

She couldn’t start too soon. She had to wait, and wait, and then: perfect on the first try. Things like this worked best when you could manage not to think about them. That seemed, in the present case, vanishingly unlikely.

‘Any time,’ she muttered to herself, imagining legion black shapes moving in the eddies of the swirling fog before she finally spotted the real one. A great, hulking thing, creeping along the street in their direction. Obligingly slow. Perfect, she thought—or she may have said it out loud, but in that moment her mind was already shifting over, channeling into muscle memory. Sherlock was saying something behind her, but it hardly registered.

‘Wait til you know they’ve gone, Sherlock,’ she said, eyes still fixed on the approaching car, her voice sounding distant in her own ears. ‘I’m not doing this for nothing.’

And then it was there, the perfect distance gauged in some long-abandoned partition of her brain, and she blinked, once, and shot her headlight on, and let her muscles take over.

She rolled the throttle on hard and the tires screeched on the wet tarmac, and Johnnie was dimly aware of the car braking; they’d seen her; it had registered. Faster, and faster, and she put her head down and raised her weight off the suspension as she hit the gated entrance at speed, the rusty chain flying up, hitting her hard in the bad shoulder. She hardly noticed.

Two seconds, and she felt her muscles remember. The black pit was rushing up, up—

Leg over the right side, balanced back on the peg, and—

Hand hard on the hand-break, and she felt the back tire kick up, and—

And dammit, she thought, as the Vincent spun back-over-front and she tried to kick out and felt her foot connect with nothing, it was always getting the kick right, it was always—

She tried to ball herself up in the air, away from the bike, but a spinning handlebar came down on her shin and she swore she heard a crack.

It didn’t hurt, though; and then her back hit the ground with a thud, and that didn’t hurt yet either; and a split-second later was a crunch and screech of horrible twisting shattering glass and metal, and that hurt like hell but it was yards away and hadn’t touched her.

‘Jesus,’ she heard herself mutter. Everything was black, black, but she could feel the ground and so the sky was in the other direction. When she looked up she could make out the diffuse double beams of headlights over the edge of the pit.

She cursed, and scrabbled in her trouser pocket, and thanked God again to feel the cool metal rectangle under her fingers. She hobbled back away from the bike, ignoring the shooting pains in her leg, and forced herself to look straight at the wreckage and not think about it. She heard a car door open, overhead. Then she flicked the lighter on, tossed the little flame onto the heap of twisted parts, and dove toward the wall of the pit as the open gas tank exploded.

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June 4, 1955
12:10am
Construction site, Chelsea Embankment
London, England

In the years that followed, Sherlock berated herself for the simple fact that her own will power would have failed her. Johnnie had told her to wait; she herself could see that the black car was still idling on the brink of the construction pit, silhouetted by a faint orange glow through the fog. Yet if her legs had been capable of carrying her across the tarmac, none of it would have mattered. She couldn’t deny to herself, even after the memory had mellowed with time, that she would have run gasping across the road like the dimmest village child faced with the loss of its home.

Her legs, though, could not carry her. Would not even hold her. Her throat worked, and would not make a sound.

So instead of making a fool of herself, getting herself picked up by Townsend-Farquhar’s hired muscle, she watched silently, gripping onto alley stone, as faint sounds filtered across the way.

One overcoated man had been nearing the edge of the pit. The other had his door open, calling his partner back. But when the ball of yellow flame shot up over the pit’s edge, the man nearest leaped back.

‘Shit!’ he said. His scrabbling footfalls came to Sherlock muffled over the street, and something about getting out of there, and a slamming car door. Sherlock opened her eyes again to the surreal vision of the black car, headlights blazing now, pulling back past the broken, unchained gate, and speeding off through the midnight fog.

Her eyelids slid closed again. She swallowed, hard, so as not to vomit, and she wrenched them back open.

It seemed ages, before she could make herself move. Ages. And that would be another source of reproach, in years to come, because those age-like minutes might easily have been the crucial ones. But the orange glow was burning through the mist, and Sherlock couldn’t quite—. She couldn’t—.

From a purely logistical standpoint, every time she let go the wall, her knees buckled and her stomach heaved. From every other standpoint, it was too much even to consider.

But she had to, in the end. She turned aside and vomited quietly on the orange crates stacked by the alley wall. All that came up was a trickle of the gin she’d shared with Danny the night watchman; and she felt briefly vindicated, because she always said there were benefits to not eating on cases, and Johnnie always—

She vomited again. She rested for a moment with her forehead against the rough brick. Then she rose to her feet, and they held her, and she walked unsteadily out of the alley and across the street, toward the eerie glow of a burning motorbike, and the distant floodlights of Battersea Station.

Her footsteps slowed as she approached the pit, but she forced herself, forced herself to keep walking. She had to be sure, she reminded herself. Sherlock Holmes would want to be sure. And if there were anything she could do—.

She stopped for a minute. Drew a breath. Walked on.

She paused, just inside the gate, to look for the way down into the pit. There must be a ramp, or a— or a ladder, the workmen had to have driven the earth-movers in somehow. And yes, just there, halfway along the pit’s edge where she could make out the wild veering tire-tracks of the bike, she thought she could see the twin endcaps of a ladder bolted to the concrete. She walked over, shivering
more than the cold could account for, carefully not thinking about the twisting swerving tracks, or why she could so easily see the ladder, or why she was no longer wearing her coat.

She backed down the ladder and shivered even more in the warmth from the fire. She couldn’t, she just couldn’t bring herself to walk any further; she thought of golden freckled arms in the auto repair shop, smoothing proudly over polished metal, and squinted into the flames at the twisted chrome, and couldn’t move. It would be the third point of self-reproach: that she stood frozen and might have turned, might have climbed back up the ladder and walked away from the Embankment, and gone God knows where, back to the Chronicle offices; or to some bolt-hole in some hotel somewhere in the City; or to sleep under a bridge or in the back room of Mr. Patrick’s corner shop; or to live with goatherds in Tibet, even; anywhere but Baker Street—she might have wandered off like an idiot and a coward if she hadn’t heard—

‘Sherlock,’ came the voice. It was halfway between a moan and a hiss, and the rushing of the fire made her think she was imagining it. Her foot carried her a step forward. Then stopped again.

‘Sherlock, goddamn it,’ the voice came again, and this time it was so exasperated and impatient and familiar that Sherlock’s insides thawed at once, and she was running past the fire, almost through the fire, chasing the sound of it.

‘Sherlock, what the Christ were you doing,’ Johnnie said, when Sherlock hove into view around the flames. ‘I know I told you to wait until they were gone, but I didn’t mean “until they’ve arrived in Yorkshire,” bloody h—,’ but she didn’t say any more, because Sherlock had thrown herself against Johnnie’s chest, and was holding her and holding her and never letting her go. She thought she must be weeping, though when she pulled her head back at last and felt Johnnie’s dirty fingers stroking down her cheeks, they were unaccountably dry.

