The Other One

by PurpleHydrangeas

Summary

Sherlock Holmes isn't anybody's fool. In fact, she's regularly six steps ahead of Mycroft. That is, until his meddling knocks her through a loop, and before she knows it, she's adding a wing to her Mind Palace to house a not-so-aged Army Doctor. John Watson doesn't know what to make of this mad genius with blue eyes, but he knows working for Mycroft Holmes is, within the span of 24 hours, the biggest mistake of his life.

Notes

I wrote Girl!John, so Girl!Sherlock wasn't too far behind. This basically is my take on an AU meeting if Sherlock's family was a bit more overtly meddling, and she had a more positive relationship with her parents. They do mean well, but, well…the whole thing's a little odd.

Pre-relationship because it's not clear to John how much Sherlock knows about their interference and informed consent is sexy, and manipulation is not.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

John Watson had a secret.

Oh, not the gambling he’d indulged in during his tours, when he had combat pay and little sense.

It certainly wasn’t the fact that he hated wearing his dress uniform. Everyone knew that, because everyone hated them. Only some kind of freak liked wearing them. John felt as though he was at once trussed up like a goose over a spit spun by Satan, and had his soul on display via the clink of every medal pinned to his chest.

And yet, here he was, in June, wearing his bloody dress uniform, at Trooping the Colour. John wasn’t a fool. When a box lands at your front door, with an engraved invitation from the Powers that Be, you dust off your medals and report for duty. It was the Queen’s official birthday, and if someone demanded on her behalf that John be there, he was not going to question it.

Except that, well, he did.

He questioned it as he sucked it in and stood at attention.

He questioned it when his leg began to ache from the rigid seat, and he felt his cane’s rubber tip melting against the heat of the stands.

He questioned it as drums reverberated. Why was he here, amongst all these posh people, who had invitations and cards just like his own? John wasn’t, despite his decorated Army days, one of these people. He’d gone through Uni and his postgraduate work on the Army’s pound, he’d gone to government schools, not Harrow and Winchester.

Secretly, he wondered why he was here.

He wished he could be like the people lining the Mall, so taken away by the pomp and the grandeur. Instead, he was in what could only be described as a VIP section of stands, and John saw everything they chose to ignore. John saw reality, saw the boys who had been excluded for being too short or too tall, saw the women who had fought tooth and nail to be taken seriously, saw the sweat rolling off of the regiments as they marched and spun.

The flypast was over, the Royals had waved and looked suitably royal and commanding, and the whole thing was done. John had wasted his whole day. If Ella ever heard him say that, she would drop to the floor in a faint, but it was true. John wouldn’t work to rouse her, because she’d only want to explore his feelings.

Who had seen that he had gotten an invite? He’d been introduced to the Queen a time or two, but John doubted the woman remembered him. What was there to recall? The summons from the Lord Chamberlin set John on edge, and made him aware that there was more at play than he could presently observe.

John moved around the stand once he was on terra firma, through the crowd of important people he saw on the magazine stand at Tesco’s. He thought these were probably Waitrose people, not that most of them did their own shopping. John supposed he had a chip on his shoulder about it all. He wasn’t looking to make friends. He sort of hoped he could slink back to his bedsit and forget that this invitation had ever come along.

These were the people whose power and indifference had seen him booted out the Army, a worker
bee amongst others. He would have risen in rank. He never would, not now.

“Dr. Watson?” Without warning, there was a impeccably dressed man at his side, “I’m Waller.”

John ventured, “Hello.” His Mum had raised him with manners. When creepy men came up to you, you at least said hello before discerning their purposes. Unless, of course, you were in a war zone.

John to remind himself that Buckingham was not a war zone. Even if it felt like one.

“Sir, the parties are gathering this way, if you’d be so kind as to follow me.” Waller spoke, a tone that was all that was polite. John saw, though, that he was being told to do just as Waller demanded.

“I really...” John tried, as Waller led him expertly through the crowds. They were heading towards the Palace. John forced himself not to stop. He’d gone into hostile territory before, this was nothing new. He had no one at his six, but that had never stopped before. Sweat beaded at his brow, and it had nothing to do with the heat. Likely, his body was trying to battle the cold chill zinging down his spine.

Something was off about this whole bloody fucking thing.

Waller spoke, just as they rounded a corner, John’s cane keeping pace easily. “It’s just inside, out of the heat, sir.”

John did not reply. He wanted information, not what he could see and discern. He could see that the sky was a cloudless blue as they made their way towards a door, and the summer heat was moderate, but insistent, the sun shining and glinting off his jacket like a sniper’s scope.

They continued silently through the bustle, which thinned considerably once they were inside. John’s polished shoes moved along the freshly hoovered carpets.

Just as he was about to demand information, Waller took a step back, allowing John to take the lead, “Here we are, Captain. Please do make yourself comfortable, and if you should need anything, we’re happy to assist you.”

Before John could splutter, he was abandoned in a cocktail party, like some kind of circle of Hell. Champagne was flowing, and waiters moved around with trays amongst impeccably dressed people. Their gaiety was a front, John realized. It was like the time he’d had to drop out of a chopper to perform an emergency surgery in the field, and a fast extraction.

John had the strangest feeling that this was an audition of sorts, that he was being watched. He trusted that feeling. The Taliban had followed him once. Those men hadn’t survived their venture, not that John took any joy in doing what he had to do for the safety of his men and his own skin.

Therefore, John strode into the room as though he owned the place, as best he could, and took up a flute. He knew it would shake in his hand and slosh over the top of the glass, but he had no intention of eating, so this was a compromise. He had, therefore, to display an ease he did not feel.

He needed to scope out the room. It was wide, rectangular, with two side doors wallpapered over to look like the wall, several windows, and one main door. His back was never to the doors as he observed the people. Something was not right, here. They socialized, chatting about this and that. John heard bits about someone’s children, and worse, grandchildren. Snippets hit John’s ears, and he exchanged smiles when people met his gaze. It looked normal, but that was the trick. Things that looked normal never really were normal.

John was content to watch the people, but they weren’t content to observe him, for several people
went of their way to be genial. A comfortable looking woman in a pastel suit ended up standing next to him, “Oh, hello.”

John felt her reading his medals like Harry would read the proof on a gin bottle. He replied, “Hello.”

After a moment of staring at him, she spoke again, “Thank you for your service.”

John noted the glint in her eyes. She probably meant it. Most people did, in that rote sort of way. It was polite to say, but John really wondered if it was polite to talk about death, and death, and suffering, and loss. Then again, she likely had some romantic view of war, unsecured by reality. No, he realized, she was testing his mettle. She wasn’t saying anything mindlessly. She had a point, an intention. This woman was intent on observing his reactions, intent on emotionally manipulating him, reminding him of who and what he had used to be. He wasn’t up for a witty game.

Not, of course, that this was a game. He knew what this was, what she, in all likelihood was. After all this setup was textbook, so textbook that he could see his instructors, and hear them lecturing about...John did not give further thought to those memories. They were classified. Best to keep up the front, all the while knowing that these were basic tactics, taught the first week.

John smiled tightly, “Everyone does their part.”

“Indeed.” She allowed, “But you’ve done more than you share, haven’t you? When the time comes, don’t let that boy put you off. He does mean well. You do understand duty.”

John didn’t ask her what boy she meant. He knew he would figure it out. She’d done him a service and confirmed a few things for him, but that didn’t give her power over him. He was being watched? Why tell him? Was she the one at the top?

He didn’t want to give her control over him. He didn’t reply to her question, because he had no intention of opening himself up to her, even if this little conversation hadn’t been a test. She was not his ally.

Offering a crumb of information wasn’t a gift. It was test.

John missed the days when he wasn’t so fucking paranoid. Except, he thought, it wasn’t paranoia if you were correct. Besides, he hadn’t been a twenty year old kid in almost two decades. Even then he’d not been very trusting.

Instead, he asked, “Would you care for a mini-quiche?” The tray was headed their way, and John would willingly have crossed the room to fetch her one and end this line of inquiry. He needed a plan, and to observe her from a distance.

He knew they were speaking in a code for which he did not have the cipher. Flying blind in yet another God damned mission, like within Africa, in the Balkans, in Ireland, and other continents, regions, and countries he’d been in and out so fast that the name hadn’t quite stuck.

“Me? No, no. I’m quite all right. Trooping the Colour always steals my appetite.” She sipped her drink, “Lovely to have met you.”

John returned the sentiment, and watched as she swanned away. It was only then that he realized that his champagne flute had been held steady in his hand the entire time she’d been next to him. John knew it didn’t have anything to do with the cost of her suit.

John didn’t really want to make conversation with anyone else who came by his post. After another
fifteen minutes, it was clear that the point of his being here wasn’t going to be found in this room. John wasn’t a sitting duck, even if he was lame.

Instead, he went in search of a loo. If he ended up somewhere they didn’t want aging army doctors, they could lock him up and it would be a blessing.

He stilled when he heard a voice in the shadows. He paused, ready to defend himself, “I’d apologize for Mummy, but I make it a point never to acknowledge her foolishness.”

A woman, young looking, tall and painfully thin, appeared from an alcove. She held a lit cigarette in her pale fingers, and she blew out smoke, “Then again, perhaps...” She shook her head, and snuffed out her cigarette on a saucer she’d clearly taken from the party. She barely looked old enough to smoke.

She was likely apologizing for her mother’s comments, even though she said nothing more as she stared at him with a burning intensity.

It was kind of her, but why? What could she see? Had she served herself? No, he would know. Her eyes had seen war, but not the kind fought on a front far from home.

John studied her. Her electric blue eyes were wide, her face free of makeup, and her wild, curly, hair was pulled back into a loose knot that rested at the nape of her long neck. “Yes, I’m beautiful. Can we move on?”

John felt the saliva in his mouth dry. “To what, exactly?”

She pulled an iPhone from her clutch, sighed, and stuck it back. “What you must know is that I do not intend to alter my career objectives in any way just because you’ve deigned to show your face in London.”

“I’m a doctor.” John offered, “You don’t look sick.”

“Oh, John.” The woman smiled, and it stole John’s breath. “You of all people know not every condition is visible.”

“Wait.” John held up a hand, “You know my name.”

“Don’t be absurd. Mycroft has had you in mind for years, not that he ever thinks. If he had, he would have covered his tracks.” The woman spoke as though he knew everything she was talking about, “Vienna confirmed it. It’s not my fault they sought to hide the truth behind gilt and purchased gentility.”

John opened his mouth, and closed it. What did Austria have to do with anything? He had never been to Austria. This girl was not safe. And yet, she talked about this like one might talk about nits, or a flu jab.

He found her fascinating, “Who are you?”

When John blinked, she was gone, in a swirl of dress. John knew it would haunt his dreams, if he slept.

Later that week, John was struggling back from Sainsbury’s when he noticed an SUV following him.
Black. Tinted.

Following him continually for the fourth day in a row.

John was done.

This wasn’t fun and games any more. 24 hours was questionable, 48 was intriguing, 72 was old hat, but 96 hours of continual observation was just a waste of resources. There were pensions to be paid, and if they weren’t government spooks, John would eat his hat. They had followed him to rugby yesterday, to the chemist’s, and to see Ella. He’d lost them this morning, what with spending an extra hour navigating the Tube. They’d been long gone when he went into the shop, but now they were back.

John shifted a bag against his cane. He could fight them off, but damn if he’d break an egg. His pension didn’t allow for breakage, even in the name of self-defense. John took a left turn in between the cars, just as the car got over to take a right.

They weren’t even bothering to blend. The driver knew where he lived, which John had known because the damn car had been in front of his bedsit for days without fail.

They were definitely government. Obvious. Why, John wondered, had he never taken private contracts?

John looked up. The car stopped. He decided that if he approached it, his bread wouldn’t squish like it would if he kept tramping about the city. He’d been at a job interview at some posh clinic in Hampstead. They’d taken one look at his cane and his shaking hand and written him off. War was hell on the CV.

He’d gone grocery shopping with the last of his funds. Might as well go to hell with a full belly, after all. John reached to tap at the window, just as it rolled down, “Something you’d like? There’s a sale on milk at Sainsbury’s.”

“Dr. Watson.” The driver spoke without looking away from the road, “Please do get in.”

“Kidnappers who say please?” John asked, pulling open the door. “How can I refuse?”

John slid in, cane first, and shut the door. The driver ignored him. John knew he could overtake the car easily. There was only one man, and he had to drive. Dispatching him would be child’s play, as would taking over the driving. How shoddy was this operation? John wanted to laugh.

The car wasn’t even locked. He could jump out, but he really wanted toad in the hole and his leg would bitch for days if he jumped from a moving vehicle.

John knew he wouldn’t eat, so he tried to force himself to eat bland foods he could pack with calories. He couldn’t jump out and carry a dozen eggs, a loaf of bread, his gun, and his Tim Tam. Damn if he was leaving his one treat behind. Oddly, all of these counter surveillance efforts made him hungry.

Mind on his gun beneath his shirt and his stomach, he decided to hedge his bets, and wait. John decided that now was as good a time as any to eat his Tim Tam.

John didn’t have to wait long. The car pulled to a stop in front of a white building just as the last of his Tim Tam disappeared into his mouth. A discreet doorman popped out of nowhere. John hefted his groceries, felt his gun shift in the band of his jeans as he slid from the seat, and went inside. He knew that the driver wouldn’t be any help. He hadn’t even batted an eyelash when John fiddled with
his wrapper and stuffed it in the door handle. It was never a bad idea to leave behind a bit of DNA.

The doorman greeted, “Welcome to the The Diogenes Club. Would you care to refrigerate your foodstuffs for the duration of your visit?”

John looked over his bags, knowing his toad in the hole was a lost cause. The doorman pushed a buzzer and two men appeared. One took his bags, his face impassive. John saw a flicker of judgement on his face, though he didn’t bat an eyelash. John guessed he didn’t buy frozen food, nor anything that said ‘by Sainsbury’s’ on the label.

The second employee in uniform led him down a hall. John took a quick study of the space as he limped along. He could easily break some windows, and that was a relief, even if it would mean trampling the flowers outside. He didn’t relax, but he knew his way out in a trice.

The door to a small sitting room opened, and his escort stepped inside, “Dr. John Watson to see you, sir.”

John stepped inside. Books lined the wall behind him, and a man in a bespoke suit with an umbrella by his side gestured to the opposite chair, “Dr. Watson.”

John did not reply. He had nothing to say. His last name and rank were hot in his mouth until he remembered that the Army wasn’t behind him on this one.

He was John Watson.

One man Army.

Alone.

The man poured a cup of tea and added just the right amount of John’s additions. John didn’t roll his eyes at the confirmation of whom had been behind the ongoing surveillance. It was so bloody showy and obvious.

Again, clearly the government.

Was that supposed to intimidate him? Millions of people took their tea in the same way. His umbrella didn’t make him all knowing. John had never felt more energized, not since he’d left Helmand. If someone wanted to be evaded and ditched on the way to grabbing his dry cleaning, well, at least it gave John an excuse to do as they asked. It kept him sharp, gave him a goal, a purpose.

“Dr. Watson.” The man took a sip of his own tea. In the space of a moment, his phone buzzed four times, which the man ignored, “I’m prepared to offer you a job.”

Knowing slid into place as John rested easily on his feet. “MI-6? No thanks.”

“We have a mutual interest, you might say.” The man ignored John’s refusal, “Sit, and drink your tea. I assure you, it’s the finest Earl Grey.”