‘I know,’ Sherlock said, ‘it must have been difficult for you, what we did the other day, but if trusting me made you feel like that—,’ and Johnnie let out a bark of laughter, so Sherlock, too close for anything else and suddenly furious, caught her on the side of the head with a hard swipe of her elbow.

‘Ow!’ Johnnie said. ‘What the bloody—’ She looked closer; moved Sherlock to the side so that her face was half-illuminated by the burning bike. ‘You didn’t reckon I knew what I was about?’ she said at last, with a look that was half-grimace, half-smile.

Sherlock gritted her teeth. ‘You don’t think you’ve overdone it a bit?’ she asked, gesturing at the wreckage of the Vincent.

Johnnie laughed. It was a spontaneous burst of relief and recognition, and she sobered in a few seconds, following Sherlock’s gaze.

The remains of the Vincent was still being consumed by the roaring orange blaze. Johnnie sat under Sherlock, the tips of her fingers running up and down the bony ridge of Sherlock’s spine, watching herself in her mind’s eye: rescuing the bike from the junkyard; working on it into the wee hours. That grim ride with Ana down the coast. Kissing Sherlock on a tor in Dartmoor. It had been, she thought, a good run. At last she sighed.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘You may have a point. I’ve destroyed our transport home and managed to break my leg in the process, which is a record even you’d have a hard time—,’ at which Sherlock leapt off her lap, yelling ‘You did what.’

‘I think it’s broken,’ said Johnnie, nodding. ‘Though I’m not feeling it too much, yet, because I was just so worried about keeping us away from those goons. I think I can get up the ladder, though; just
don’t stand directly beneath me, in case I—,’ at which point Sherlock rolled her eyes, and swore, and
dove for Johnnie with her shoulder down and her arm around Johnnie’s waist.

Johnnie, as it turned out, wasn’t the only one riding an overwhelming current of adrenaline. Months
later they would try the stunt again, and be unable to replicate it. But that night Sherlock hadn’t the
slightest trouble making her way up a construction ladder, one hand on the slick metal hand-rail and
Johnnie Watson slung over the other shoulder.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 4, 1955
4:30pm
Metropolitan Police Headquarters
3 Broadway, City of Westminster
London, England

‘Are you literally insane?’ Johnnie said, at the same moment the rumpled man behind the desk kneaded his forehead with his fingertips and said ‘No. Just—no. Absolutely not.’

Sherlock sighed, deep and put-upon. Against her will, Johnnie felt the edge of her lip twitch up.

‘Look,’ Sherlock said, ‘shall we go over the facts again? I have single-handedly gathered—’

‘Oi,’ Johnnie said, moving suddenly in her seat so that her new leg-cast clacked against the floor of DI Lestrade’s office. Sherlock rolled her eyes, but, with a look at the cast, fidgeted in her seat.

‘Yes, all right,’ she said. ‘My partner and I—’

‘Not just me,’ Johnnie interrupted. ‘We wouldn’t have any of these papers if it weren’t for Chester Davis, don’t forget.’

Sherlock drummed her fingers peevishly on the arm of her chair, pursing her lips. Her leg bounced, too, where it was crossed over the other knee under the grey tweed of her straight skirt. The DI looked out from between his fingers at the pair of them, half-disbelieving, half-amused. Johnnie, unrepentant, shuffled her cast-plaster against the floor again; Sherlock’s eyes flicked over to it, and the hard line of her mouth relaxed just a bit.

‘All right, yes,’ she said, at last. ‘But the fact remains that due to the diligent efforts of myself, my partner, and Mr. Davis, the Met now has enough evidence to convict Mr. Townsend-Farquhar of wartime collaboration and dealing in the black market. This is all material of whose existence the Met would otherwise remain ignorant, never mind having it in your possession. There are strong—’

‘Now wait just a—,’ the DI began, but Sherlock talked over him.

‘—there are strong circumstantial indications that Townsend-Farquhar was also responsible for the death of Sylvia Cohen, previously known as Ellen Erins, a week ago Saturday, at the Gateways Club in King’s Road. All I—’

‘Indications we have every intention of pursuing,’ Lestrade interrupted again, but Sherlock was not to be dissuaded.

‘—all I am requesting,’ she continued, ‘is the opportunity to complete the investigation Miss Watson and I began, and with regard to which we have delivered remarkable progress in a short span of time.’

‘You’re a pair of unqualified civilians,’ Lestrade said, the trace of a smile on his mouth, sitting back
in his office chair. ‘You think I’m—what? I’m going to deputise a couple of—of girls off the street?’

‘I have no desire whatsoever to be…deputised,’ Sherlock said, with a dramatic little shudder. ‘I’ve as much experience as any private investigator in the city. References upon request, should you desire them, although I have it on good authority that such requests are not part of the normal procedure.’

Lestrade steepled his hands in front of his face, and stared out at them both, not speaking. Sherlock looked back at him, chin up.

Johnnie, despite her own reservations about Sherlock’s plan, let her good knee jiggle slightly. It moved Davis’s manila file of copied-out records, which she’d been holding it on her lap. She saw Lestrade’s eyes dart to it, briefly; she emphatically didn’t smile.

‘You said yourself,’ Lestrade said at last, slow and would-be patient, ‘that we’ve already got him dead to rights on treason, and as soon as this supposed…newspaper story goes to print, we’ll have him on libel as well. We’ll bring him in, question him here. You can’t seriously think you’ll have better luck getting the truth out of him, than trained police investigators.’

‘He’s got a point,’ said Johnnie.

Sherlock’s look spoke of praying for patience. Johnnie bit the inside of her mouth to keep her expression stern. Sherlock was manifestly impossible to talk out of anything, but she reckoned she’d be remiss not to try.

‘The evidence against him on the murder charge,’ Sherlock snapped, ‘is currently nothing more than a series of suspicious coincidences. And he knows it. If he’s already been dragged in by one of your lot, he’ll simply deny all accusations; there’s no possible way you can convict on the evidence.’

‘He’s up for life in prison, anyway,’ Lestrade said. ‘Treason.’

Johnnie cleared her throat. ‘That won’t clear our client’s name,’ she said.

‘Your—client,’ said Lestrade. Deadpan and disbelieving. ‘This—club owner, this,’ he checked his notepad. ‘Gina Ware?’

‘Mrs. Ware,’ said Sherlock, ‘as you well know, has hired us to clear her employee. Mabel Smith.’

Johnnie started; she couldn’t help it. Mabel. Jesus. She’d forgotten.

‘Well,’ Lestrade said. ‘Assuming your client isn’t guilty, how exactly will it be to, er, her advantage, if we send you two into the lion’s den?’

Sherlock stifled a sigh; Johnnie still heard it.

‘You wouldn’t be sending us anywhere, Detective Inspector,’ she said. ‘The idea is simply to present Mr. Townsend-Farquhar with a resource ripe for exploitation, someone unlikely to be believed and easily silenced in the event, and to give him enough rope.’

‘Then we’ll—we’ll send someone in undercover,’ Lestrade said, gesturing with his hand, exasperated. ‘You’re not some kind of—of magical disappearing girl; it’s not as if you invented disguise, you—why are you giving me that look?’

Johnnie didn’t need to glance over, to know the look in question. She would have put money on Sherlock in fact believing, somehow, that she had invented disguise.
'I believe we bring certain advantages to the table,' Sherlock said, incongruously prim.

She said nothing more.

When Lestrade looked over at Johnnie in surprise, Johnnie jiggled her knee again, and drummed her fingers casually on the cover of Chester’s manila folder.

Comprehension dawned on Lestrade’s face. It was gradual, and unwelcome, like a bad aftertaste to an accustomed dish. There was a silence in the room.

‘I can have a court subpoena those, you know,’ he said at last.

Sherlock hummed, noncommittally.

‘No,’ he repeated, then. ‘Absolutely not.’

But he sounded a very great deal less certain. Sherlock smiled.

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June 5, 1955
2:30pm
Offices of the Daily Chronicle
16 Francis Street, Westminster
London, England

Which is how Johnnie Watson came to be packed into a storage cupboard, her cast propped up on some boxes of cleaning supplies, peering into Harold Townsend-Farquhar’s office through the slats of the louvred doors while Sally Donovan breathed in her ear. At their feet one tape reel bled into another, and a little red light blinked and blinked.

The timing had been of the utmost importance. Both Sherlock and Lestrade had known it, and so the argument, such as it was, had been shorter than it might have been. According to a source of Lestrade’s at the Chronicle, Cohen’s carefully-seeded story was going to press that afternoon; after that, there would be no stopping the dominoes from tumbling. Somebody needed to get to Townsend-Farquhar while his defences were still relaxed, before the counter-exposés and the Met’s rebuttals came down upon his head. And that someone, on pain of making Lestrade’s life a good deal more difficult vis-a-vis Chester Davis’s file, was Sherlock.

Or, more accurately, thought Johnnie: that someone was Livvy.

She was seated already as his 1:30 staff meeting was wrapping up: perched in the spindly chair in front of his massive desk, exuding fragility, and defiance, with a duffel bag at her feet.

There was a symmetry about it, Johnnie thought, staring at Sherlock’s—Livvy’s—face, in profile from behind the slatted door.

Johnnie’s commanding officer at Margate had been a bullish, bullying woman, a Major Bertha Fox. She’d harrumphed, and tugged at the bottom of her jacket like braces, and smoked a fag from her hoard every time a new recruit had cried in front of her. And Major Fox had dug a pit in the dirt in order to achieve this same exact placement of furniture in her field tent: the large, high desk, looking down on the supplicant beneath her. Johnnie felt she understood, in the face of that looming mahogany, what kind of man they were dealing with. And here was Livvy, tiny in her oversized dress, perching on the edge of the chair with her trembling chin in the air and her hair braided
crooked like she hadn’t a proper mirror at home. Major Fox would have almost purred at the chance to take a girl like that apart.

Johnnie shifted at the thought, uncomfortable. Her cast scraped against the cardboard supporting it, and Sally shot her a warning glance. Neither Sherlock nor Livvy looked round. Johnnie apologised with her eyes; Sally rolled hers.

There were shufflings just outside; then the door opened. Johnnie, still thinking of Bertha Fox, was surprised at what she could see of Harold Townsend-Farquhar: he was slight, and spry, with a rosy nose and a cloud of unruly white hair, like an elf that had grown old in the service of Father Christmas. He looked like someone’s favourite grandfather. He had a pencil between his teeth, and was looking down at a pile of papers, and it took him a minute to register the presence of another person in his office. When he did, he stopped short, his hand still on the latch of the door. Livvy had risen to her feet, squared her shoulders. Johnnie held her breath.

‘Can I… help you?’ Townsend-Farquhar said. He’d reached up to take the pencil from his mouth, but otherwise didn’t move from the doorway.

‘I know some things,’ Livvy said. Voice determined but shaky.

‘Do you,’ he said. Johnnie could practically hear him categorising the encounter. Shutters were slipping down over his face; but his voice, too, was full of recognition. Ah yes, it said, one of you, and Johnnie let out her held breath, slowly and carefully. He thought she was a blackmailer. He thought he knew all about her.

He thought she hadn’t a chance.

‘I know—know about what you did,’ said Livvy. Johnnie saw through the slats how hard she swallowed, like she could barely believe her own daring.

Townsend-Farquhar’s face was considering.

He sat; gestured for her to sit. She visibly thought about it; stayed standing a moment too long before sitting again on the very edge of the seat. It was painful to watch.

‘And what exactly is it,’ Townsend-Farquhar inquired, settling himself further into his overstuffed chair while Livvy squirmed on her straight-backed wooden one, ‘that you think you know, my dear?’

‘I could tell the p—police,’ Livvy stuttered. Townsend-Farquhar’s smile grew wider. ‘I knew her, you know, I knew Miss—Miss Cohen.’

‘Miss Cohen!’ he exclaimed. ‘My, my. You make her sound like quite the virtuous maid.’

‘She was vir—v—,’ Livvy said. ‘She was good to me.’

‘It’s better than the cinema,’ he said, under his breath, so that Johnnie could barely make it out. Then, louder, he said: ‘Good to you, was she? Kindly took you home from the pub? Generously allowed you to sleep in her bed?’

Livvy blushed scarlet. Johnnie slid her eyes sideways, and caught Sally, for the briefest moment, with an open look of admiration on her face for Sherlock’s ability to flush on command.

‘She—she was always—,’ Livvy was saying, as the flush spread.
‘Look, child,’ said Townsend-Farquhar, leaning forward. ‘Sylvia Cohen had a way with words and a strong right hook, but let’s be frank with one another, you and I. She wasn’t winning any awards for humanitarianism, now was she?’

His smile was overdone, ugly. Johnnie strongly suspected him of using the word ‘humanitarianism’ solely because Livvy was unlikely to know it. Sure enough, she squirmed uncertainly in her seat, and Johnnie took a deep breath and reminded herself of Sherlock in Lestrade’s office, saying give him enough rope.

‘I saw her, you know,’ Livvy went on. ‘The night before she died.’

‘Oh, pray, tell me all about it,’ Townsend-Farquhar said, with a wave of his hand.

‘She knew,’ Livvy said. ‘She—she knew something was about to happen, and she knew it would be you.’

‘Oh?’ Townsend-Farquhar said. ‘And that’s what you plan to take to the police, do you? “Oh I swear, sir, the victim had a vague feeling of animosity the night before the murder, toward a man she’d scarcely met. She told me all about it when she was sodomising me on her filthy flea-market sofa.” Yes, I’m sure they’ll be flocking over here on the double.’

Livvy’s chin trembled.

‘She’d met you,’ she said. ‘She’d been playing you false for years.’

‘Not that I’d put it past her,’ he said, drily. ‘But I happen to know I had the best going rate.’