John did like Earl Grey, and free tea was free tea, even if it did come in absurd bone china. John sat, then, hauling a simple wooden chair over from the table to face his contemporary. He wasn’t going to give this man a chance to get between him and the door. “You and I have nothing in common.”

“Give it time, Doctor.” The man allowed, “Give it time.”

John did not ask how long, or what the man meant. He knew that the questions were visible no
matter how hard he tried to hide it. “I am the second son of a minor member of the peerage.”

John sniffed. So what? All John saw was a man who was likely hemmed in by expectation, and limited by his circumstances, same as anyone else.

“Do you mean to say that, with my wealth, prestige, and influence that you pity me?” The man pressed.

John did not reply.

He did not seem offended though John knew he could not tell for certain what the man was thinking, “I went into public service after Cambridge, and thereby, occupy a minor position in the government.”

“And you have yet to offer your name.” John observed, “Didn’t your dons bother to mention that point of social convention?”

“You care not one bit for social convention.” The man was icy, coolly assessing John, “Or else you would have not spoken to a young girl in the halls of Buckingham.”

John swallowed his tea. She was involved with this somehow, she of the blue dress and the bluer eyes.

John did not trust his rabbiting heart. He had thought of her quite a bit, and not just in a sexual way, which just told him that he needed to get out there and chat up a teacher or a fellow doctor or someone out for a bit of fun down the pub. He’d tried to text a friend or something, but it had been a pointless thought, one he’d lost as soon as her eyes had flashed over his mind. He was happier staying in, knowing his surveillance unit was sitting out in a car in the summer’s heat, wasting time and petrol, watching him do absolutely nothing.

“I don’t remember. Did I talk to a woman?” John asked, “It seems that you would know.”

The man’s mouth tightened. His phone buzzed three more times in the span of a heartbeat.

John sipped his tea.

They sat in cold silence for a long while.

“Dr. Watson.” The other man broke first, and it was a thrill to John to know that the bullet and the pain hadn’t stolen quite all of his mettle.

There was a loud thud that had John on his feet, and spinning around carefully so that he was on the defensive, ready to grab his gun, instinct and training coming to the fore. Two people, John gathered from the sounds coming down the hall. Someone, a male, was shouting for another person to stop. The second person was lighter, faster, but was moving with a slightly hesitant, pained, quality. There was a scuffle in the hallway.

Alright, enough laying in wait, John thought.

John was a nanosecond from grabbing the door and reaching for his gun when the door flew open and a woman stood in the doorway as the door hit the wall.

It was her.

Her eyes blazed with anger. Her slim body danced with suppressed energy. The man who had
carried his food was hot on her heels, shoving into her, jostling her, and before John knew what he was about, she was behind him, and the doorman was on the floor.

When he stopped moving, John had a shoe on the grocery carrier’s back. His palm burned from where it had come into contact with smooth skin as he’d hauled her behind him. The man was cowed by John’s foot, but his tone was indignant, even muffled by the carpet. “This is a gentleman’s club, Mr. Holmes.”

“I do apologize, Felmour. My sister will be leaving.” He glanced at the woman as John removed his foot and reached out a hand to the doorman that was ignored. “Won’t you, Sherlock?”

Her eyes glittered. John couldn’t help but stare. “I will leave when I leave, Mycroft.”

“You may go, Felmour. We won’t require any assistance.” Mycroft Holmes allowed, his words propelling the rumpled man to do the door. He glared at John, as though he was too crass and violent to even be breathing the same air, and exited.

Sherlock spoke, “I had to leave my experiments because you decided to barter me off like a cow!”

“If I wanted to barter you off, I would have compelled you to stay in Vienna, or perhaps New York.” Mycroft’s smooth tones did nothing to settle his sister. “I was merely getting to know Dr. Watson. You cannot blame me for it.”

“You do realize,” John pointed out, having a sister of his own and coming to see what this was with a sort of shocked clarity, “That your sister and I, that we, have only met once. Don’t you think you’re being absurd here?”

“You misunderstand me, Dr. Watson.” Mycroft insisted, “May I remind you you are here for a job?”

“What else is there?” John asked, just to rile him up.

“Mycroft is always absurd.” Sherlock insisted, “Mummy’s no better. Why must you do this to me?”

“I am trying to secure you a security detail, Sherlock, that you will not maim, poison, attempt to murder, reduce to tears, or evade.” Mycroft snapped, “It appears, after much deliberation, that Dr. Watson is the only living soul for the job.”

“What a ringing endorsement.” John muttered.

Mycroft looked at him, “You're very loyal very quickly.”

“I do not need security. I need cases!” Sherlock hissed, “If you hadn’t stolen my DI, I would not be in this fix!”

“Sherlock.” There was a soothing note in the elder brother’s voice that made John pause. For all of his haughtiness, Mycroft did care for his sister. John realized this with a sudden but unshakable clarity. Clearly, Mrs. Holmes had been warning him of this fact, as though it was not totally and fully evident. “I did not steal your DI. You know that I’d sooner...”

“Oh, shut up.” Sherlock bit out, “Why would I want Gavin? I want him to come back from your sex holiday and give me cases. Dimmock is useless.”

Sherlock sat effortlessly down on the chair John had refused and thumbed her phone.

“Gregory.” Mycroft returned, “Is not the topic of our discussion. Neither need we discuss our recent
nuptials. You have been in six hostage situations in half as many months. You have been stabbed, assaulted, shot at, beaten...” Mycroft listed them, and each one was made John’s adrenaline surge, “God knows what else has happened that you’ve hidden.”

Sherlock huffed and looked away.

John knew she had hidden a few things, including the cracked rib she was ignoring, and a fresh bruise on her collarbone. “She doesn’t need you to cackle like a hen.” John began, “If Sherlock has been hurt, she’s got a right to choose if she wants to talk about it, and to choose whom she tells.”

“Finally, some sense has been spoken.” Sherlock exclaimed. John realized something, when she sent him a smile that was as real as it was crooked.

John’s heart stopped for a second, so brief he almost missed it. He almost missed the moment his entire life changed. He’d prayed so long for his heart to stop, that when it did for a totally unfathomable reason, he couldn’t miss it.

Sherlock Holmes did not need him. She was no doubt as formidable as he’d dreamed, iron willed, and strong. She would never need a broken Army doctor who could not come by a respectable job, or sleep a night through. But as for John, he could tell that he needed her. He needed her like air, wanted her like sunshine. It was that simple, and that true.

Fuck. This was a bit not good.

“You’re a doctor.” Sherlock paused, “You were an army doctor.”

“Yes.” John expressed the truth. “A good one.”

“Seen a lot of injuries, then?” She asked, and John saw something behind her eyes. “A lot of violent, deaths?”

“Yes.” It was nothing more or less than the truth. He’d caused a few of those deaths, and he’d never been an innocent bystander no matter his role.

She pursed her lips, “Bit of trouble, too, I bet.”

“Of course, yes.” He agreed, wondering why she was asking, “Enough to last a lifetime. Far too much.”

Sherlock tucked hair behind her ears, a wild curl that seemed as disinclined to listen as Sherlock herself, “Don’t delude yourself, John, you run the risk of becoming dull.”

Mycroft’s inhalation was telling.

“Want to see some more?” Her eyes glittered, the promise of danger and sin bright in their depths.

“God, yes.” John had to force himself to look away. It wasn’t right to mix business with friendship, or whatever the hell this was that he felt, this alien flutter in his stomach and calmness in his soul. Still, he would do it, if it meant access to a war zone in London with this confusing woman at his six.

Sherlock stood, “Well, then.” She tugged down her cotton sleeve, “Mycroft, work it out. Do whatever it is you do, and have my flat debugged. Those are my conditions for now.”

She sailed to the door, as though a man had not been sprawled there a scant five moments before.
She paused, after crossing the threshold, “John, are you coming, or are you going to stare at those biscuits all day?”

John stood, just as Sherlock marched across the room, took up the plate, and dumped the plate into her messenger bag.

Mycroth whimpered.

John laughed as they exited the room.

When they had absconded with Mycroth’s car, and Sherlock had ordered them back to her lab, Sherlock leaned against the seat, and closed her eyes. Her phone was clasped tightly in her hand. Pain tightened her mouth as she blew out a low breath.

John knew what he was seeing, “You know, if you took a blow to the head, or otherwise sustained a concussion, screens aren’t the best.”

“So Google tells me, Doctor.” Sherlock snapped, but there was no venom in it. “I’m fine.”

They didn’t talk for a time. The streets moved past their windows, John lost in thought and unseeing.

She didn’t even look at him, “Ask your question.”

John had so many that he didn’t know where to begin, “What happened in Vienna?”

Sherlock looked at him as if to question his sanity. “I was a debutante.”

John snorted.

“I will have you know I was the best of my set. It was an experiment and nothing more.” Sherlock asserted, “I won’t have it said otherwise.”

“Of course not.” He knew that it had been more, just from her defensive tone. John reached for her messenger bag, and pulled out a biscuit. He bit into one. Lemon. Glorious. “So, debutante, scientist?”

“I am the world’s only consulting detective.” Sherlock announced, her bright eyes flitting over him, “You are from Scotland originally, extended family near Inverness. You were in the Army, your captaincy was a cover for something. Much of your work is classified. You hide behind jumpers and charm. Sometimes you wonder if you’re gay, but you lean towards women. There is something called bisexuality, John. You’re a doctor. Sexuality is not rigid. You’re left handed, but you can use weapons with your right. You favor football, and cricket, but you play rugby. You want a dog, and two, no, three children.”

John did not call her brilliant. He couldn’t make his mouth work. He swallowed his biscuit along with the praise that had almost spilled forth, “Is that all?”

Sherlock’s voice dropped. “I could tell you more about your sexual habits or your propensity for danger and risk.”

“You could.” John returned, back on even footing. Brilliant, amazing, world changing, Sherlock Holmes might be a genius, might be a million things he didn’t know, but he knew how to keep someone talking. It was only after the words left his mouth that he realized that he wished she would
spill his secrets. He not only wanted to hear her voice. He wanted to listen.

“Don’t flirt with me.” Sherlock’s tone was slightly chiding. “I’m married to my work.”

John blinked. Had he been flirting? He didn’t think so. He’d only ever flirted during his ops. “I wasn’t aware that I was flirting.”

Sherlock considered him, before looking out the tinted window and speaking, “You see but you don’t observe, John.”

Her phone buzzed. And just like that, John was no longer her focus. He missed the intensity of her gaze as she spoke into the phone, “What? No! I forbid it.” She hung up, muttered, “Why do they never text?”

And just like that, Sherlock proceeded to open the door of a moving SUV. The car stopped, and she fluidly stepped out just as the tires ceased to roll. The car behind them nearly bashed into their boot, and John ended up throwing himself towards Sherlock to avoid being hit.

As he stepped up on the pavement, he brushed off his shirt, Tim Tam crumbs still evident. “Was that necessary?”

“Entirely.” Sherlock turned right, and John saw why she had flung herself out of the government issue vehicle. “We’re here.”

He’d not seen it for all the traffic blocking the view, but here they were, in front of a derelict apartment building, a far cry from the tidy streets of her brother’s haunts somewhere in Mayfair. There was a panda half on the curb, and an officer waiting in the hallway on the third floor. John’s leg ached, but the pain faded as he saw that the cheap door had been busted open. “Dimmock, you idiot.” Sherlock spat, “If you’ve disturbed my mold cultures...”

The man rolled his eyes, “I cannot wait until Lestrade is back. This is so far below my pay grade.”

Before Sherlock could make her displeasure more fully known, a woman of color in a sleek summer jacket came to the entry. “It’s not a bomb.”

“As if you’re qualified to discern that fact. I’ll have you know that with minor modifications--”

“Sherlock.” John did not want her to explain elementary bomb making to a bunch of suits. There were things even they did not need to know. “Your mold cultures...”

Sherlock gave him a dirty look and bustled off into her domain. It was not what he expected her apartment might look like. In his head, he’d seen some swanky place, sleek and shining, quite unlike this hovel. John figured if he really was hired to be her security, well, then, this would be the first change he’d work towards making.

The floor was rotted out in places, the window locks, where they existed, were broken. John had bigger fish to fry than the assumption that there might have been a bomb in here. Clearly, it had gone off. This place was a death trap. There was at least one person operating a brothel here, and another two drug dealers on this floor alone.

John flashed a smile. “John Watson.”

Before Sally could offer anything more than her name, Sherlock shouted, “John!”

He faked a laugh, forced levity into his shoulders, and walked off. Sally didn’t like Sherlock, and he
wasn’t going to feed her ire. It was better just to play dumb until he figured out his game plan.

John peered through the disgusting flat. He’d grown up in a council flat after his Mum had gotten sick, but this place was so far below that tidy place that John couldn’t describe it. Mice in a lab had better living conditions. John flipped the faucet on, and not surprisingly, no water came out.

“Tea!” Came the demand, “These slides are critical.”

They weren’t going to be discussing the cops in the apartment then. Still, John had to mention something. A tech pulled open a drawer, “Common spaces and visible objects only!” Sherlock snapped, without bothering to look up from her pristine microscope.

“If you want a PA to make you tea and answer your phones, Sherlock, hire one.” A silver haired man John had observed approaching said, “Your security detail is not your nanny.”

“How would you know what my nanny did, Geoff?” Sherlock queried, genuine confusion on her face. “She was hateful.”

“She retired, Sherlock. You grew up, went to Uni.” John realized that this man was none other than Gavin, Geoff, Greg Lestrade, partner of Mycroft Holmes. There was some soothing note in his voice that John understood. For all her bluster, Sherlock Holmes felt deeply. Those who knew her best seemed to be telling John that, from her mother, to her brother, to her brother’s husband.

For the first time today, John found himself smiling warmly at a Holmisean man. “You’re Greg, then?”

“Yeah.” The DI spoke, extending a friendly handshake, “You must be John. Nice to meet you. Myc said...”

“John!” Sherlock jerked excitedly, “Does this look like stachybotrys chartarum to you?”

John eyed her skeptically. “If you go and try to kill yourself to avoid dealing with your apartment being searched, I’m dumping you at the A&E.”

Still, John looked, and did, in fact, see black mold. Jesus. She needed a full workup and psychical, which he was not, not, not, not going to be overseeing. When he was leaning over the eyepiece Sherlock whispered, “I found it under the sink in the loo.”

She looked up, “Sally! I keep things that might be of interest to you under the sink.” She winked at John. John knew she rarely did that, for her face squished. It was utterly adorable and endearing. He wanted to...

Shit fucking hell.

Greg inhaled, “No, Sherlock. There will be making my detectives play hide and find, and there will be no...just, just...No.” He grimaced, “I’m not ready for this. I should have stayed in Mustique.”

“How middle class of Mycroft.” Sherlock sniffed, “Couldn’t he have taken you somewhere nice?”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Greg allowed, “My honeymoon was not planned with your idea of fun in mind. Not that we saw much of the beach.”

John wanted to snigger like a twelve year old boy at the good natured joking, but he paused. The look of confusion on Sherlock’s face was clear for a moment, just before her brain put together the
insinuation, and she primly fiddled with her eyepiece.

“Why must you persist in feeling that I am alarmed by your habits?” Sherlock snapped. “It doesn’t alarm me.”

John stayed silent, leaning against the counter. She didn’t seem the sort to be fussed up by two men together. Clearly, she had no issue with it. He’d know. He’d observed it so many times, as Harry Watson’s twin.

Greg spluttered as his arms fell to his sport coat, rumpled and haphazard. He patted his pocket, “Give it back.”

Greg looked at him. It was a warning, then. Stay away from my sister. It was as loud and clear as Mycroft’s insistence had been not an hour ago. John did not look away.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Sherlock twirled her stool, and nudged John with her knee. He stepped out of her way. She held out her hand, “Slide.”

John shook his head, “I’m not a lab assistant. I don’t get paid enough to become your lab rat.”

“I’m hardly testing compounds on you.” She scoffed, reaching for the slide that was two inches beyond her grasp. “I’m not giving your ID back, Giles. It is futile. Molly has bodies that I simply must examine. I will not be locked out of the lab by a cake eating, boot licking, bureaucrat.”

Lestrade’s hand went to his hair, “Jesus, Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s tone was strident. “I am not a first century man, and now I have things to do.”

She hopped off of her stool, and went to a crooked mirror, hanging partly off the wall, near her front door, swinging her arms as she did so.

John muttered, “I’m beginning to see why people try to kill you.”

“Oh, John.” Sherlock stated as she pinned up locks of hair that had fallen from her nape, “Do not pander to Giles’s delusions.”

“Greg.” Greg stressed, “You’ve only known my name since you were bloody ten, Sherlock.”

John tried not to crush the bug he had to step over to get out of a tech’s way.

Sherlock replied, “I do like to clean out the mind palace from time to time. You know how I abhor clutter and detritus.” She pulled her phone from her pocket, “I am going now.”

John looked around the flat, stunned. She had to be fucking joking.

As Sherlock left the room, Greg called out, “I need the file, Sherlock!”

She was at least halfway down the hallway when she yelled back, “John! I could be accosted in the hallway whilst you fraternize with the enemy!”

John felt himself biting down a grin as he spied something sticking out of the DI’s bag, where he’d left it on the only clean space on the counter. There was a file sticking out of it. “That your file, then?”

Before Greg could reply, John left.
Sherlock was sneaky, he’d give her that much. She’d placed that file in his case, when she was spinning around fixing her hair, slight of hand and distraction coming to her aid. Still, it was pretty funny. Lestrade’s team members were digging around her rat hole of an apartment looking for a file the DI would seemingly have misplaced. It was only when he realized how angry Sally and Dimmock would be, both at the DI and at seemingly wasting their time, that John got Sherlock’s motive. After all, they wouldn’t have seen Sherlock put it there.

The next day, John’s phone buzzed, pulling him from his racing thoughts. His bank account had a deposit, a sum far greater than he understood.

All night, they chased a down cabby and ran through London. John wondered how ever lived a second without her. They’d slept on a stakeout, having gone from the lab to Lestrade’s office because Sherlock was sure they were looking for a cabby. Sherlock had insisted that the cabby would come to them, but that she needed to lay in wait.

John was sitting in a cab next to Sherlock as he forced out the words, “Does your detail normally live nearby?”

Sherlock clicked away on her phone. “You’re short, the bed should be suitable, for a man such as yourself.”

John took offense to that statement. “Hey, look, even the plebs like a bed of their own.”

Sherlock huffed, “I meant a man accustomed to Army accommodations.”

“The tents were nicer than your hellhole.” John returned. They’d spent the night on their feet, and John was glad, if only because it meant having the ability to avoid her apartment.

“It is hardly a hellhole.” Sherlock snapped, “Hell is a garbage pit, someplace.”

John snored. He could imagine a young Sherlock arguing with the rector over things like the impossibility of Genesis, and the Lord’s Supper. “Deleted your confirmation classes, have you?”

“A religious farce.” Sherlock said, and John knew that she had in fact, removed every bit of Anglicanism from her mind palace. He thought it was odd, consider that, on a global scale, people used religion as an excuse to hate and murder almost more than anything else.

“It is a stye.” John went back to his original point, “I refuse to set foot in there.”

Sherlock didn’t look up. “You may set up a command center in the hall.”

John went in for the kill. “Why don’t you spend some of Mycroft’s ill gotten gains and splash out on something with running water, heat, and locking windows?”

Sherlock’s splutter was amazing. He had jumped five steps ahead and four to the side of where she obviously had assumed this conversation was going. But he was a doctor, a soldier. He did not complain. He did not complain, especially, about the things he could work to change. “You would have me ask Mycroft for help?”

“No.” John internally shuddered at the nuclear warfare Sherlock would rain down if someone suggested she do so, “Spend his money. On something he’d fine dull, or something.”
“You’re manipulating me to get what you want.” Sherlock’s confidence was placed fully in this truth.

“I...” John began. He was, but his intentions, while self-serving, were also pure.

“I do not object, entirely.” Sherlock absolved him, “Your plan is not without merit.”

“Right, then.” John tried to shove away feeling as though he’d asked Sherlock to live with him. This had to be work. She wanted a doctor to assist her cases, her family wanted his army background for her safety. Sherlock didn’t want him. “So you’ll move? Somewhere with, uh, space?”

“My flat is...” Sherlock began to backpedal.

“Hardly conducive to clients visiting,” John concluded, “They’d get picked up in a raid.”

Sherlock looked at him as though he was ant on her shoes. “My flat provides anonymity.”

“Your flat provides nits and tetanus.” John insisted. He wanted to give himself a booster just being in there for an hour at most.

“I have a case!” Sherlock drew her phone closer to her body, “I cannot be bothered with something as banal as your desire for granite countertops and wainscoting.”

John smiled, “Actually, I’d like a nice tub, you know, and maybe a plushy sofa.”

“I don’t care!” Sherlock stabbed her screen with force, “I don’t care. Just, let me have some peace. The only place that matters is my mind palace, and you’ve disrupted its orderliness for the seventh time in this ride alone.”

“A thousand pardons, my lady.” John grinned, “I’ll find temporal lodgings, then, and leave you to spin castles in the air, shall I?”

Sherlock huffed. Not a fan of poetry, then.

John found himself scrolling estate agent listings as Sherlock grilled poor Dr. Hooper. He rejected one flat as being too large, one as being too small. One had entirely too much kitchen, one had not enough. He closed the tab of his browser in disgust. With what was in his bank account, if the text that said ‘for supplies’ was to be believed, they weren’t really limited in terms of location. He knew better than to count on Sherlock to care about paying her half. She thought her tea magically appeared by her hand. Thereby, it was clear that practical concerns were his alone.

John heard Sherlock’s phone buzz. Even though she was in the middle of a case, and badgering Molly, she glanced at it. She rolled her eyes, and went back to poor Molly without missing a beat. The phone rang this time.

She did not answer it. Instead, she shoved it at John, who found himself saying, “Hello?” Feeling strange, he added, “Sherlock Holmes’s phone.”

Molly giggled in the background. Of course, Sherlock berated her for it. At that, John left the room. She’d get her phone back when she got it back. If a text came, well, she’d just have to wait until he’d gotten back.

The voice on the other end of the line said, “Yes. Right then. Hello.” The voice was male. Harrow educated like Mycroft, unless John missed his guess. “You must be the security Sherlock’s been ranting about for days.”
Sherlock had been ranting about him? “I suppose so. John Watson, sir.”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me, Captain.” The man allowed, “I retired decades ago.” Still he did not offer his name. “If you are looking for suitable housing, I’d advise you to check in with dear Mrs. Hudson. Her flat is for let on Baker Street, not far from Mummy and me. It would be an ideal locale, close to shops, the tube, all manner of parks, museums, you see.”

John figured out who it was without a doubt. “M--” John paused. What was Sherlock’s father called? John had googled, but he’d only found Sherlock’s blog. Everything else seemed vacant in a way that John knew meant it had been scrubbed from the web. He’d once been a ghost, too, which is why he had a blog now. Hell, he might even make a Facebook.

“Oh, how I do put the cart before the horse.” The man chuckled, “I am sorry.”

“You understand that I am Sherlock’s security.” John felt a twist in his stomach. Here her father was insinuating things, telling him that Sherlock ranted about him, and they had just bloody met. Was this a set up? Literally? Was Mycroft some kind of matchmaker?

Oh God.

John realized that, for the first time, he was working under a cover he did not want. He was in way over his head. Here he was, talking to her father about the job he was paid to do, and his mind was drifting back to a night spent running around the wet muck of London, and how her breasts had felt pressed to his side.

“Pfft.” The Holmes patriarch countered, “Mycroft may have access to the CCTV. However, I know my little girl. It’s a shade early for this, but has built you up in that big brain of hers since she found that damn file five years ago. Fifteen year old girls, especially brilliant and misunderstood ones, who dance to music no one else may hear will do that. I will not have my Sherly broken up no matter what Mummy says on the matter.”

Fifteen. Fifteen and five. What the everlasting hell? Sherlock was young enough to still be in Uni. What had happened? She was brilliant, with a mind made for deep thinking. A university might stifle her, but it was also a place he’d bet she’d love if left to explore her own mind rather than what some tutor told her she needed to know.

“Are you telling me that Sherlock is twenty?” John did not even want to touch on the fact that Mycroft had a file with his name on it.

He felt disgusting. Suddenly, he hated himself. She had the world at her feet, and all he really wanted, all he could think about, was how good it felt to be the center of her focus when her gaze fell upon him.

She was a twenty year old woman, with choices and options, and by rights, especially at her age, she should have them. She shouldn’t be put in this position, though he age did make Mycroft and Greg slightly more relatable.

They were, however badly, looking out for their little sister.

Twenty.

She did not need, nor should she want, an aging ex-army Captain who was depressed and dealing with PTSD, who couldn’t bring himself to call his fucking own twin after her wife had called to say Harry was back in AA.
“Our Sherly graduated Newham at 16 with a first, did her graduate studies, went to Vienna, spent time in New York, don’t mention it, she hated that city, and came home.” The Holmes father was so proud. John could hear it in his voice, “She was let go from her research post for becoming too involved, shall we say? The rest is hers to tell, but I’ll see that you get a file. School records, hospital reports, etc. etc. etc.”

John knew his reply before the offer left Sherlock’s father’s mouth. He thought maybe this was normal for them, but he wouldn’t violate her like this. “No.”

“No?” The word came out confused, as though John had spoken the refusal in Farsi.

John knew something that the rest of the Holmes’ didn’t know. Sherlock could be trusted. She was someone he trusted to have his back in a dark alley, and she could be trusted to tell her own story. “Sherlock will tell me what I need to know to keep her safe.”

John wondered just how much the entire family knew about him. Sherlock’s father confused him more than her mother had, even when he and Greg seemed to be the most forthcoming of the whole lot. “It isn’t only for my daughter that I find myself concerned.”

The line went dead after a moment. John couldn’t think.

He stepped back into the lab, his old credentials still far outranking even the ones Sherlock had pilfered from Greg.

He must have stood there like a gaping fish, until he heard Sherlock say, “John.” Her eyes were confused, until he blinked twice. Then she said, “Coffee.”

Halfway to opening his mouth to decline, he realized that he needed to get out of the lab to think. The dead body and Sherlock’s enthusiasm were crowding his mind. “Molly?”

“That would be lovely, John.” Molly blushed, rosy and pink. “No one ever offers me coffee.”

“You can’t wait for people to offer, Molly.” Sherlock asserted, “Your new lipstick is off putting. You have some just there.”

Molly’s brown eyes filled with tears. John shook his head, and left the lab.

Things were clear. This was one cover op that John refused to play.

He needed a plan, here. A honest, open, plan.

He realized that if he wanted to be open and honest, he might have to play the game.

John was putting milk in Molly’s coffee at the hospital canteen when he heard a voice call out, “Watson! Is that you, then?”

John wanted to groan. Mike Stamford from his uni days had grown up and grown out, but he hadn’t changed a bit. John was in no mood for good cheer, “Hey, Mike. How’ve you been?”

“Good!” Mike said, as he had for more than the fourteen years John had known him, “What are you up to?”

“Oh, you know...” John began, falling in love with a mad genius, feeling guilty because her brother
pays me to protect her, we spent the whole night running around London, it was better than sex, mate, and I don’t feel dead anymore, the usual, “Just looking for a flat. I can’t imagine finding something decent, though, let alone someone willingly living with me.”

“You know...” Mike smiled, “You’re not the first person to say that to me today.”

John couldn’t help but ask, “Someone said that to you?”

“Asked me what kind of person would want to live with her. Wanted to know what I’d make of a person like that.” Mike colored a little, never liking to speak ill of another person, “If there ever was one, I suppose, knowing her.”

“That’s pretty sad.” John murmured, wondering how long this conversation would go on, “I hope she finds somebody.”

“Are you looking for a flat share?” Mike perked up.

“No, I have somebody.” John was going to let it be there, but he knew better than that with Mike. The man could pull a story from a rock, “We’ll get on well. I think.”

“Damn. I wanted to introduce you.” Mike admitted, “She’s odd. But lonely, misunderstood. She knew my sister Bianca at Uni. You remember Binky?”

“You still call her Binky?” John shook his head. Binky must be in her thirties, at least.

“Look, just meet this girl, mate?” Mike asked, “I’m rarely right, but I think I could be this time.”

“Mike...” John took one look at those earnest eyes, and capitulated. “I can’t make a promise. I can’t.”

“Just meet her. Christ. I’m not asking you to marry her and have six unruly babies in the next ten years.” Stamford joked, “Though I do think it would suit you.”

“You’ve gone soft.” John blustered, wondering how on earth being a father himself could allow Mike to make such pronouncements.

“I’ll give you my kids if you get clucky, how’s that? They’d fix you right up.” Mike offered as they headed to the lab.

John knew there would be no smallish Watsons running about the halls of St. Bart’s anytime soon, but he smiled, and asked Mike about his kids. That conversation took up the rest of their walk.

Mike entered the lab first, only to have Sherlock stick out her hand at the portly man and demand, “Phone.”

She was slumped over a microscope, and her blouse was riding up in the back. John wanted to put his lips there. He also wanted to feed her up. He hadn’t yet seen her eat. He also wanted to tell her not to push Mike around. He was a good sort.

“Use yours, Sherlock.” Mike countered. “Or the lab phone.”

“I can’t.” She glared at the microscope, “You know I prefer to text.”

John stuck her phone out, “Here.” He had forgotten that he had taken it in the face of seeing good-
natured Mike hold his own against the gale force winds of Sherlock Holmes and emerge unruffled, “And call your father. He’s worried about you.”

She took it, and ignored the comment about her father. John saw it for what it was. They were going to have to talk.

John glanced at Mike as their fingers brushed. “Ah, Sherlock, this is John Watson, an old mate of mine. He was a doctor in the Army. I uh, told him you need a flat share.”

This was the lonely, misunderstood girl for whom Mike had a soft spot? John wanted to laugh, until he realized that, yes, there was more to Sherlock Holmes that smartness and steel. Anyone who didn’t see that was a fool.

“That’s what you think.” Sherlock hopped down from her stool, “I’ve decided your plan is adequate. Mrs. Hudson’s flat is vacant. 221B Baker Street. 7 o’clock.”

“Oh!” Mike exclaimed, “How is Mrs. Hudson?”

Sherlock did not answer, as she was exiting the room. John decided that she had finally read her father’s text.

In jest, he said, “Mike, about the person you mentioned?”

Mike glanced where Sherlock had been sitting, “She’s always like that. You’ll get used to it.”

Well. He’d shot a madman cabby.

That didn’t mean anything, he told himself.

He’d been doing his bloody job, what he been paid to do.

Yeah, right, Watson. The bullet between the eyes wasn’t personal.

Well, it had never been before.

Before Sherlock seemed like a lifetime ago.