Livvy made a sound like a petulant child being denied a biscuit. Her hands were shaking. She let out a breath, and reached down into the duffel bag at her feet, bending her head over so Townsend-Farquhar could see her crooked braid. When she straightened up, she had Chester Davis’s manila folder in her hand.

‘Needed help with your school essay, did you?’ he said.

Livvy reached out a trembling arm, and set the folder on the edge of his desk. Her lips were pursed like she was holding her breath. She shook her head.

‘No,’ he said, musingly, dragging the folder to him over the desk. ‘I suppose it’s been a good long while since you left school.’

Livvy got a look like a dog used to being kicked. She held it steady even after Townsend-Farquhar opened the folder, when the smirk faded from his face.

He leaned forward, thumbing from paper to paper. His expression, for the first time since she’d entered the room, was held carefully neutral. His eyes flicked sideways once, toward the open office door; but his head didn’t move.

At last he closed the folder and pushed it back at her.

‘Five hundred pounds and I’ll leave,’ Livvy said, her head high and challenging, as if she were naming the price of a Swiss villa instead of a few months’ rent at 221b.

Townsend-Farquhar laughed out loud.

‘Oh, very ambitious. And very loyal, aren’t we?’ His mouth twisted. ‘About what Sylvia Cohen
could expect, if I’m honest.’

Livvy raised her head higher.

‘I know you’ve got it,’ she said, her voice trembling, starting to cry. ‘And you can’t talk, you b-b-betrayed her.’

‘Oh come now,’ said Townsend-Farquhar, losing patience at last and rising halfway out of his chair as Johnnie tried hard to keep still. ‘You ridiculous little girl, who let you in here? I could tell you things about Sylvia Cohen that would give you nightmares for a month.’

‘She was the best woman I’ve ever met,’ Livvy said, sobbing into her hands.

Townsend-Farquhar threw up his hands, eyes raised to the heavens. Then he sank back into his chair. He watched Livvy crying.

‘She was a third-rate copper,’ he said at last, exasperated, ‘and an execrable person. Look, we both know I’m giving you nothing, and no one will believe your story. But Sylvia Cohen, she’s—mourning for a woman like that, it’s absurd. Did you know it was her suggestion? All of this, all this—this pilfering of dirty goods, she came into my office and laid out the whole plan, ready-made. All I had to do was go along with it.’

Livvy whimpered; shook her head hard.

‘Well, all right,’ he said. ‘She had a few stipulations, but it was all in the service of making herself look good to me, don’t you see? Listen, she probably sold you some sob story about her family, but the truth is she couldn’t have cared less. Did you know she sold out her oldest friend, when I asked her to? Did you know she lied every day just by showing up to work? Pledges and oaths, my god. A feral dog has more honour than that grasping bulldagger.’

‘She h-h-hated you,’ sobbed Livvy, her breathing getting thready. Townsend-Farquhar laughed again, gently.

‘My girl,’ he said, ‘I doubt there was a soul alive she didn’t hate. You should have heard the things she told me, before the war. Practically begging to sell her virtue cheap.’

‘So you—you did,’ Livvy choked out. ‘You could have helped her, but you used her and then you k-k-killed her.’

‘It’s not my job to assist troubled young harpies regain the path of virtue,’ Townsend-Farquhar spat. No denial; Johnnie’s breath stopped in her lungs. ‘And Ellen Erins,’ he went on, ‘was beyond the reach of any help of mine.’

Livvy just cried harder. Johnnie’s stomach flopped like a fish in her throat.

Townsend-Farquhar sighed, and glanced out the door at the deserted corridor.

‘Isn’t your, your job,’ Livvy said into her hands, after a minute, ‘to spread knowledge and, and make people better, how could—’

‘My job is to sell my wares,’ he snapped. ‘As, I believe, is yours. Don’t take a high line with me, child; you understand me better than you want to admit. Cry all you want, but ask yourself: what would you have done? For a long time Ellen Erins was my shining star. Then she was an unpleasant, but sometimes convenient, member of my staff. Eventually she turned to dead weight, and still I kept her on, but—look, she got herself seen, didn’t she? She got herself seen, in a place she definitely
shouldn’t have been, when she could have been linked to me. And then there were people talking
about it in public, just as we at the paper were courting potential buyers. Take my word, my dear,
you would have cut her loose long before I did. I can tell just by the look of you.’

Johnnie expected him to lick his lips. He was leaning forward, smiling, watching Livvy dissolve into
hysterics.

‘I was—was there that night, you know,’ Livvy said, raising her tear-streaked face from her hands.
‘At the—the club. Sylvia had asked me to meet her there so I did, and then I—got a little sick so I.
Went out for some fresh air. And when I came, came back—.’

She was crying too hard to keep talking. There was a long silence. Johnnie kept glancing obsessively
at the blinking red light of the reel-to-reel.

Townsend-Farquhar rose at last. He went to the door, and closed it, then came around to the front of
his desk, looming over Livvy, who was gasping wetly into her own hands.

‘When you came back, she was dead,’ he murmured down at her. She nodded, helplessly, without
raising her head. ‘Mmm,’ he confirmed. ‘She was in great pain while you were outside vomiting into
the rubbish bins, but that was all over long before you had a chance to notice. Cyanide poisoning is
awful, you know. I wouldn’t take it personally that she never mentioned you. She wasn’t one to
linger over her cocktails, and the dosage was strong.’

Johnnie dug her nails into the palms of her hands. Livvy kept on crying.

The movement of Livvy's thin shoulders was shaking her hair looser, and looser. Johnnie wondered
if she would be able to pin-point, later, the moment when Sherlock had freed it from its fastener.

Townsend-Farquhar took a step forward. Then another. Livvy cringed into herself when he brushed
a dark curl from the side of her cheek; he gave Bertha Fox’s vulpine smile and grabbed her
unraveling plait, yanking her head back. She made a shocked, pathetic noise.

‘Unlike you, of course,’ he went on, sounding conversational as he wrenched at her hair, twisting her
neck around, ‘I was there the whole time. So I can assure you that there were no touching deathbed
confessions, no professions of love or regret. I—,’ and Johnnie’s chest was expanding and
contracting at once, ‘I had to step back into the shadows, after I fixed her drink, and broke that glass
to distract the bartender. But I—,’ and Livvy was looking up at him with wide, terrified eyes, and he
was smiling, ‘I stayed close. I watched her the whole time, took her with me into the storage
cupboard while she frothed and convulsed. Then to the ladies’ when it was safe to do it. She moaned
about her tedious Polish family, and that old battle-axe Allen. Not a gasp of your name, at all.’

Johnnie was sure she would pass out, but she didn’t. Sally had her cuffs out. When she kicked the
door open Townsend-Farquhar seemed to freeze in place, his smile a shocked grimace, his arms
gone limp.