John pulled down his shirt, and realized that the run about London, desperate to find Sherlock, desperate to see her, desperate to hold her, and the resolution with Jefferson Hope had revealed to John two things. One, his limp was gone, had been the second he’d walked into that drawing room. Two, he could not ever consent to be on Mycroft Holmes’ payroll. He would not be paid to spy on a friend, and though he had not signed a contract, he knew that’s what it would come to be.

Even with his pension and Sherlock’s cases, money would be tight. He needed a job. And luckily, he had an interview at a nearby clinic in an hour, set up this morning. John hoped he’d make a good impression.

Sherlock was sitting with her microscope, the only thing she’d unpacked herself. “I’m off, Sherlock.”

She did not reply. John took his leave.

Before he did, he made a quick call on a burner phone he’d had for ages. “L, this is the Doc.”

A lilting voice filled his ear. “I thought I’d be hearing from you today.” She added, “Good shot.”
“I’m not back in.” He dealt a swift blow to her hopes. “I need information.” John sipped his coffee from Speedy’s, looking for all the world as a normal Londoner.

“I owe you one.” She admitted, and John heard her clicking away at her computer. “What do you need to know?”

“I need an address for the eldest Holmes son.” John had spent ages thinking about who that money had come from. It hadn’t been Mycroft. He had money, but he wasn’t the sort to give money without first getting what a promise of what he wanted.

Within a minute, he had an address. Luckily, it was right on his way. Within twenty minutes, he’d broken into a very posh office, and left a pile of cash on the desk. There was nothing to getting in and out, nor was there any issue with covering his tracks. It was a message no man could misunderstand.

He was not making a good impression. Sarah Sawyer blinked across her desk at him, “Just locum.”

“That’s fine.” John stressed. It wasn’t ideal, but he hadn’t worked A&E in years, at least not civilian.

“You’re a bit overqualified...” Sarah shifted, and John wished he had left his PhD off the bloody CV. And maybe a few of the fellowships. He had just been glad to be doing something that wasn’t classified, that literally helped people, that he’d been honest.

“I could always do with the money...” John replied. Even overqualified doctors needed to eat, and he knew by Sherlock’s wardrobe cases as she’d moved in, and unpacked her clothes, that food wasn’t going to be on her half of the shopping lists.

“Well, we’ve got two away on holiday this week, and one’s just left to have a baby. Might be a bit mundane for you.” She hedged, and John knew that he had it in the bag. Thank God.

They chatted some, flirted over his bad school clarinet playing, and John knew that Dr. Sawyer would be a great date. He resolved to take her out, as soon as he could. She was smart, not brilliant, but smart, kind but not empathetic and deeply, confusingly, emotive. They would get on well. They were chatting when a clinic nurse knocked apologetically.

“Dr. Sawyer, Dr. Lee just called off...” The nurse revealed, “Of all the days for her son to need to be picked up from school early.”

“Actually...” Sarah asked, after the nurse hastened back to her post, “Could you start now? We’re a bit packed. We will get your paperwork processed.”

John had been planning to suss out Mycroft and tell him he wasn’t going to work for him, but he did need the money, and saying no might well risk the job.

That decided, he set to work.

John finished up, and with a smile at Sarah, headed to 221B. He couldn’t get a taxi, and so he decided to, now that he could once again, make the walk home. The phone box near the Chicken Cottage rang.

Not again, John thought as he picked up the phone. Mycroft must have an obsession with crappy spy films. “Good afternoon, Mycroft.”
“There is a security camera on the building to your left. Do you see it?” Mycroft asked. John affirmed that he did, and watched as it moved pointedly.

Mycroft spoke again, “I would make some sort of threat, but I’m sure your situation is quite clear to you.”

“Look...” John sighed, “Before you haul me off to some warehouse, try and chain my hands to a table, and try to make me listen to Barney for a few weeks, you should know that I never took the job, and I am not going to take it. If you want somebody to track her movements for you, pay someone else.”

“What was your GPS guided sniper routine, then?” Mycroft was far too the point for John’s liking, “If not you doing your duty?”

“I would have done that for anyone.” John asserted, “I plan to keep up my half of Baker Street. I cannot be your employee. It isn’t right.”

Sherlock, be she 18 or 80, was a grown woman who did not need her family looking out for her in quite this way. They had means, Mycroft surely thought this use of them normal, but John knew better. John wasn’t going to be their tool.

He wanted her be as free an unfettered to do as she wished as possible, within the the laws of the UK and the Geneva Convention, and he rather saw friendship as supporting that desire. He wanted for her to want what she wanted, and for himself, he wanted to support her goals if she, and only if she herself, asked.

“You don’t expect me to believe--”

“I don’t do what’s right for money.” John cut him off, “Consider the fact that I have specialized training I’d theoretically put to use if I deem necessary one of the quirks of my personality, and we’ll get along.”

That said, John made a large gesture of moving the phone away from his ear.

“John, do not hang up thi--”

John did just that, and headed back to 221b Baker Street. He fired off a text as he crossed the road: I’m not working for the your brother.

Instantly, there was a reply. Pity. We could have split the money. -SH

Takeaway for dinner? John proposed.

There’s a case. -SH.

Come at once if convenient. -SH

John put away his phone. He was certain of what the incoming text said when it buzzed in his pocket. He waved at the CCTV camera, and went on his way.

Though Mycroft had been called away urgently, the camera tracked his movement to the end of the block.
Blocks away, in an office in Mayfair, a man smiled. He was no longer the military man he had once been, and he doubted Watson even recalled the shy man who had shared quarters with him at Sandhurst. Now, apart from a little governmental work, he was a staid man who read grain reports and managed properties.

He’d known from the moment he’d met John Watson their first week together at Sandhurst’s brush-up, very low-key, course for officers that John mind was uniquely perceptive and empathetic in a way that matched Willa’s own depth, and, well, what was manipulating his brother a little bit in the face of her happiness? So, he’d dropped a few hints, and laid some tracks, thinking that, perhaps, for once, he’d been wrong. Given time, he’d known that he hadn’t been wrong about John Watson. Five years ago, he’d begun to test a theory. Predictably, Mycroft had followed the trail he’d begun.

Satisfied, Sherringford Arthur Vernet Holmes went back to work, but not before sparing a thought for the money in his desk drawer. He figured a little renovation at one of the country homes, maybe one in Sussex, wouldn’t be amiss. The old pile was going to need a lab.

He also made a note to have his assistant arrange to secure his retired nanny some fire insurance in the interim.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The long awaited update... Notes at the bottom!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John reviewed his rationale for asking Sarah out, not for the first time. He liked her, first and foremost. She was kind, sweet, devoted to her work, funny, and pretty. He liked spending time with her, and something about her name sent a bolt of rightness down his spine. There were no better reasons for seeking her company on a Friday night, especially on a Friday night when there were no cases.

John was late coming back from Tesco’s, and dropped the heavy groceries on the table. There was a chemistry textbook, a pair of suede Prada platforms, and a few petri dishes on the same table. The hodgepodge of items spoke to Sherlock Holmes. “Sherlock, I bought the groceries. You put them away.”

He had less than 15 minutes before Sarah was meeting him here. He sniffed at his shirt, and determined a quick change and shave would do well enough. John shoved a bunch of academic journals into something resembling a pile, and gathered up a few mugs and deposited them in the thankfully empty basin. Thank God Sherlock had sterilized it in order to test some theory or other.

“Sherlock, I’m not kidding. Sterilizing for an experiment does not count as your share of the housework.” John looked around, and saw his laptop open and active on the coffee table. She was here, then. But where was she, anyway?

“What?” John ventured. He could probably still call Sarah. She would expect it by now. He’d only done it five times. This month.

John winced. There was no backing out of this date, not if he wanted to keep seeing Sarah.

“Not as such.” She darted from the loo into her room, and John saw a flash of dark hair and a tatty designer dressing gown, “I’m going to check on my Network.”

“I’m having company over, remember?” John shot a look at those black velvet Prada platforms, and hoped Sherlock wouldn’t go running through skips in heels like those once again.

John rushed to shove the frozen food in the freezer, hiding his frozen cookie dough behind a bag of carrots. For someone who didn’t eat, she did have a penchant for ice lollies, biscuits, cakes, and anything with no nutritive value whatsoever. Sherlock would never look there. He put away the milk, tossed the eggs in the bowl, and shoved the bags under the sink. The non-perishables could wait.

“Despite your assertions, I am a grown woman.” Sherlock snapped, her ire clear even through her
door and the space between them. It was almost enough to make John wince. “I will be back around ten. Please do attempt to clear out by then. I have to correlate data relating to cigarette ash.”

“I thought we talked about the smoking, Sherlock.” John pulled out his toothpaste and his razor and set them on the edge of the sink. He took up his toothbrush from the UV case Sherlock insisted cleaned the toothbrushes properly. “You’re already a walking risk factor for...”

“I am hiring members of my network, who enjoy smoking, to test the cigarettes. I will record the process.” She replied, as John cleaned his teeth, “It is not as good as first hand data, I’ll have you know.”

“I suppose I’ll get used to standing in the way of science, yeah?” John spat out his toothpaste. He considered his ploy to get Sherlock to ditch smoking a morally grey action for good. A few well placed comments about skin, hair, and nails had done the trick, as had information about how smoking distorted and dulled the senses. Sherlock Holmes would never allow for her data collection processes to become permanently impaired. John chose to say nothing of the patches she kept in every room of the flat.

John was buttoning up a clean shirt when there came a knock at the door. He hastened to pull on one of his shoes, but it was too late. He had not made it to his post by the door in time to forestall what he heard. Sherlock was huffing and crossing the flat before the second knock had finished.

John fumbled for the door. It was too late to tell Sherlock to wait without offending Sarah.

Sherlock was opening the door, just as he flailed out of the loo.

“Hello.” Sarah greeted Sherlock, her navy skirt and prim blouse a stark contrast to Sherlock’s denim encased legs and black top, which showed her slim figure to its best advantage. Objectively, of course.

“John did not budget his time well.” Sherlock returned, “I suppose he finds value in fastidiously cleaning his dentition before spending time in your company.”

“I can’t think why.” Sarah’s eyes sparkled, though she seemed uneasy. He supposed the fact that he found Sherlock’s gaze to be warm and curious, rather than cold and evaluative, spoke to his own penchant and his own bias towards his flatmate. He knew who she was, but somehow, Sarah’s body language in this moment was offensive to him on a deep level. There was no cause to recoil like that, imperceptible though it might appear to him. He knew Sherlock saw it.

“John!” She looked directly at him, then, and John thanked God he’d gotten his shoe on as he’d watched them as they’d spoken. “You didn’t return my text. Are we still staying in?”

“You’ll want to avoid the mold cultures on the coffee table.” Sherlock shrugged on a light jacket, picked up her phone, and moved toward the door.

He smiled at Sarah, who seemed charmed, possibly intrigued by the idea that they’d have the flat to themselves, for the first time ever. He thought surely that all their near misses added up to a date or so, making the likelihood of sex well within the range of possibilities for the evening. Steady on, he thought, steady on.

“Yeah, I’d thought we could--” It was then that he noticed Sherlock’s hand on the doorknob. “Wait. Where did you say you were going?”

“The location is need to know.” Sherlock replied, pulling the door open. “As I have made every
effort to excuse myself for your needless social interactions, I fail to understand your continued interest. I can waste no further time on your injuries.”

“Your continued survival is the only way for me to get your half of the rent.” John let her off the hook. He knew, despite her assertions, that she was uncomfortable around Sarah. It was no wonder, really, with Sarah trying so hard to be nice, even as it was clear there was no real connection between them. False overtures of friendship had hurt Sherlock in the past. He’d tried to tell Sarah just to treat Sherlock perfunctorily and let things grow, but his advice had gone unheeded.

“We don’t need money.” Sherlock blinked, standing in the doorway, “Actually, I do. I find myself in need of some items, and my credit card isn’t in my wallet. Do see if you can find it. Or leave yours out, it hardly matters.” Sherlock tucked her phone in her back pocket, “You ought to come shopping, Sarah. It’s dull. You’d enjoy it.”

And with that pronouncement, Sherlock was gone, the door open behind her.

John looked at Sarah as he shut the door himself.

She appeared to be suffering from shock. John tried to put this experience together for Sarah, “I think she likes you, Sarah.”

Sarah made a noncommittal sound. If Sarah didn’t care, as she clearly did not, why did she persist in treating Sherlock as though they were friends to her face? He didn’t know much about interpersonal dynamics between women, but he knew from observing Harry that the practice of politeness was often about attempting to be friendly when in someone’s presence when you really didn’t give a shit was increased amongst women. It set his teeth on edge because he knew Sherlock saw through it.

John didn’t dare say that Sarah wouldn’t still be in the room if Sherlock didn’t at least consider Sarah less hateful than the majority of people. He knew well that Sherlock’s acceptance, if not approval, of his need for pointless social interaction was important to him. They’d been through a lot of shit together over the last six months as flatmates. It was only normal to value her insights and opinions.

John pulled out the menus they kept behind Billy for easy access, “Thai, Indian, or Chinese?”

Sarah smiled, “How about Greek?”

Sherlock rarely wanted Greek. They almost never had it. John revealed this as he rifled through the menus, providing this information so as to promote conversation. He looked up, triumphant at having found the menu in the haphazardly arranged stack, and found that there was front in Sarah’s eyes. Ah, well, he knew how to make up for whatever gaffe he’d committed.

John shifted on the couch.

He couldn’t quite settle into the movie. It was almost dark and the sky seemed to be getting blacker by the second. How long did it take for a bevy of people to smoke a few packs of cigarettes? A quick mathematical run down of the situation, coupled with the average burning time, told him that Sherlock should have been home just before they’d started this movie.

John didn’t know why, but he felt rather uneasy. He had long, long ago learned to heed that feeling. It didn’t rule him, but he had been too close to death to many times to ignore any awareness he had of the world around him.

Next to him on the sofa, he heard a small sigh, and the television flashed as Sarah pushed pause. John couldn’t recall what they had been watching. The woman’s expression on the telly suggested
she had been right in the middle of something hectic, though. He’d not seen a movie in months, and had no idea of who the actress even was, though Sherlock did occasionally binge reality TV.

John startled, “Why did you pause it?” John thought fast, knowing the look on Sarah’s face called for some fancy footwork. “It was just starting to pick up.”

“John, would you like to go for a walk?” Sarah pointedly phrased the question that made it clear the invitation was not a request. John didn’t know if he had passed or failed the test that was implicit in her expression. Her change of the subject gave him little information. “We could get some waffles, down the road?”

There was a Wafflemeister down the road, near Baker Street Station. Sherlock liked it there, even if the place was glutted with tourists. She hadn’t eaten today, maybe she had stopped to deduce people and eat part of a waffle. At the very least Jorge at the counter would know if she had been around today. She’d found his pet cat, and now they got free waffles all the time. Well, if the manager wasn’t in, that was. John always paid, but Sherlock considered her services plenty of compensation.

John felt instantly relieved. He excused himself to the bathroom, and slipped into his bedroom thereafter to slide his Browning in the back of his trousers.

Something was not right.

“Dears!” Mrs. Hudson called out as she came to the corridor, “Would you care for some biscotti? I’m boxing up some for my dear Sherry, but I’d love for you to try some.”

John bore the delay with little grace. He did not know who her relative Sherri was, nor at the moment did he care. The date had been miserable, and John was forced to face some realizations. He liked Sarah, but the conversation over spanakopita had been banal. Nobody could have faulted its pleasantness or the companionship therein, but John found himself missing looking down at his plate and finding that a person hadn’t picked at half of it. He found himself missing the bits of crime scenes on the table, and missed not having to worry about what he said or didn’t say. He had found himself missing Sherlock, and that wasn’t fair to anyone.