‘Well,’ said Sherlock, straightening up, and slipping otterlike out from under his hand to face him
where he stood, her limbs steady, her face stony, her smiling mouth set. ‘That’s very interesting, Mr.
Townsend-Farquhar.’

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June 7, 1955
6:35pm
The Gateways Club, 239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England
A person would have had to know the usual schedule of open nights at the Gates, to realise anything was different. Ted had suggested, and Gina had agreed, to put up a notice: *Club closed for private event.* But Sherlock had pointed out that the only people not welcome at a party celebrating Smithy’s exoneration, would be anyone who hadn’t met her. So all Gateways members were invited, and the club opened specially on the Tuesday after Harold Townsend-Farquhar was taken into custody on a triple charge of treason, libel, and murder.

And Johnnie, surveying the club from her place of honour at the bar, could swear she had never seen the place so full.

The press of bodies would have seemed overwhelming, had not the high spirits been tangible. Private, mid-week events were generally casual, like a Wednesday or a Sunday; but tonight couples had outdone themselves. From down in the pit of smoke haze on the dance floor, the roar of rough female voices almost eclipsed Chester Davis’s hell-for-leather ragtime. Bess Taylor, pressed against her bass in an orange dress with a boned bodice, was visibly sweating to keep up with him. Earlier the drummer had broken a stick, flipped it about, and kept right on playing.

Johnnie felt Sherlock stir behind her, her arm moving from around Johnnie’s waist to wave at someone just arrived. Johnnie turned round herself in time to spot Cass Thorssen’s tender-pale face emerging from the press of bodies, followed by Haley Murray and Lou McGuire. Cass and Haley were holding hands.

‘Oh look at this,’ Johnnie shouted, when they were near enough to hear. ‘You three bloody well went shopping!’

Haley dimpled up; Johnnie thought she might have even blushed. Her freckles got less prominent, anyway. She was draped in something very fluid and very pink, with no back and extremely little front, and she bullied past Johnnie to wrap Sherlock in a bear hug that went on and on and on.

‘Couldn’t arrive at an event like this underdressed,’ said Lou, to Johnnie. ‘I took them both to my tailor. As you’ve no doubt guessed.’

‘Oi,’ said Cass, tearing her eyes off Haley and Sherlock to mock-glare at Lou. ‘And whose money did we spend at your tailor, anyway?’

Lou grinned. She put up her hands, conceding the point, and Cass grinned too. Cass was in black-tie; one of only two or three full-formal butches present. Johnnie had never seen Cass in clothes that played to her lankiness, rather than trying to hide it. Her legs went on forever, Johnnie thought: she was nipped seams and angles to Haley’s ludicrous curves. Improbably, they put Lou in the shade.

Haley drew back from Sherlock at last. If Johnnie hadn’t been watching with unwavering attention, she would have missed the split-second as Haley pulled away, before Sherlock wrenched her eyes back up to Haley’s face.

Johnnie almost laughed aloud. Someone, she thought, should stand Haley Murray a few rounds: a décolletage capable of distracting Sherlock Holmes was remarkable indeed.

Sherlock cleared her throat, flushed but defiant. ‘Cass,’ she said, putting out a hand. ‘Lou.’

Johnnie’s chest tightened the smallest bit when Lou took Sherlock’s hand and lowered her lips to kiss it. She was halfway braced for a seduction attempt, or a comment about Sherlock mixing trousers and lace. But Lou only gave a chaste bow of her head and a murmur of ‘Miss Holmes,’ and let her go.
It was, Johnnie realised, the first time she’d set eyes on Lou since the night of the alley fight and the murder. The past week seemed a month, she thought; so much had happened. Sherlock, and the case; Gina and Smithy and Sherlock and Townsend-Farquhar. The day of their argument on the pavement seemed simply ages ago. And Lou, after one bland brush of her lips to Sherlock’s knuckles, was now carefully avoiding dwelling on her face longer than dictated by the basic rules of politeness.

Johnnie looked so long at Lou out of the corner of her eye, trying to work out just how to feel about her, that she almost missed Sherlock twisting behind her to motion to Smithy. When Haley put a hand to her hip, though, and scowled hard at someone over the bar, Johnnie turned round as well.

‘Smithy,’ Haley said, very stern. ‘Why on earth are you working? It’s your night!’

And Smithy, who must have been asked that exact question a hundred times already this evening, had the grace to smile, and take it in her stride. She grinned, standing behind the bar with her shirt-tails untucked and her blazer askew.

‘No rest for the wicked,’ Smithy said. ‘What can I get for you, Haley?’

‘I refuse to let you,’ Haley said, making an elaborate show of a pout. ‘I’ll come back there myself and get my gin and tonic. You should be out on the dance floor, celebrating.’

‘I reckon the Wares told her exactly that,’ said Johnnie, who was in fact not reckoning at all but had been present for the conversation herself.

‘Gin and tonic, is it,’ said Smithy, moving away, but Cass leapt halfway over the bar and grabbed her wrist.

‘Really, Smith,’ she said. ‘Any of us could tend bar. Go on, have a dance or two. You’re a hero now, you know; any femme in the place would dance with you.’

‘Nah,’ Smithy said. She tugged her wrist free, gentle but firm. ‘The lady of the manor is hard at work; I guess I can be, too.’

‘The lady of the manor,’ came a voice from behind Smithy’s shoulder, ‘is no such thing.’

Smithy jerked back, startled. She twisted to the side, and behind her, red mouth quirked at the corner, arms crossed over her breasts and red-lacquered nails drumming on one arm, stood Gina Ware. Her posture was hard, but her face was oddly soft. Smithy’s mouth fell open.

‘I was simply overwhelmed with volunteers to man the door,’ Gina said. ‘They seemed to think I ought to be dancing.’

‘Yeah?’ Smithy said. ‘You got that too?’

It was something to see, thought Johnnie, the way their eyes met. She could count on one hand the number of times she’d seen them together for more than a minute or so without one or the other rushing off somewhere, in all the years she’d been coming to the Gateways. Still. When one of their looks lasted longer than a few seconds, however stony Gina’s expression, however harried Smithy’s, it was like they would lock together, and grow. Their smirks turned to smiles and bubbled up into grins, and the air turned joyful between them. Just at her left ear, Johnnie heard Lou whistle, long and low.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake,’ said Gina, eyes rolling to the heavens and arms un-crossing. ‘Dance with me.’
So Smithy raised her eyebrows and put out her hand, and Cass whooped, and vaulted the rest of the way over the bar though there was a perfectly serviceable swinging door entrance, and Johnnie felt herself grinning from ear to ear as the crowd parted to let Gina Ware drag Smithy onto the dance floor.

Gina had danced before in her own club. Johnnie had seen her: once with Smithy and once with Ted, and once with Gina’s Milanese cousin. But that was three times in ten years; and during one of them the club had been almost empty. Johnnie heard the hush descend. Couples were clearing off to the sides of the floor, to let them onto it. Over on the bandstand, Bess’s fingers were held silent over the fingerboard of her bass; even Chester’s piano faltered, and quieted.