“We’re on our way for waffles, Mrs. Hudson.” Sarah refused, “But thank you. Maybe next time.”

“Oh, of course.” She smiled at John, “I do love sweets on a warm spring night.” She paused, glancing between him and Sarah. “If you should happen to hear from Sherlock, please do send her my way.”

“Will do!” Sarah smiled, “Ready, John?”

John almost asked Mrs. Hudson to elaborate, but he knew that was a bit not good. Thankfully, he didn’t have to ask, for Mrs. Hudson was always one for a chat.

“She’s been working with her network since she was sixteen.” Mrs. Hudson mused, “I shouldn’t worry. They protect her.”

“She hardly needs protection, Mrs. H.” John assured her, “I’ll see you later. Would you like me to bring you back some ice cream?”

“Heavens, with all these biscuits in my flat?” Mrs. Hudson laughed, “I’d be the talk of Baker Street.”

John ate his banana covered waffle, trying in vain to think about how he was going to settle this war
within himself. He liked Sarah. The emotion he felt for her was genuine. But could he love her, in time? Was he looking for love? He was happy, largely, with his life. This thing with Sarah felt like something he should want, rather than something he did, even though he did want her in his life. She was a great person, kind and funny, and smart, and good with patients, and fun to go for a pint with, and she was a great boss.

It was, he decided, simply that he should not be here. He should be with Sherlock, wherever she was inhaling secondhand smoke, and fussing in her brisk way over her Network. He should be there, just to be there. It had nothing to do with Sarah, and everything to do with Sherlock. If she’d not been with the Network tonight, he would have never found himself in this tumult of thoughts.

More at ease, John smiled at Sarah. This date was not a wrong thing, it was just that the timing was wrong. How could he have possibly given anyone else, even Sarah, his full attention when he knew that Sherlock was out there somewhere? It was completely sensible.

John tried not to notice the CCTV camera that was pointed their way in the unseasonably warm spring night. He gave a jaunty little wave when Sarah’s gaze was elsewhere, and covered the gesture by offering Sarah an napkin. He and Sarah were standing in the glow of the shop, tearing into messy chocolate covered waffles having an actual conversation when John remembered to reply. He was already uncomfortably full, as there was no one sticking her own fork into his portion.

John felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Dr. Watson!” A rough voice, though young, grabbed his attention just before he had thrown the person to the ground. “Dr. Watson, you’ve gotta--”

“Wait, wait.” John looked at the waif, thin and bedraggled, like someone out of Charles Dickens, if Dickens had written young man with combat boots and piercings. “Breathe.”

The young man sucked in air, “The Lady!” He pushed out, “She’s...she’s...”

“Where is she?” John demanded, calm, cool, and for the first time tonight, feeling in control. He’d been right. He still had it, not that he relished his battle instincts in this moment. He would have rather been wrong, been mad, just to spare her the fear in this world weary young man’s voice. He knew he should have been with Sherlock.

“She’s going to get stuck in a drainage pipe, but she won’t leave!” The boy cried, “She won’t leave, and she’s going to get hurt. Creaky Pete said it’s gonna rain but good and nobody won’t go and help her. And I told her to push off...”

John shoved his waffle container at the boy, who dropped it into the bin. He seemed to consider his words, as though he needed to explain himself, “But, but I swear I was only looking out for her. She’s been good to me. Never asks for anything finky.”

John spoke before the teen finished, “Sarah—”

John looked around, instantly considering the whys and hows and wheres and whats. He felt as though he was balanced on the edge of a knife, and it felt almost like Sherlock was beside him, quirking her expressive eyebrows and laughing, “The game, John, is afoot!”

He simply wished that the game didn’t include Sherlock stuck in a pipe, likely with a dead body, when it should have found her here, beside him, two steps ahead of him.

His date had already binned her waffle. “I’m coming.”
“I--” John backed down, not having the time for a fight, “Alright.”

John rushed down the embankment, giving Sarah a hand as she picked her way through the darkness in sensible flats. “She was wearing Prada wedges.” He muttered to himself, wishing like hell he had a torch or night vision capabilities. “It had be at least an eight to ruin those shoes.”

“You noticed her shoes?” Sarah asked, something funny in her voice, “Of course you did.”

“What do you mean?” John spied the drainage pipe, and a small crowd gathered round the grate that blocked the entrance to the pipe.

The sight stole his breath. He forgot entirely that he was supposed to be listening to Sarah go on about Sherlock’s wedges.

He ran. There was only one reason a crowd like that might gather. He shoved through the small group of people, not caring that his back was to them.

He lifted the creaky, rusty gate and vowed that the second he found her he was going to shout until he was hoarse and hold her until he stopped feeling so sick inside…

He stopped thinking, mostly because now was not the time to think. Now was the time to trust his training and act. “Sherlock?”

John took one look at the drainage pipe, and knew it was going to be a tight fit. He drew a breath, and put his hand on the inside wall, reaching around himself to make sure his gun was secure. He ignored the sign that read: Danger! Extreme Flash Flood Area! and moved onward, knowing that such a sign might as well have read: Sherlock, enter here!

As he did, he saw in the eerily lit entrance, massive amounts of spray painted concrete to enter into the drain, a rushing river of water flowing on the ground between his now-separated feet.

Pipes entered into the drain creating areas of standing water where the water had not yet moved on in the sluggish slope. As it grew darker, he had to rely on his other senses. This drain sucked and he swore to God there were spiders crawling everywhere over him. The water was up to the middle of his calves, and there were likely toxins in the water, because that was his luck.

His voice echoed as he continued onward, calling her name occasionally when he deemed it prudent, his body brushing against sediment that had built up along the narrow passage. The darkness almost helped, in that it hid just how small this space truly was in comparison to his body. He wondered how someone had dumped a body down one of these things.

John’s heart was in his throat, his footsteps sure, as he saw a light emerge from the darkness. He moved closer, calling out. Sherlock didn’t answer, but it was her. She was there. There she was, then, in the back of damp drainage pipe just behind where two smaller pipes joined, almost dry in comparison to his waterlogged pathway.

She didn’t move, but John saw that she had a camping lantern resting in her lap, clearly borrowed from one of her many admirers. “Are you hurt?”

John scrambled quickly towards her, not caring that his shoes were soaked, now, nor that these were his good trousers. He had to fold himself up even more to fit in the space next to her, as it was little more than a cranny that opened up a few feet back, but he did it. The walls were tight around him, and he forced himself to look at Sherlock, whose head was mere centimeters away from the top of the tunnel as she sat in the shallow water.
Sherlock shook her head. Were there tears in her voice? Something inside John broke at the thought, but of course that was mere imagination. This was not something to push Sherlock to tears. Bodies were simply The Work. “No. I need a doctor, for him, though.”

It was then that John saw, via the lantern light, the pitiful body she was cradling in her lap, above the water. He was a waterlogged mite of a dog, who moved pitifully toward the ink-stained fingers that were gently patting his matted coat, if his patches of fur could be considered a coat.

His eyes fluttered open upon John’s approach. Gently, he nudged Sherlock’s hand. “I can’t help him.”

“Well, then thank God I got Bella to call the vet. Go away.” Sherlock demanded venomously, petting the scruffy creature, who was panting for air in a way that told John he’d been badly beaten and left for dead with a punctured lung and broken ribs, “I’m not leaving him and I can’t move him myself. Go back to your date.”

Now she was just being silly. However, silly or not, she was right. He could fashion a sling, or something, with what he had on him, between them, but the animal was too bloody to be moved, the water below him a pinky-red. John wasn’t a vet. One wrong move on their parts and he could snap the poor animal’s spinal cord.

Outside, thunder boomed. The dog whimpered. Sherlock made a soft sound, one that tore into John like nothing else.

John simply shook his head, and slid his hand under hers. “Support his hindquarters. I’ll take the head.”

Within a few minutes, he heard splashing above the occasional rumble of thunder, saw lamps, and heard a female voice call out, upon seeing them, “Is there a dog down here?”

Sherlock rolled her eyes, “No, it’s a former MI-6 agent and a person on the Do Not Fly list.” Sherlock snapped, “Yes! Why else would I have called you except to help my dog?”

John rolled his eyes as the vet squeezed past him, a focused look in her eyes as she put her hands in place of his. The expression on the professional’s face was known to him, as it was the expression he’d seen too many times on his own face. She was thinking, “How do I tell these people that no matter what I do, their loved one will die?”

John’s stomach lurched. He’d never been on the other side of this conversation. MI-6? Really? There was never a chance in hell. It was only after the vet got to assessing the poor dog that John recalled Sherlock’s words, and noted the way she seemed to be focused on the dog.

John felt like the world’s worst person for telling her, “Sherlock, we cannot keep him.”

“Why not?” Sherlock lifted part of the animal as the vet continued her assessment. John was so used to triage that he tuned it out.

Sherlock looked his way, the rushing water almost drowning out her words. “You want a dog. He’s interesting.”

“Sherlock, just because I want something doesn’t mean that now is the best time for us to consider —” John cleared his throat, as yet another person entered earshot, carrying a combat bag with a dog on it.
The vet had radioed out for more support. Hope bloomed within him. Just because he couldn’t keep the dog didn’t mean he didn’t want it to have a good life, in some garden, with a couple of kids to chase after and too much kibble in his bowl.

One of the vet techs that wasn’t preoccupied tending to the dog looked at him, “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you and your wife to exit the, uh, pipe. We’ll need to bring your dog up for treatment and transfer.”

After John protested her words, he followed the order, and hauled Sherlock out of there. They walked out much the same way they both had crawled in, and when she exited the pipe, her thin top was soaked through with groundwater from having to stand.

John draped her jacket, abandoned in the dirt, over her. “So you are agreed.”

John watched the crowd dissipate. His guide here held up a hand. John did the sensible thing. He waved back curtly. The Lady was safe, and the boy’s mission was complete. The sky looked terribly like rain as electricity clapped in the sky above them.

“We’ll find him a good home.” John offered, knowing full well that finding such a mutt a home Sherlock considered worthy would be hard. He wondered if Mycroft and Lestrade, now that they were married, would like a pet to begin their family. After all, pets were a good way to begin building a family with someone. She could visit and manage his care, and surely she would agree that Lestrade was capable. After all, he’d had some hand in raising her.

Sherlock sniffed, “A boring home.”

Despite the fact that she looked like she had just been put through a wringer washer, she held herself as though she were a queen. No. She held herself like Sherlock Holmes, infinitely more regal and sure of herself than any mortal queen.

“A good home, with people who love him.” John corrected, meeting her raised chin with a firm tone.

“As if anyone could know what he needs better than me.” Sherlock snapped, as the vet and the techs moved slowly out of the tunnel, dragging the transport until they could heft it between them. She softened her voice when the dog emerged, painfully thin, and strapped to a bed with an IV and a chest tube already started, “No. He shall reside at Baker Street with us.”

Logic, Watson. John knew he had to fight this flight of sentimentality with the reality of caring for this animal, who would need round the clock care for months if he pulled through, and would likely have worse behavior patterns than Sherlock herself. “Do you mean to tell me that you will do as something as boring as keep a schedule for a helpless creature?”

“He’s not boring.” Sherlock recoiled from him in time with the first flash of lightening, as though the truth hurt her. “I’ll show him London, and he’ll add to my range of data points.”

John thought that unlikely. He barely did that for her, and he was bloody well human. “He’ll eat my jumpers and shit on the rugs.”

Sherlock conceded, her grin lighting up her face as thunder boomed and a flash illuminated the world around them. “Only your very ugly jumpers.”

John tried desperately, desperately, to be stern. “Sherlock.”

“Leave me alone about it.” She snapped, “I won’t leave him in the gutter to starve, and I won’t hack
him up, or test things on him. What more do you want?"

Rain began to fall heavily around them, the first drops barely even a prelude to the force of the oncoming rain, so quickly did it start. The rain jumped up, making him feel wetter and more miserable.

“I want you to be sure that he’s what you want.” John switched tracks. If they took this dog, they took him until he was old and grey. This couldn’t be a passing fancy like her fleeting obsessions, “This isn’t a houseplant. He’ll have feelings, and very likely issues, traumas.”

“So do you, and I--” Sherlock huffed, “If you must know, I have grown attached to him. However, in a gesture of equanimity, I will allow you to name him.”

John could not believe how quickly they jumped from rehoming the animal to talking about things like names. Somehow, that sealed the deal for him. Sherlock loved this dog. She loved him enough to admit it. He could not take something she loved from her, not if he wanted to live with himself.

John gave up caring that he was sopping wet, and stepped closer to Sherlock, the rocks under his feet shifting. “Really?”

Satisfied, Sherlock began to pick her way up the embankment. John kept pace beside her as she spoke. “Not Scruffy or Fido. He must have a name with meaning.” Sherlock amended, “But yes, we are agreed. I won’t hear another word about giving him away to some banal couple with jobs in finance.”

They reached the top, and John dusted off his hands. He held them up in a placating gesture. Nowhere had he mentioned banal DINKs living in Camden. “I didn’t say--”

“John.” Sherlock quirked an eyebrow as they approached the animal ambulance. Naturally, Sherlock was intent on observing the level of care the animal was provided.

She was right. The whole thing was decided and it was useless to pretend otherwise.

John sighed, looking over the scraggly dog the size of an elephant in the glow of the high-powered lights in the back of the van. His skeletal body looked huge. No wonder Sherlock couldn’t lift him when she’d tried. “He is rather cute.”

The tech chuckled, “I do believe you two have just become pet parents. My congratulations.” She paused, “We will need a name for the poor fellow. You’re welcome to follow along back to the hospital.”

“MacPherson.” John sighed, “MacPherson Holmes.”

Sherlock made an approving sound.

He turned to her, “So help me God, Sherlock, you are going to be the one to explain this to Mrs. Hudson.”

Sherlock merely watched the animal ambulance doors swing shut. As if on cue, a black SUV pulled up. In this case, John was glad to get out of the rain and only cursed Mycroft once.
poodles on the wall. Dancing poodles.”

“They’re the veterinarians, Sherlock, not me.” John reminded her for the seventh time in the last hour. He did not add that the pictures were meant to be soothing.

He shared a look with the older lady who’d tried to engage Sherlock in conversation, only to be told in no uncertain terms that urgent matters required her full attention. Oddly, 98.67% of her brain capacity seemed to be focused on asking him questions he didn’t know the answer to, and subsequently looking up the answers on questionable websites and cross-checking them on both their phones.

He hadn’t been able to answer Sarah’s texts, not that they likely contained anything but thinly veiled annoyance and resignation.

John told her just what he had always told families in waiting rooms, “Best leave them to their work.”

“Well, how do we know they’re experts on MacPherson’s breed?” Sherlock began anew, “There are countless variances!” She peered at her phone, and scrolled downward, and began to rattle off information about dog breeds.

John resisted the urge to snatch it away. The animal was likely not any discernible breed. What Sherlock was rattling on about veterinary care, most people spent a decade in school to learn. He felt a headache like the one WebMD caused him building in the back of his brain. Tension headache, the doctor part of him supplied, unhelpfully.

The old granny holding a tiny hairless dog in an ugly dog jumper smiled at them.

John barely returned it.

“Yes, there are variances from dog to dog, as there are from human to human.” John prayed for patience. “They know dogs, and they they know what they’re doing. This isn’t the Friday night I planned on having.”