Such a concentrated stare Johnnie had never felt. Smithy and Gina came to rest together in the centre of the floor. Smithy splayed her hand at the small of Gina’s back. She cleared her throat. Feet shuffled, around the room.

‘Chester,’ called Smithy, gesturing with her head, not taking her eyes off Gina’s face. ‘Taint Nobody’s Business, all right?’

‘Yes indeed,’ Chester said, almost under his breath, and ran an arpeggio up and down the keys, but Bess, with one hand, signalled to him to wait. She signalled with the other to a tiny blonde femme to her right, who nodded, and made her way up and behind Bess’s bass. The blonde looked so small she’d barely be able to hold the thing up, but she somehow managed to get her arms around it. Bess stepped out in front. Chester grinned, and ran his fingers up and down the keyboard again. Johnnie looked back at Smithy and Gina, to find them still staring into each others’ eyes, faces still, waiting.

Bess counted them down extra slow. On four the tiny blonde started up a steady line. Chester’s arpeggios settled into an even stride just as Bess opened her mouth.

There ain’t nothing, she sang, I can do, or nothin’ I can say, and Smithy tightened her arm around Gina’s waist, and they moved in synchrony. That folks don’t criticise me, growled Bess, drawing out the long notes. The song was slower than Johnnie had ever heard it, but fiercer, too. Not gentle at all. There was no microphone, but Bess filled the club with her voice, custom-fit it to the room, and wrapped it round all the tables and the chairs, and the still and moving breathing bodies. But I’m gonna do just what I want to, anyway, she sang. Over by the entrance, Ted Ware stood propped against the dividing wall, smiling to himself. Johnnie felt Sherlock’s arm snake back around her waist; she put her hand over Sherlock’s hand on her stomach, and squeezed.

If I should take a notion, sang Bess, as the hi-hat rattled and Chester’s stride lengthened, to jump into the ocean, as Gina pressed closer against Smithy's chest, ain’t nobody's business, if I do.

There was sweat pouring in rivulets down Bess’s face and her neck by the time she’d got halfway through. Nobody joined Smithy and Gina on the dance floor, but couples all around the periphery were touching each other, were swaying with the rhythm. Cigarettes burnt out in peoples’ hands; condensation trickled down glasses and pooled on tables. Ain't nobody's business, sang Bess, if I do.

As the song neared its end, Chester forced the rhythm even slower. The tendons stood out in Bess’s neck as she ground out the last low phrases. When Chester’s rhythm broke up, cascading haphazard into the lower registers, and the little blonde let her fingers creep upward to hit the resolve, the air was so thick with feeling that everyone in the place breathed heavy.

There was absolute quiet, for a long moment. Gina and Smithy stood in the middle of the floor, panting, still touching, seeming to converse without words. Nobody so much as shuffled a foot.
And then Chester cleared his throat, and dove full-bore into a raunchy, determined stomp of a number, and Bess laughed aloud, and sang out. A collective breath released. Gina and Smithy moved further apart, looking down at their feet as they fumbled over the old-fashioned moves.

Around the room, other couples were offering each other their hands, relaxing into it. A few butches near the piano, Leslie Matthews among them, even shouted out along with Bess the first time the chorus came around, *Give me a pigfoot*, and Bess pointed over at them and winked.

The joy, the relief of the thing were contagious. People were laughing, and jitterbugging; Gina left Smithy doing a stumbling Charleston with Ted, and headed back toward the bar.

And made straight for Sherlock and Johnnie. Johnnie took her hand off Sherlock’s hand to shake Gina’s; she expected another round of gratitude, perhaps a few minutes in which Gina would allow herself to slide onto a barstool, take the weight off her feet.

What Gina actually did, though, was to shake Johnnie’s hand, and then Sherlock’s, and then stand back on her heels and clear her throat, leaving her hand outstretched and turning up her palm.

‘Miss Holmes,’ she said, unexpectedly formal. ‘Would you do me the honour?’

Johnnie gaped at her. Then she turned awkwardly on her barstool, lowering her cast from its propped-up position on the next stool over, to gape instead at Sherlock.

‘I,’ Sherlock said. ‘You’ve already—I’m not—.’

Which was all true, thought Johnny. Gina Ware had danced three dances in Johnnie’s presence, in the ten years previous: none of them on the same night, and none with anyone other than men or butches. But Gina just stood there, holding out her hand. Johnnie squeezed Sherlock’s side through her blouse. Sherlock took a deep breath, and smiled, and reached out for Gina’s hand.

Johnnie watched them go: one glamourous and polished in her black sheath dress with her red lips and her red stilettos, and one windswept and boyish-looking, tonight, in khaki capris and ballet flats and an oversized black button-down blouse, with her face bare and her hair piled up on her head. Sherlock looked back over her shoulder at Johnnie as Gina pulled her away, raising her eyebrows comically. Johnnie remembered that second night at the Gates: Sherlock in her off-the-shoulder purple silk, breathing false seductive pleasantries against Gina’s skin. Now, out on the dance floor, Gina leant over to speak into Sherlock’s ear, and Sherlock laughed, sudden, with that goofy little shake of her shoulders that she did when she was genuinely amused and not thinking about how she looked.

Johnnie felt *dizzy* with gratitude.

The song had ended. Ted had stepped back, was laughing with Smithy. Chester was playing a tinkling little bridge piece, to allow Bess the time to take her bass back from the tiny blonde. Then Bess swung her instrument into place and let her fingers start walking, and Chester broke into a mid-tempo country and western number. The couples around the floor were pulling each other closer, and starting to lean and rub up against each other, when the ones nearest the bar started noticing Gina and Sherlock.

Then people were pulling back, whispering among themselves. Johnnie balled up her hands. Sherlock pulled her chin up in that prideful, nervous way she had. But Bess and Chester kept right on playing, and Gina smiled at Sherlock, and Sherlock, in her cropped trousers and her lace-trimmed blouse, smiled back.
And then, for the second time that night, Gina Ware and her partner were dancing alone on the floor of the Gateways, this time to a tougher crowd. Gone was the reverent silence of earlier; in its place was whispering and fidgeting, and glancing sidelong. Johnnie couldn’t be sure, but from somewhere in the back of the room she thought she heard a low hiss.

Gina seemed to care not a whit. Sherlock spun her, and Gina did a complicated little double-time flounce at the end of the spin, and came back to centre looking lovely and at ease, and only the tiniest bit defiant. From off to the other side of the room, Johnnie recognised Smithy’s giddy laugh.

And soon it was more than her laugh: Smithy had golden Diana Dors by the hand, and was pulling her out onto the floor, smiling. A murmur went up. Then, from the other side of the room, Haley and Cass twirled out of the crowd. They were already so far into a spin when they caught Johnnie’s eye, that she couldn’t tell who had started it; but she did see it, a minute later, when Cass caught Lou’s attention over the top of Haley’s head. Lou rolled her eyes, and put out her hand to the tiny blonde femme who had taken over from Bess on bass, and they sidled together onto the floor too.

Chester started in on a Vera Lynn number. Sherlock transitioned Gina into waltz time. The floor wasn’t empty but it wasn’t full. Johnnie bit the inside of her mouth.

Over by the piano, Leslie Matthews and Andie Levinson were staring, their pints forgotten in their hands, but behind the bass Bess was glaring at them. She took her hands off the strings completely for a measure; Leslie’s head whipped around, and Bess widened her eyes, and Leslie toasted her with her pint and put it down on the piano. Then she put out a hand to Mireille, standing nearby.

And then—Johnnie felt her eyebrows approach her hairline—Sally Donovan, of all people, took Andie Levinson by the hand and led her out onto the floor, too. Sally gave Johnnie an arch look as she passed, but she moved closer to Andie and ground against her, and Johnnie found she could forgive her an awful lot.

After Sally and Andie, Johnnie couldn’t keep track. Couples were sliding onto the floor from all sides; there were people Johnnie didn’t even know. Chester launched into another number, medley-style, after Vera Lynn, and then into another. He sped things up a bit as more and more couples stepped out, and soon the floor was thick with grinding bodies, Gina and Sherlock unnoticed among them. It was, thought Johnnie, like any night of any week of any year, at the Gates.

***

June 7, 1955
10:44pm
The Gateways Club, 239 King’s Road, Chelsea
London, England

It seemed like ages. Ages of shaking hands, and smiling; ages of laughing at peoples’ increasingly-drunken jokes; ages of accepting a surprising amount of gratitude—before Sherlock was able to corner Johnnie by the door to the ladies’, and lean down to whisper in her ear.

The party was—it wasn’t terrible, Sherlock thought, with some shock. Especially after the dances with Gina. Sherlock’s whole body had seized up stiff when Gina had taken her hand; but Gina had pulled Sherlock out on the floor and planted her own hand firmly on Sherlock’s shoulder, and leaned over to whisper in her ear ‘Johnnie tells me I ought to let you lead.’ Sherlock had been surprised into laughter, glancing over her shoulder to where Johnnie sat at the bar. It had been easier, after that. And once the floor had filled back up, and Gina had returned to her post by the door, Sherlock had danced with Cass; and then Haley; and then a butch Sherlock had never met before; and then, to her
great astonishment, the same femme Astrid (or was it Sam?) who had been so horrible to Sherlock on her first night here, and who tonight had made her laugh despite herself with her hand on Sherlock’s hip, teaching her a new dance she called the cha-cha-cha.

Sherlock had been too exhausted to dance anymore, after that. Two more butches and another femme had asked her, on her way back over to the bar, but she’d had an image in her mind of sitting back down on the stool behind Johnnie; of putting her arms around Johnnie’s waist and nuzzling behind her ear and inviting her—.

But when she’d arrived back at the bar, Johnnie had been gone.

Which made Sherlock cross. She’d wanted to go find her at once. But when she’d asked Smithy, Smithy had just smiled and held up a finger, and started making Sherlock something she called a ‘Corpse Reviver,’ so Sherlock had felt obligated to wait for her to finish. And in the meantime, as the group was on a set break, Chester Davis had come by and shook her hand, and then Bess Taylor had buttonholed her, and thanked her, and asked if it were true what she’d heard from Cass about Sherlock detaining a thief in a neighbour’s sitting room with only the contents of the victim’s knitting basket, which Sherlock had had to admit was true, actually, after which Bess had asked such surprisingly astute questions about the probable fibre content of the available materials, and how Sherlock had accommodated for the elasticity of the wool, that it was a good half an hour before she had made her escape.

And then Leslie had found her, and shaken her hand, and neither of them had said anything much at all. But they’d taken long enough about it that Sherlock was still standing about when Ted came up holding the hand of a tiny black-haired girl in a blue cotton nightie, who thanked Sherlock, sleepily but very earnestly, for saving her auntie Smithy from prison. Sherlock had shaken the girl’s hand, smiling awkwardly. She had spotted Johnnie leaning up against the wall in the corridor just as Ted picked up his daughter and started up the stairs, with her looking back at Sherlock over his shoulder.

Infuriatingly, Sherlock almost missed Johnnie again after that; because by the time she made her way through the crush of bodies around the far end of the bar, Johnnie was leaning up on her crutches, easing out of her conversation with Lou by the ladies’. Johnnie had her hand on Lou’s arm. It looked, thought Sherlock, coming up behind Johnnie and wrapping an arm around her waist, as if they were patching things up.

‘Oh, hullo,’ Johnnie said, a little blurrily, nuzzling her head back against Sherlock’s shoulder.

Lou tipped her hat, and went into the washroom. Sherlock bent her head to Johnnie’s ear—at last, at last—and murmured ‘Come out back with me.’

‘Out back,’ Johnnie said, eyebrows up. ‘You want Smithy to barge in on us again while we’re half-naked, do you?’

‘Actually,’ Sherlock said, pretending to consider; so that Johnnie laughed, and shuffled herself around in Sherlock’s arms to punch her awkwardly on the side. Johnnie really was a little tipsy, Sherlock thought. She smelled of Armignac, which to Sherlock’s knowledge wasn’t officially for sale at the Gateways. Sherlock suspected that Smithy was slipping them both liquor from her private store.

‘Might be a little awkward, with these damned things,’ Johnnie said, into the crook of Sherlock’s neck.

‘No, really,’ Sherlock said, as Johnnie leaned up to nibble at her neck—distracting. ‘Come out with me. There’s something I—Johnnie. There’s something I want you to see.’
That got Johnnie’s attention, at last. She pulled her head back from nuzzling at Sherlock’s collarbone through her blouse, and hobbled a half-step back, a questioning look on her face. But Sherlock wasn’t giving anything away.

‘Lead on,’ Johnnie said at last. ‘By all means.’

So they slipped out the back way, together this time, and Sherlock couldn’t help feeling—as she walked backward up the stairs in front of Johnnie, up and up the narrow wooden staircase, and stopped them both on the landing because she was giddy and tipsy and she wanted to ease Johnnie up against the concrete wall and kiss the brandy off her tongue—she couldn’t help feeling that this way was a thousand times better than the last time they’d come, even accounting for Johnnie’s broken leg.

The kiss went on—went on longer, a bit longer than Sherlock had planned. It was just that Johnnie was so—god, delicious, and her shirt was all rumpled and her skin was warm and her hands were in Sherlock’s hair.

But Sherlock was too wrought up to linger long in the back stairwell of the Gates. Her brain felt waterlogged with talk and alcohol, but her skin was vibrating on her bones, and she kept thinking of what was waiting, what was—

‘Hurry up,’ she said, drawing back from Johnnie without letting go of Johnnie’s pinned shoulders. Johnnie laughed. She didn’t point out who had been holding them up.