“MacPherson is suffering,” Sherlock hissed, “my clothes are utterly ruined, and you’re worried about meaningless sex with your girlfriend?”

Oh, great. Now the Granny in the waiting room was glaring. Wonderful. Just fucking wonderful.

“You wore good clothes to go flitting about London and open-toed platform heels to go crawling down a drainage pipes! That’s not very logical, is it?”

“They’re four seasons old!” Sherlock bit out, turning against the chair, “At least you should make yourself useful and monitor their progress. A body is a body is a body, be it canine or homo sapien.”

“I have an MD and a PhD, Sherlock. They don’t mean I can fix the dog.” John snapped, really looking at her for the first time since Sarah had left them here in Mycroft’s black car, never mind the fact that Mycroft was no doubt using this to gather intel on Sarah. John was totally unable to leave Sherlock to sign forms and wait alone. If MacPherson died, he wasn’t going to let her face that loss alone. And frankly, he did not trust her not to totally berate the staff if he did pull through. “It means I can tell you’ve got a cut on your leg and banged up your hip.”

John berated himself for not seeing the dried blood on her trouser leg before now. Inwardly, he knew a tetanus booster was the first order of the day. By now, it was after eleven, and he wasn’t about to haul her to the A&E.
Using supplies he begged from the woman at the intake desk, John cleaned and bandaged the cut, made a mental note on the size of the bruising, and let Sherlock sulk.

The granny smiled at him, “You know what they say about doctor’s wives, dear.”

John dropped his head to his hands. Why did the entire world persist on thinking that they were married, when he knew for a fact neither of them wore rings. They had fucking eyes, didn’t they? Fanciful busybodies, the whole lot of them.

“Dears!” A voice broke into John’s thoughts behind his dozing eyes, “I’ve only just heard from Mycroft. I’ve brought nibbles and dry clothes.”

“Mrs. H...” John looked over at Sherlock. Organizing her Mind Palace, no doubt building a doghouse out back for MacPherson.

He glanced back at his flatmate. “It appears we’ve acquired a dog. I know the lease—” He didn’t know exactly how to approach this, because the fact that they lived at Baker Street and now had a dog were immutable facts to Sherlock. He didn’t fancy living on the street, or worse, in the Holmes house, after losing their flat. He somehow knew the flat would go before the dog.

She scoffed, “The lease. You’re family, John.” She passed him the basket she held. “After I take my soothers, he may bark as loudly as he likes. I have noticed you’re very careful to be quiet in the evenings, but I want you to feel as though Baker Street is your home. You may of course bring anyone you like into it.” She continued, “Even if it is that lady doctor friend of yours.”

The world was conspiring against him. “Ta, Mrs. Hudson. His name is MacPherson.”

Mrs. Hudson blinked. “He’s a big dog, then?”

“I doubt he could snap anything with his bones, but it did, somehow,” John admitted, “seem fitting.”

“You’re a very literary sort, John.” Mrs. H winked, “It gets you the dates, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, well I blew it again.” John muttered, digging for the flask of tea tucked in the basket. “I’m not sure Sarah’ll want to go out with me again.”

“Oh, John.” Mrs. Hudson sighed, “I’m sure it’ll all work out in the end.”

The Granny in the waiting room was looking at him with wide eyes. John returned her stare boldly, even as he draped a warm jumper over Sherlock’s thin frame.

John wasn’t sure what to make of Sherlock’s behavior. MacPherson was still in the veterinary hospital, and Sherlock had hacked their security cameras to observe his living space. She watched the feed continually, making notes and bringing up various concerns on her daily visit. John glanced down at her notebook, a moleskin that was plum, and had spidery writing on the cover: MWH. John pondered the monogram for a long second, wondering what middle name she had given the dog. Something like Wisteria, surely, given her family history of floral names.

Inside, John found a logbook of exacting detail. Today alone, she had filled a page, before leaving for the hospital to commandeer the small garden for interaction with the beast.

*Water delivered late, bowl not full. Possibly not completely rinsed with hot water, swabs required. IV fluids changed 2.3 minutes early. Technician did not engage him in conversation relevant to his injury, and instead nattered on about her boyfriend. Gay. Cheating with local male barista and in*
John groaned.

“Dr. Watson, I do hope you are well.” A voice spoke from behind him, cultured tones that John knew had been many a man’s last memory. The door latched behind her with nary a whisper.

John whirled, not bothering to ask the Holmes matriarch how she had done that to him. MI-6, indeed. “Hello, Violet.”

“How pleased I am to see you!” She carried a small shopping bag, “I’ve ordered some things to arrive for MacPherson. I just thought you should know, so as not to worry about his belongings.”

John thanked her. He was not a little bit relieved to find that his credit card hadn’t been charged for the ergonomic bed Sherlock had been evaluating. She’d mused buying two, one for testing and another for use, if and only if her analysis proved it the ideal bed for a canine with orthopedic special needs. It had, however, been used to order a tweed dog coat from Mycroft’s tailor. John hoped Mycroft would take care of the tab, otherwise, they’d be eating beans for two weeks.

“They’ll be delivered, John.” Violet assured him, “In the meantime…” Violet glanced over at the logbook, and seemed to take away something from it that John could not, “I find myself wanting assurance that you are committed to this venture. It may be a bit intense for you.”

John knew Sherlock well enough to know that every detail of MacPherson’s life had become an experiment, but not in the way he’d thought he’d expected. Sherlock had already begun datasets to track his progress, his weight gain, the thickness of his tufty hair, and any number of factors that related to the dog’s wellness. “Sherlock is a very focused person. If we survived the H1N1 research phase, we can handle a dog.”

“I will remind you that you have said as much.” Violet replied, her gaze never wavering. “I do hope it brings you comfort then, as it seems to do so now.”

John did not quite know what to say in return. Violet however, had seemingly gathered her information in much the same way her daughter collected data. She made her way home after a moment or two of banal chat that was rife with double meanings and complexities that rivaled, if not surpassed, Sherlock’s own lexicon.

Within a day, a slew of dog things began to arrive. Within two weeks, though, that stopped, only to be replaced by a continuation of the experimentation on various objects, from the durability of dog bowls to the softness and fiber quality of various blankets. She carried out durability and safety tests on dog toys. The litany of tests and experiments she devised were inventive, while dizzying.

John found himself blogging increasingly about MacPherson’s recovery, and the animal hospital began to receive cards to decorate his space and charitable donations from MacPherson’s growing fanbase. A girl in university stopped him on the tube to ask after him and he had his own hashtag on Twitter. It surely seemed that people had rallied behind him, but it was nothing on the exactitude with which Sherlock approached pet ownership.

John came home from the surgery to find the entire contents of Sherlock’s bedroom, stuffed full with items on a regular basis, all over the sitting room. When he picked his way through the maze of items, nearly knocking over a movable clothing rack and a tower of scientific tomes, John paused to listen to the conversation in the next room, “You missed a spot.”
There is a process to this…” A beleaguered cleaner, no doubt, replied, “I assure you that by the time I’ve finished, everything will be up to our very high standards.”

“How can they possibly be, if you neglect the very basic knowledge of cleaning from top to bottom?” Sherlock returned, “It is not that difficult! Have you never heard of gravity? No?”

Sherlock was on the edge of a grand sulk after a biting rant that would begin with Newton and end with ripping the cleaner to absolute shreds. Thinking quickly, John looked around for a suitably heavy item, and grabbed it blindly.

She had only just begun going on about \(-9.8\text{m/s}^2\) when the silver frame hit the floor. Just like that, her ire was focused in a new direction and she came bolting out of the room as John picked up the photograph of a grinning Sherlock and Mycroft at some college do. “Must you be so clumsy?”

John sighed, “You did leave everything everywhere for some inexplicable purpose.”

Sherlock’s teeth clenched together. “By my calculations, MacPherson will be released Saturday. It is Thursday. Preparations must be made, and as he cannot manage stairs, his recuperation space will be in my bedroom.” She sighed heavily, “One cannot have a medically fragile animal in anything less than pristine surroundings.”

John’s jaw unhinged. “You’re cleaning?

“Oh, don’t be absurd, John.” Sherlock sniffed, “I’ve hired it out. But as it stands, I must supervise the entire process, because imbeciles make an utter mess of even the simplest tasks.”

“Sherlock…” John winced, hoping against reality that the poor woman cleaning the walls and floors and windows of Sherlock’s bare room had not heard them despite Sherlock’s raised voice at salient moments, “It isn’t fair to call someone an imbecile because you’re…” John fumbled for a word that wouldn’t incite ire, “…massively keen.”

“A more milquetoast expression I have never heard.” Sherlock declared, moving aside some random items that clearly constituted an experiment, to stalk to the sofa, which was not, blessedly covered with the hatboxes that had been stacked on the floor nearby, “Say what you mean or say nothing at all, John.”

“He’s going to be fine, Sherlock.” John assured her, a new scent filling his ears over the bleach that had overwhelmed him, even with the open windows, “You don’t need to spray the flat down in bleach and lemon cleaner to insure MacPherson will be well.”

Sherlock sniffed the air once, and shoved herself to her feet again, leaping over items with her general gracefulness, “I stated natural and scent-free cleaners only! Bleach I consented to most begrudgingly, but there will be no artificial lemons in my flat!”

“No, ma’am.” The cleaner replied dryly, “Only mold and inches of dust.”

John escaped from the resultant explosion and dashed down to Mrs. Hudson’s flat for a cuppa. He was not escaping, but between the boxes arriving at the behest of one of the Holmes women and the discarded items going out the back, John had only gotten home and he already needed a break. John, naturally, found his landlady quite willing to put a cup of tea and a plate of food in front of him. She set the plate down with the hopeful query, “Isn’t it nice to see Sherlock taking an interest in her physical surroundings?”

John replied, “Is that what you’d call this?” For his part, John thought this was as experiment. He admitted at much, and Mrs. Hudson paused in passing him a spoon and fork.
“When someone we love enters our lives, John, it can ask us to reflect upon them.” Mrs. Hudson sat down to her own repast, though far lighter than his own plate, “Why, just look at you and Sherlock.”

John dug into his peas. He didn’t think he had changed all that much. Sure, the nightmares were better and the limp was gone, and he no longer thought about eating his gun, but he was still John Hamish Watson. He still was addicted to danger, was at the top of his game, was still a bloody good doctor and soldier.

Rather than dissuade Mrs. Hudson from her eternal matchmaking hopes, John ate his dinner. Afterwards, he went upstairs and helped with the cleaning. After all, if the flat was getting a scrub it was only sensible that he prevent homicide and make sure everything went along as best he could. It wasn’t like Sherlock was going to help.

The week before MacPherson was meant to come home, John joined Sherlock after getting her usual come at once texts. Instead of a dirty alleyway or a locked room, the cab dropped him off at Selfridges’ and he found Sherlock, not in the back working on some case, but on the second floor.

Within a minute of hello, John was way in over his head. “Are you shopping?” John asked, clearly and hopefully meaning to ask why in the hell he’d been called away from work, making money they actually did need, in order to spend money at Selfridges' looking at dresses.

“No, John, I’m conducting an experiment.” Sherlock snapped, “Yes, I’m shopping. As this involves MacPherson, I felt it only equitable that you come along.”

“You’re not going to put him in dresses!” John spluttered, as Sherlock shoved a few hangers his way. He accepted the various garments with trepidation, noting that another shopper was staring blatantly, “Sherlock…”

“Why do I put up with your absurdities?” Sherlock rolled her eyes as she stalked knowledgeably about the section, devoted to the designs of someone named Diane, “Mummy masterminded throwing MacPherson a welcoming shower, though of course she is not the hostess. I am expected to go and participate in banal socialization with women I wouldn’t let within 500 feet of MacPherson. You are not required to go. I blame the patriarchy.”

“So it’s only fair I suffer through the hell that is shopping with you.” John mumbled as Sherlock deduced a dress and found it lacking, “What about that gold one you got last week?”

“John, if I must suffer this event, at least I should have some sort of compensation.” Sherlock left that section behind to dart across the aisle quickly and add some frothy pink dress to his staggering armload, “A dress seems paltry in comparison.”

John wondered why on earth they were shopping when there was a case. Just like eating and sleeping, shopping took a back seat to the case. There had been a time in Blackpool that she’d purchased something, claiming it was for the case, even though John knew better. Such was the risk of having a thief in jewelry stores. “There was a case this morning, I thought.”

“The operative term being ‘was.’” Sherlock replied, “I solved it. Now.” She held up two dresses, the same except for the color, “Cornflower or bittersweet?”

John pointed towards the orangey one, “Cornflower.”

Sherlock rolled her eyes and put down the blue dress. “You picked the bittersweet dress, John. Must we review my post on the 600 basic colors and shades therein?”
“Let’s not and say we did.” John suggested, rocking back on his heels, and saw a pale vivid dress hanging on the rack beside the offending Cornflower dress. It was Sherlock. It screamed her name. He forbade himself from thinking about the specks of purple around the rim of her irises. That was just so not done. However, it did seem to check a lot of her typical boxes when it came to clothing.

As though they were communicating, Sherlock pulled her requisite size from the rack and added it to the pile. He looked through the pile of dresses, and put money down on the pale silk dress. He thought it was a sort of purple-blue and that was all he was going to think about it. “I think you have enough to try on. You’re going to crowd your data set.”

Sherlock added two more dresses as they made their way to the fitting rooms, making deductions about various designers on the basis of their designs. Drinker. Closeted. Sleeping with assistant. Going broke. Spent time in the psych ward. Had a baby, very happy, new dog. She even deduced things about previous shoppers on the basis of the makeup they’d left on the collars of garments. John had never had a better time in a store, even if he did know more about Jane Bloggs than he ever cared to know.

Moving through the store, Sherlock sailed right into the personal shopping area, and John knew that she had booked the appointment not for the help, which clearly she did not need, but for the dressing room space. God forbid she be cramped into a badly lit stall with the proles.

John turned to set the dress down, and found a rack there waiting. He did not know how long Sherlock had been here, but he saw a few garments on the rack that had clearly been sorted. He added the dresses to the rack, and noted something out of the corner of his eye. Sherlock was kicking off her shoes and making yet another deduction.

Flatfooted, John realized that they were roughly the same height. Sherlock routinely wore heels of varying styles, saying that she had no interest in apologizing for being tall. John fully supported this, if for no other reason than she was sticking it to the patriarchy and being herself in one fell swoop. But as her violinist’s hands went to her tiny buttons on her blouse, John was stuck by the intimacy of this moment, and how much he wanted to press his lips to hers, just to see if that I have a secret, I know something you don’t know smile felt and tasted as good as he’d long ago decided it must.

John jolted when he saw the pale expense of her chest appear between the buttons she was parting very casually, as if her mind was still on her deductions. “I’ll just wait out there until you pick one.”

He closed the door behind him, deciding that he had not been scared or aroused by a little bit of cleavage revealed between a demure blouse. He was a bloody doctor, he saw more out in public. And so what if it had been Sherlock in stockinged feet and her blouse rumpled with deduction in her eyes? So what. So what. So. What.

John plonked himself down on an upholstered bench, where he would be able to see Sherlock when she came out of the dressing room. He was not thinking about the way silk and chiffon would feel against her trim body. Rather, he was mindfully considering his next blog post. Though he did not normally mention personal events or outings, he decided that he would compile a post of the deductions she’d made whilst shopping into a post called Designer Deductions or something like it. Readers would enjoy it.