‘What’s the hurry, then?’ she asked instead. Sherlock tugged at her untucked shirt, since both Johnnie’s hands were occupied: up and up and up. Johnnie grumbled in a laughing way. Sherlock held the door open with her foot, and grabbed Johnnie’s lapels to shuffle her around and more or less lift her through it backwards, and then drag her around side-to-side with Sherlock so that Sherlock could see her face when she—

‘Sherlock,’ Johnnie whispered.

Darkness had fallen, almost completely. But Smithy had helped Sherlock earlier with setting up extra lighting in the alleyway, and clearing away the detritus, and putting an extra padlock on the wire-topped gate so that there was very little danger, really, of anyone succumbing to temptation and attempting to steal the motorcycle that stood illuminated there, gleaming silver-blue against the red alley brick.

‘How did you—,’ Johnnie said, swallowing, her hand clenching and unclenching on the grip of her crutch. Sherlock may have bounced on her toes, a little. ‘Did you have to go to your brother for this? Because after what you told me I don’t want his—’

‘No,’ Sherlock said. Her voice came out higher than usual, almost a squeak. ‘No, nothing like that. Go on then, look it over.’

Johnnie swung forward, tentative, crutches and then leg. She reached out a hand to touch the lacquer of the petrol tank, but she still looked hesitant.

‘Then how—Sherlock, this bike is brand new, it’s a brand-new Triumph, you don’t even have money for food down the shops, how did you—’

‘I called in a few favours,’ Sherlock said. Johnnie just looked at her.

‘Well,’ Sherlock amended, feeling oddly nervous all of a sudden. ‘Rather a large number, actually. We’ll need to be careful not to break anything important for the next, er, year or two, really. And we
may be dining on tinned beans even more than usual, although from the way Gina was talking I
won’t be surprised if she shows up at Baker Street with hot meals; the woman seems to think we
starve. Smithy was good, though, she and I talked the bloke down to quite a fair price in the end.
And Mickey, of course, she helped me to assess the condition, since I have to admit it’s not really my
area of exper—’

But she couldn’t finish about Mickey; or about bartering goods into pounds sterling across the length
and breadth of Marylebone at odd hours of the morning; or the vast array of conflicting advice
bestowed upon her by Lee and Pat and Cass and Smithy; because Johnnie had shifted forward on
her good leg, and let her crutches fall away from the Triumph, and was wrapped around Sherlock,
electric, kissing the words from her lips.

Chapter End Notes

1. (*T*)Ain't Nobody's Business is a classic 20s blues song originally written by Porter
Grainger and Everett Robbins, although at this point everyone and their sister has
recorded it; the most famous version is (I think?) Billie Holiday's. I dithered over
using this song for Gina and Smithy's dance, because of the lines about how it's
to get hit by your man than to get left alone; I hope it goes without saying
that we here at breathedout, inc. do not condone violence between sexual partners
unless said violence is fully consensual.

I opted for it anyway because I have strong feelings about the way this particular
song is used in storytelling contexts, where it's usually made to illustrate an
individual's justifications of their self-destructive behavior. (Exhibit A on this is
the Billie Holiday biopic Lady Sings the Blues, where Ain't Nobody's Business is
cast as Holiday's anthem for justifying her drug habit.) The song can certainly be
read that way, but I think that to do so exclusively is to ignore the larger cultural
context of the blues. In particular, that it's a form which came directly out of black
Americans facing bigotry and systematic racial oppression day after day,
generation after generation. Lines like "Ain't nothing I can do, or nothing I can
say / folks don't criticize me" read very differently if you take them in the context
of a history of slavery, segregation, housing discrimination, lynching,
systematically maintained black poverty, and just white assholes being as sholes,
than if you use those same lyrics to look at one individual's personal choices. In
particular the lines become less about an ill-advised alienation of one's support
system, and more about a very brave and healthy response to being treated
abusively, which is to distance oneself as much as possible from the abuse, and to
try to rebuild one's own sense of self.

Since I've gone on this long about this one song, I should also mention that no
two oppressions are the same, and I hope I don't come across as making an exact
equation between oppression of black Americans in the 20s, and oppression of
queer Londoners in the 50s. I do think there are some resonances there, though,
that would be powerful for the characters in that scene, particularly given Smithy's
Alabama roots and Chester Davis' long-time familiarity with ragtime and the
blues.
Okay, SORRY FOR THE TANGENT; I just have a lot of thinky thoughts about *Ain't Nobody's Business*, apparently!

2. On a hopefully much shorter note, please enjoy Bessie Smith's excellent 1933 recording of *Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer*. It's highly enjoyable! The song was written around the time of Smith's recording, by the husband/wife team of Coot Grant and Wesley Wilson.

3. And here you have a visual reference for Johnnie’s new bike: a 1955 Triumph T110 Tiger. This would have been, if my understanding is correct, not quite as sexy an option as the Vincent, but still brand-new and quite powerful enough to be getting on with. The first T110s were released in 1954, so it's not only a brand-new bike but a brand-new line. And of course, as is all-important: British-made. :-)

) Poor thing, though; she'll miss the first six weeks of riding season with her leg in the cast.

End Notes

Good lord, it's done. I'm kind of in shock. There is a $40 bottle of champagne waiting for me in the fridge.

There is no way I can properly express my gratitude to all the many, many people who helped out on this massive undertaking. *Sophiahelix* and *Sparck* for their eagle-eyed beta work; *Roane* for her early feedback; David for his pinch-hitting beta work and incredible ongoing support; *Nympheline* for her advice on Chapter 3 and *Corinna* for hers on Chapter 6; *Emma* for helping me make a classical music joke in Chapter 10; *Gins/Greywash* for listening to me bitch and moan about this project on a near-daily basis for months, as well as
constantly upping
my game through conversation and example; the entire Antidiogenes Group for the word
wars and the constant support and encouragement. THANK YOU SO MUCH, MY
BEAUTIFUL FRIENDS.

AND THE ILLUSTRATORS! Oh my goodness, I am overwhelmed that so many people
made beautiful pictures for this story. Thank you to Ninette Aubart for the gorgeous
motorcycle frontispiece, and the image of wee Sherlock and Vicky Trevor; Against-
Stars/Katya for adorable Sherlock and Johnnie at the garage at the opening of Part 2; and Dee
for the wonderful drawing of Johnnie adjusting her tie, from Chapter 10. I AM SO LUCKY.
You are all AMAZING. (And should anyone else feel inspired to add to this list, please
consider this blanket permission to do so.)

To everyone who commented on this, especially people who said it touched them in some meaningful way, I am totally serious when I say I never would have
made it through this process without you. It means SO much to me, thank you thank you
thank you. Thanks to all of you, and in particular to Otter, whose comments have been of a
scale and complexity to match the story itself, and who is contemplating a HTMCIS-related
project of her own that makes me jump up and down every time I think about it.

Basically, it's been a scene, man.

Thank you all.

I love you.

Good night.

Works inspired by this one

Cover for How the mouth changes its shape by moonblossom graphics (moonblossom)

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