John was instantly aware of the shopgirl approaching him. She wore a white top and black trousers, and was carrying a few boxes of shoes. “Mr. Watson, these are the shoes Miss Holmes requested. Shall I take them in to her?”

“Uhm. Sure.” He didn’t quite know what to say when she kept studying him, but felt compelled to ask, “Is there something on my face? I had a salad for lunch.”
“No, oh no.” The shopgirl smiled, “I follow your blog, you know. I just wanted to say that I enjoy it. I hope you’ll keep writing about your new dog. He’s certainly stolen a lot of hearts.”

“Well, that’s true.” John took note of her name, so as to mention her on the blog when they got another picture with a healing and happy MacPherson, which Sherlock took regularly to document his healing and progress. John said nothing of the album in which she pressed the printed photographs, nor of the data and information written carefully under each item in her careful and flowing handwriting, nothing like the spidery scratch she used in other places.

She moved away, and within a few moments of her exit, Sherlock came out in the blue-purple silk dress, and stood in the doorway, “This is sufficient. God, tea at the Landmark. Tedious. You’re writing the thank you notes.”

Sherlock’s body language screamed vague iteration, and her long legs disappeared underneath a skirt that brushed the bottom of her knees. “I’m sure it’s more than sufficient.”

“Of course it is.” Sherlock returned, sliding her feet into uncharacteristic flats. “I selected it.”

John hummed noncommittally. It seemed he, in addition to having expert marksmanship and some other classified skills, also had killer fashion sense. After all, he knew he’d picked that dress. John Watson, blogger, doctor, soldier, personal shopper. Also, evidently, garment bag schlepper.

Sherlock came up the stairs to their street, threw her flats at the smiley face, and threw herself on the sofa, not that he blamed her. He did have to avoid the sight of that silk dress rucked up around her thighs, however, as he sat on his chair and scrolled through the pictures that had arrived just before the woman in a great many of the shots.

John’s jaw unhinged slightly when he realized that Mummy had thrown Sherlock a shower. It was essentially a baby shower for their dog, complete with gifts and food. Thankfully, there were no games, because John knew if there had been, he would have been bailing Sherlock out of jail instead of scrolling through pictures of tissue paper and tea sandwiches.

John knew there was only one thing to do when he got to the photos of people coming up to Sherlock, largely because she likely refused to go around to the various round tables in the blue carpeted chandelier-ed room. Sally had been there, and so had Harry, looking sober and happy for once. His cousin Lucy had sent a gift. A swirl of Holmes relations filled the rest of the room, along with several young women that he supposed Sherlock found tolerable enough.

He pushed quickly to his feet, “I’ll put on some tea.”

Sherlock neither moved nor spoke, but when he brought her the steaming cup, heavily scented with tannins and sugar, she sat up and took it without response. She sipped it as it cooled, and declared, “It was hateful, absolutely hateful.”

Still, John later found that Sherlock the platter Sherlock had shoved onto the table was a carefully wrapped cardboard box with his name on it. Inside, there were hearty slabs of cake and a separate container of food. It was likely that Mummy had packed the box, even though the box did contain both the corner pieces of cake that he enjoyed and contained no crab salad, which he hated with a burning passion. How she had deduced his food habits was unknown to him, but he would put nothing past that woman.

After he’d consumed a large slice of cake and half the sandwiches, John washed them down with his own cooled and tepid cup of tea. He had long ago decided to keep personal things off of the blog,
because his life with Sherlock wasn’t some commodity, but he did post a few nondescript pictures. It seemed a good mystery for the average reader, and would give those who knew him a space to comment.

People had a lot to say. Harry was the first to comment. Lovely shower, John! When’s the next one? You know what they say about getting a dog. ^_^ I’m teasing. It was nice to see Sherlock. When can we do lunch?

John pretended not see it until there were a slew of random comments, some ranging from remarks that he could have done without. #Poshpeople have showers for their dogs? Absurdities. What a waste of time and money. Must be nice.

Others still, were excitable and polite. These made up the majority of the comments. Molly was always sweet about things. So glad to celebrate Toby’s new friend! It was grand! Mike’s wife even commented, as she sometimes did. What a festive occasion. Do tell Sherlock, won’t you John, that I’ve got a copy of that book for her to keep. I’ll send it to you via Michael.

The comments soon outpaced most of his other posts, and it was clear that the shop assistant had been largely correct. People loved MacPherson. Not, however, as much as the woman who had suffered her own personal brand of hell because she wanted him to have the experiences that came along with life. It was clear that Sherlock had sent a message today.

MacPherson was family. She did what she felt she had to do for family. Did Mummy have to force the issue? Likely, but it was Sherlock who had purchased a dress and shoes and hauled out her jewelry cases, Sherlock who had said a few words when prompted by the hostess, Sherlock who ordered extra stationary for him to write thank you notes she would sign, Sherlock who had endured banal socialization. It was blindingly clear in a single moment.

Family was everything to Sherlock. MacPherson was family. Therefore MacPherson was everything to Sherlock. In that moment, he knew that his life had changed for the better the moment he had begun to scurry like a sewer rat through the drainage tunnel. He knew that there was nothing he would not do for that dog, who crawled into his lap at the animal hospital like a lapdog and who looked at Sherlock with open adoration.

With that, John began to reply to comments on the post. With thoughts of Sherlock and MacPherson, he agreed to meet his sister for lunch next week. When she texted to confirm it, he actually replied. Lunch with his sister wasn’t something he had done for months, but if they were making changes for MacPherson, John knew that this was the right step to take.

Surprisingly, they enjoyed themselves. John did not allow himself to trust her sobriety, but she was sober today. She had been sober yesterday, and almost two years worth of yesterdays. He would take today, a good today, just as MacPherson welcomed a good today, a better day, with every day that he opened his eyes. He couldn’t change his yesterdays, but MacPherson didn’t let them get in the way of today, and never gave a thought to the circumstances of tomorrow.

John found himself looking at the world in that way from time to time, and he credited that more to MacPherson than he did Ella or even to his own willpower.

MacPherson entered 221B Baker Street under his own power, medicated and groggy, but aware all the same of the changes in his life. After weeks in hospital, he walked into his new home with something of a patchy grooming job, wearing a collar given to him by Sherlock’s father, fashioned by whomever made his saddles. John had to admit that the giant of a dog looked quite sporting.

The poor canine knew something was changing in his life, and his ability to grasp at hope and joy
after a life of untold pain and suffering shook John deeply, as it had done for the past few months of his rehabilitation. Over time, he had found himself seeing London through MacPherson’s eyes, and found that he wanted the dog to have every possible positive experience he possibly could in life. In this, he and Sherlock was totally and completely united. It seemed a strange, and yet perfectly correct, objective to share.

MacPherson sniffed upon entering Baker Street, accepted a pat from Mrs. Hudson, and promptly lifted his great body with a single pained hop onto the sofa.

It seemed, somehow, that MacPherson knew he was home. John set down the leash on the table, clean for MacPherson’s homecoming but soon to be covered anew with experiments, and sat down on the couch with the dog, whose pleading gaze had settled on his face.

John wedged himself onto the small vacant space on the sofa. Sherlock set down MacPherson’s medical bag, not trusting even John to carry it properly, never mind the fact that he had carried far more volatile substances than pain medication, antibiotics, and anti-nausea medications. Nevertheless, Sherlock had appointed herself in charge of MacPherson’s medication schedule, and John was fine with letting her have at it. He was fine with treating humans, but felt something of a cad for making animals take medications, owing likely to a childhood cat who had taken her diabetes diagnosis as a personal insult.

Sherlock bustled out of the room to get something, and John took a long look at the dog who was now sitting on the sofa, his head in John’s lap. His heavy-lidded eyes flicked up to meet John’s gaze, and John knew just exactly MacPherson was thinking, “We’ve both come up in the world, haven’t we? She’s a bit intense about it, but she loves you, you know?” John patted the dog’s still healing body gently, his body taking up every bit of the sofa John wasn’t using, “You’re always going to have a home here, mate.”

Sherlock came back into the room, having fetched something from the toy bin in her room. “Here, MacPherson, this will provide you with mental stimulation and emotional comfort.” Sherlock placed the squeaking elk on the sofa on the inside. She leaned over John to place it, and John gamely kept his gaze who was wholly unappreciative of the glimpse of pale flesh above them. “It is an alces alces. They have been extinct here since the bronze age. However, they are commonly understood to be a symbol of Canada and there are called moose.”

But, medication doing its work, MacPherson had fallen asleep. Somehow, John suspected being stuck on the sofa with a dog the size of a small pony would be his lot in life. There were, he decided as he reached for the paper, entirely worse things to establish as tradition.

A week after MacPherson came home, they had established something of a routine. Sherlock tended to him in between experiments and cases, though she eschewed meeting with clients and instead turned to Skype, though that would last only until MacPherson found his feet. John returned to the surgery a day after MacPherson’s arrival at Baker Street, and used his lunch break at the end of the day to take the dog on a leisurely stroll to the park and to play with him. John felt it important they bond as a dyad as well as within the household.

Saturday on Baker Street was reasonably quiet. After putting some chicken in the oven, he set to blogging. Nearby, Sherlock was experimenting with human hair, thankfully nothing to do with flames, and MacPherson was resting on the couch with a Nylabone when the buzzer resounded. It was not a client buzz. John almost did not want to get the door.

John clearly was the one to get the door when Sherlock didn’t so much as look away from her tweezers and her sample, and MacPherson only sighed. John opened it and found Sarah standing
there. He’d assumed it was Lestrade. Lestrade was not to call on them as professionals until MacPherson was on his feet. Sarah, however, had no such injunctions against her and clearly dropped round the flat on his sixth day home.

John glanced behind him and saw Sherlock sliding on a sweater. Modesty around Sarah confused him, but who was he to remark on something like that? “Sarah, what a surprise!”

“I sent you a text.” Sarah replied, “May I come in?”

John hadn’t checked his phone in nearly a day. Sherlock hadn’t gone out, and neither had he, and there had been no real reason to keep it on his person. John stumbled backwards slightly, “It’s really nice of you to drop by to see MacPherson.”

Sarah did not approach the dog, but she did give him a friendly smile. “He’s much, ah, bigger, in person.”

Sherlock had no hesitation in speaking, “I’ve been analyzing dog hair, and of course the in-process DNA testing will confirm it, but we have evidence to believe he’s a Scottish Deerhound.”

MacPherson looked happily to Sherlock, and John supposed that the dog must be happy simply to hear her voice. John was glad to be corrected and know that it was not human hair she was examining under her microscope.

Sarah nodded, and it was clear to even John that he’d just learned something new about Sarah. She was not a dog person. He didn’t quite understand that, but he also knew that MacPherson stood head and shoulders above others of his species, literally and figuratively. He was kind and smart and funny and compassionate. He was sure that Sarah would love him just as they did.

The idea that she hadn’t lost her heart to him almost instantly made something clench in John’s middle. After months of talking about MacPherson’s wellbeing and keeping her updated when he went to visit him daily, John had assumed that Sarah was similarly invested in the dog and wanted to be a part of his life.

Sherlock seemed to notice this, because she made Sarah no offer to pet the dog that had once again returned to chewing his bone. It was entirely evident by the way that she was clutching her bag that she wanted nothing to do with MacPherson.

John shoved a hand through his hair, “I just put some chicken in the oven. Do you want to stay?”

“I’d just popped by to see if you wanted to go to dinner, actually.” Sarah returned, “But I’d hate for you to waste your chicken. Some other time.”

“Well…” John looked to Sherlock for her assent, which she gave with the roll of her expressive eyes, “MacPherson has hydrotherapy on Monday after work. It’s quite a lot of fun.” They played games, and John got to participate from the edge of the pool. It was amazing to see MacPherson enjoy himself without the pain of his joint problems. After a puppyhood of pain and abuse, the freedom had to be exhilarating. “You’re more than welcome to come with me.”

“I’ll see if I’m free.” Sarah replied, and it didn’t take Sherlock’s deductive powers to know that she would not be joining them.

John tried to sweeten the offer with a bit more detail. “Well, we could do dinner afterwards, if you like.”

“With the dog?” Sarah pressed for information, and John felt his enthusiasm dip. Not only did she
not like dogs, she had no interest in getting to know MacPherson or even using his name. That was one question answered, then.

“Of course not!” Sherlock interjected, her voice plainly displaying what she thought of that statement, “MacPherson doesn’t need to be stuffed under some restaurant table after the taxation of his hydrotherapy. I’ll take him, and you two can go and eat subpar food.”

“That’s very kind, Sherlock.” Sarah replied, as though she were talking to a small child, “I’ll see if I’m free.”

After a few more moments of agonizing chatter, John escorted Sarah to the flat. He did not attempt to kiss her, and she did not say she would call him. She would not be going out with him on Monday, nor again, and he wouldn’t be asking. Before she headed out onto the pavement of Baker Street, Sarah smiled sadly, and noted, “I never took you for the kind of man that wanted a dog, John.”

“I’m just sorry he's a deal breaker for you.” John replied, knowing full well that this was not something Sarah wanted to work on with him. He said it plainly to spare her having to do so.

“I can’t apologize for it.” Sarah replied, “I never wanted pets or the trappings of a family life, and it’s clear you aren’t as closed off to the idea of them as I had assumed.”

“I wouldn’t want you to apologize for being the person you are, Sarah.” John assured her, knowing now that any hope of a relationship was dead in the water and had been since the night they’d found MacPherson. John did not resent him or Sherlock for this truth, he was only sorry it had taken them both so long to see it and admit it. “You’re a wonderful friend.”

“I’m glad to remain that, John.” Sarah affirmed, “I do wish you and Sherlock the very best.”

John tilted his head, “With MacPherson?”

Sarah frowned gently, before understanding dawned in her eyes and she laughed, “Yes, John, with the dog. I’ll see you at work next week.”

John pushed open the door behind her, and wished her an honest farewell. He stood there for a long moment, watching her disappear towards Baker Street Station. Upstairs, he heard a rare happy wolf and an even more rare peal of genuine feminine laughter. Intrigued, John headed up the stairs to find out what was so going on that had filled both dog and woman with exuberant joy.

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Weeks passed as spring became summer and summer reached its peak.

If John had been worried about MacPherson’s intrusion on the Work, he needn’t have done. As Sherlock would have said, focusing on the projections without data to back them up was a waste of time and the average person’s severely limited mental capacity. Sherlock solved cases in the dog park, and at the agility course facility, where she spent some mornings. As she had begun when he was hospital, she continued to train MacPherson to fetch things, including the household blogger, and taught him a slew of commands and began to integrate him into the Work without missing a beat.

They worked together like a finely oiled team, and Sherlock’s cases somehow seemed to flow differently, now that she simply had to stop to feed the dog, to run the dog, to see that the dog got his requisite sleeping and playing time for proper wellness. If John used these periods as reasons to feed Sherlock without her actual awareness of the orange slices placed by her side or the pasta in the bowl in front of her, he felt no guilt.
She was happier than he had ever seen her. She had a continual source of change and an ever complex puzzle in the form of MacPherson, a puzzle and a changer that never seemed to bore her or annoy her in the way that people did on a regular basis. Everything MacPherson was scientific and wonderful, at least as best he could gather from Sherlock’s monologues about the dog.

She nearly got her and MacPherson thrown out of Egerton House, where she MacPherson went for research. John thought she had simply wanted to take the dog to tea, and said nothing of the sort when she came home fuming about the whole ordeal with another patron. John made sure he had their legal representative on speed dial, waiting on tenterhooks to see if the other lady was going to sue. Thankfully, she did not bring suit against them, though if Mycroft had thwarted it, John did not ask.

She took MacPherson everywhere she went, from the Chanel salon to foraging around skips. John invariably stood at the edge of the skip holding a lead, but at the very least he got to be useful and stay out of refuse. He knew that dogs were man’s best friend, and indeed, MacPherson proved in that single act alone.

This, however, was not to say that he did not where he ranked in his own household. The shaggy beast was utterly devoted to Sherlock, following her about the flat and trotting along by her side no matter what else might be ongoing. Sherlock fed him, and brushed him, and attended to his socio-educational needs, because the world was full of idiots and MacPherson was far too intelligent a canine to be saddled with an ineffective and inefficient carer. She even let him sleep in her bed, which was not something he supposed he should have found shocking, as she herself hardly used it.

Their cases with Scotland Yard back with Scotland yard continued this pattern. When Lestrade’s text came, Sherlock simply rose, stuck a few bobby pins in her hair, clipped the lead on MacPherson’s collar, and looked to John, “There’s a case, John. It’s barely a four, but it will undoubtably be of benefit to MacPherson.”

John unfolded himself from his chair, pushed aside his thoughts and his hopes for clean laundry today, and accompanied woman and dog to the aforementioned crime scene. Anderson was at the barrier, and was their first obstacle as he had always been. This had not changed since MacPherson’s first case some weeks ago, “I won’t have a dog contaminating my crime scene.”

Sherlock looked at him as though she could see the flesh melting from his bones. “Why would you assume he’ll do something you’ve already done? MacPherson is well aware of crime scene behavior, which is not something I can say for your team, despite MacPherson’s exacting example since his arrival.”

John smiled a killer’s smile as Anderson as he insulted MacPherson, “He’s got awful shaggy hair!”

Sherlock glared, shoving past the barrier. She primly directed her conversation to the dog, “MacPherson, you see, some things are constant in crime solving, chief amongst them Anderson’s idiocy. You have my permission to chew on him if you require some chewing time. The world would hardly miss…” her voice was covered by the noise of the crime scene and the sound of pandas pulling up. Sherlock had trained MacPherson for this, stealing an actual siren and other items to simulate a crime scene for their attempts at desensitization and preparation for a scene like this one.

Anderson, who was not entirely a bad sort despite his propensity to insult John’s dog within his hearing, looked to John, “Watson, come on, mate. She’s not Paris Hilton.”

John shook his head, “You’re fighting a losing battle. MacPherson’s a part of the Work.”
“Jesus Christ.” Anderson blurted, knowing full well what that meant, “I hope that beast is obedient.”

In the distance, John saw Sherlock walking MacPherson through a deduction from where he sat next to her crouching body. He was halfway to wondering if he’d been replaced wholesale when the dog moved at the slightest command from Sherlock, and began moving steadily in his direction.

MacPherson gave a short, sharp bark. John by now knew what that meant. Not only did Sherlock summon him, she’d also taught the dog to do it. She said it made MacPherson feel objectively useful, but John knew better. Asking the dog to summon the blogger saved Sherlock the trouble of having to stop making deductions.

By the time MacPherson had fetched John, Sherlock was just at the point of needing his medical expertise. John wondered if she’d trained the dog to evaluate gunshot wounds, and laughed at the idea as he patted the animal. MacPherson was a lover, not a fighter. He was lazy, lovable, and would sooner run and jump for food than to detain a criminal. God forbid, however, they ever chased a criminal that had some kind of chicken on their person.

“After this,” John proposed as they worked to examine the body, “I think MacPherson could do with a snack.”

“His mealtime is not for four point seven hours, John.” Sherlock looked up from the body that she was all but sniffing, “If this is an attempt to feed me, I assure you I require no sustenance. As it stands, we are expected at dinner tonight. You know Father will fuss if we don’t make absolute gluttons of ourselves.”

John rather hoped that the case would stretch onward. He really did not want to see Mycroft looking dubiously at MacPherson. If he did, however, John decided he would take the dog to Mycroft’s wardrobe and find Mycroft’s shoes and let MacPherson have at it. He’d take the dog into Mycroft’s study and let him loll on the settee. He was very nearly to explosion with the way the older Holmes treated his sister’s dog, largely because it hurt Sherlock deeply, each glance a blow and each word a taunt. Sherlock clammed up and MacPherson recoiled away from Mycroft like the other man reminded him of his past, neither of which John could easily observe.

As Sherlock had predicted, it was barely a four, and they were expected to leave with Lestrade to head to his home in order to participate in the hellish ritual known as a Holmes family dinner. John did his best not to think of the Holmes’ parents as Mummy and Father, but seeing as even they called themselves Mummy and Father, the names had become something of forenames in John’s mind.

Sherlock was tense, and stepped away to have a word with Mycroft. John had observed the flurry of messages and assumed that the older Holmes had a case for his sister. John hoped he knew that like the blogger, the dog was a package deal, and if he wanted Sherlock’s help it, he would take it the way she was comfortable offering it, or not at all.

He and MacPherson stood in the entry of Mycroft’s home when Mummy came bustling into the room, “Ah, John! How lovely to see you! And MacPherson!” She moved closer to them and paid a hearty greeting to the dog, who absolutely loved Mummy. After MacPherson was worked up to a suitable jolly wag and wiggle, Mummy finally looked to John, “You just leave him with me, won’t you? Go and fix yourself a drink should you want it.”

John left the lead on the small central table, and let MacPherson do as he pleased. Naturally, he stayed where he was until Mummy patted her thigh and declared, “There’s my good boy! Let’s go find you a biscuit!”
Naturally, MacPherson was willing to go to the ends of the earth for one of the biscuits that only Mummy Holmes seemed to possess. John had long ago discerned that her housekeeper made them especially for MacPherson, and that Mummy was the only Holmes who doled them out, though Father had been known to sneak one or two MacPherson’s way under the dining table.

Mummy and MacPherson made their way into the parlor, and John considered calling him back to him as the pair ahead of him disappeared into the parlor. The dog was either with him or with Sherlock, universally. She did not let her Network watch him, and she refused to hire out so much as a dog walker. Rather than risk his head, John followed along, wondering where Sherlock had loped off to that she had not taken MacPherson.

The question was answered within moments, as he heard shouting from Mycroft’s study. “You will leave John entirely out of your deranged thoughts!” Sherlock yelled, her tones clipped and forceful, “The only reason you should bring this up to him is if you want him to evaluate you for insanity brought on by gluttony!”

Smiling tightly at Father Holmes, who had been endeavoring to discuss some sort of painting he was doing with John as the elderly man shared MacPherson’s attentions with his wife, Jon rose. MacPherson did not follow him as he moved closer to the corridor, and the closed door. The dog, ever a ham, soaked up the affection as his due, his massive tail thumping against the patterned rug with glee.

John shut the door, so that MacPherson would not hear the shouting and endeavor to hide under the bed, as he did at home whenever he heard shouting on the telly or between the verbal members of their family. Consequently, there were fewer loud noises around Baker Street. He knew what it was to have PTSD and Sherlock would stand for nothing upsetting the dog.

“Sherlock—” Mycroft was saying, “You cannot keep an animal such as this one in an abode like Baker Street. He has no room to run or play. The Gorden’s are a good family. They’ve a little girl, and a son at Harrow. MacPherson would want for nothing.”

“I said no!” Sherlock screamed, and underneath it, John heard something breaking in her voice. He knew that Mycroft had to have heard it as well, and before he knew what he was about he’d thrown open the door. There was a time for shock and awe, and this was one of those times. Sherlock was enraged, white-faced, and standing, spine ram-rod straight by the fireplace, as Mycroft sat at his desk, with yet another of his damn files. John wanted to grab the damn thing and make him eat it, shove it down his throat. Rage surged, cool and clarifying, in his blood.

John’s gaze flew to Mycroft’s in a single instant. “You have no right to MacPherson, Mycroft. Do you really want to attempt to remove him from Baker Street?”

Mycroft, despite Sherlock’s continual assertions, was not a stupid man. He knew his team wouldn’t make it across the threshold. He knew the dog was going exactly nowhere. “I merely wished to present the idea for your consideration.”

“You have our response.” John replied, “That’s the end of it.”

Mycroft was not one to accept being told what to do, but in this case, he saw the wisdom in retreat. He nodded, and stood, his chair rolling back slightly, “Shall we join the others, Sherlock?”

“John, go and get MacPherson.” Sherlock sat down, “Mycroft, get out. You will face Mummy alone and face the consequences.”

It was clear to John that Sherlock wanted a word, and, though she would never admit it, a moment to
collect herself. John opened the door to find MacPherson sitting by the doorway, barely allowing Mycroft out before he pranced inward, as though he were walking on air. MacPherson made no bones about putting his front paws on Mycroft’s settee, and allowing Sherlock to bury her hand in his coat as she petted him. He was always quick to comfort them. Poor MacPherson knew what it was to be sad.

After a moment, John spoke. “Sherlock, you know I’d never let him take MacPherson.”

“He wants what you want for MacPherson.” Sherlock returned, “It seems only MacPherson and I understand that he must stay at Baker Street.”

“Sherlock…” John sought her gaze, and found it vulnerable beneath the steel in her eyes, “I hardly knew him when I made that suggestion. I was wrong. He’s a consulting canine, just as you are consulting detective.”

“You believe what you are saying.” Sherlock breathed the deduction, as though she herself did not believe this to be true, “And you weren’t lying about the lengths you would go to in order to keep him with us when you confronted Mycroft. It was not at all falsehood or adrenaline.”

Sherlock looked wondrous, like she’d just been kissed, properly and truly kissed. Her eyes glittered, their blue rims filling with light. John had to look away before he made a fool of himself. Instead, he cleared his throat, “It’s just the truth.”

“Your problem, John, is that you insist in minimizing the importance of truth.” Sherlock returned, and though John wanted desperately to hear something meaningful in her statement, he knew he was reading things into it that for which his vivid mind was solely responsible.

“So I?” John sought clarification, if for no other reason to keep hear her speaking. Her mind was a beautiful place, and to hear her express its inner workings for his ears alone was a gift beyond measure.

“Truths have meanings, implications, consequences.” Sherlock replied, “If you can acknowledge a truth, you have to accept those, build upon them, act upon them. You have yet to do so, though I suffer no such paralysis.”

MacPherson placed his paws upon Sherlock’s knees, and she gently guided him off of her jeans, so that he was sitting next to her, his craggy head butting her hand for pets. John’s mouth dried as he considered the meanings of what she was saying.

Before he could reply, the door swung open anew. It was Lestrade. He took in the scene before him, and though he could not see the electricity in John’s blood nor the fire in Sherlock’s eyes, he did apologize, adding, “I never would have let him go on thinking that was sensible, just so you know.” His assessing eyes darted between Sherlock and John, “Dinner?”

Sherlock stood and bolted from the room with the dog loping at her side. John thought he saw a blush cresting across her cheeks. John simply filed that image away for later consideration and faced Lestrade, who had stepped aside to let Sherlock pass quickly.

“What?” John asked, rolling his shoulders as he left the study, absurdly happy to see dog hair on the silk settee Sherlock had vacated.

“Did I say something?” Lestrade’s undertone was full of something John could not name, “Or interrupt something, rather?”

“You’re more ridiculous than Mycroft.” John retorted as he headed towards the dining room.
following the sound of Sherlock admonishing her father for overfeeding MacPherson.

“Just for that I won’t tell you that Mummy has a scheme all cooked up.” Lestrade informed him, “I’ll let you flounder and try to wiggle out of a week in the country.”

“MacPherson would like it.” John replied, near the doorway to the room in question, “If Sherlock wants to go, it might be nice.”

“Could you be anymore domest—” Greg was cut off from asking a question John did not really care to answer when Mummy called his name, absolving John from proving the point that Greg was really even more absurd than Mycroft.

He was John bloody Watson. Solider. Veteran of Bart’s. Doctor. Blogger. He was hardly domesticated. Coming around to his chair next to Sherlock, he felt a great paw land atop his brogues, followed by a craggy head, attached to a body that was sticking out from underneath the table.

Sherlock’s rare smile was crooked and unguarded as she put the napkin in her lap and caught a glimpse of MacPherson. John’s heart skipped a beat just as Mycroft choked on his wine.

It was an apropos start, all told, to yet another Holmes family dinner.

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John readily agreed to the week in the country once Sherlock had done so. MacPherson would have ample space to run and play, and he would get a week to clear his head and consider what on earth had happened in Mycroft’s study. It would also give Sherlock some time to ride her horses, experiment in her lab in one of the outbuildings, and perhaps sleep more than three hours a night while exploring local cases that came her way.

Two days before they were ready to leave, a shipment came down from Sherlock’s childhood home. The moving team trudged the crates upstairs, leaving John to open them.

By the time Sherlock returned from her deduction hour and afternoon run with MacPherson, John had unpacked a rather large set of vintage Globetrotter luggage. They were clearly items that had belonged to some member of the Holmes ancestry on one side or another. They were fashioned out of leather and straps, though they were entirely pristine and their patina was free of stickers or stamps.

Sherlock downed a pint of water standing by the fridge, her slim ankles on display as they emerged from Sweaty Betty leggings and disappeared into trainers. MacPherson had already darted for a few laps from his own water bowl and begun to hop around the sitting room.

Finishing her water, Sherlock breathed out, and declared, “I manipulated a very pretty woman to dispose of MacPherson’s refuse.”

“You cook entrails in our best kettle, but refuse to scoop poop.” John observed, “Did you get her number?”

“Yes, but I’m not giving it to you, or using it.” Sherlock replied, stuffing a bit of paper into the dregs of the coffee pot, which John was entirely responsible for binning. “She’s just gotten a divorce, compulsive liar, and quickly on the road to gaining fifty pounds and losing out on a possible promotion.”

“Your luggage came.” John replied, stating the obvious, as there were cases everywhere. “Are you packing today?”
“Hardly. I will, however, assist you in facilitation.” Sherlock declared, as MacPherson’s panting resounded around the flat, “MacPherson, please do not try to fit yourself in Grandmere’s suitcase, you are not a liquid.”

“Nor a cat.” John chortled, turning around to see MacPherson trying to tap dance his way into fitting into the open suitcase on the floor. It was a medium case, and nowhere large enough to allow the dog to lay down in it, though he was determined to try.

“What?” Sherlock asked, distracted as her attention was on the dog, who was rummaging through his toy chest to put as many toys as he might into his large but finite mouth, “Cats are not liquid, John. Do be serious.”

John noticed then that Sherlock looked largely distracted. He pressed her for information gently, and she turned a gimlet stare onto his face. He allowed her to deduce whatever she wanted from his expression and his person. To pretend like it wasn’t both consensual and welcomed on his part was absurd.

When she was ready, having determined whatever it was she needed to know to begin, Sherlock spoke, “I need you to watch MacPherson and begin to pack for him whilst I’m gone. I’m going to the doctor, and I cannot, despite my objections to the policy in place, bring him along.”

John studied Sherlock. She was being carefully to the point and direct. Had she had so much as a sniffle, though, he would have heard about it after the first instance, no matter what he was doing or where he happened to be at the moment. “I’m glad you’ve decided to see to your routine care.”

“It’s only sensible, given the probabilities of future occurrences.” Sherlock replied, “I have done my research, and I think the Paraguard best for my body. I am uncomfortable with hormones I have not synthesized myself, and the manufacture of a pill each month is tedious and something I am likely to disregard in the midst of cases. The consequences of such an action would be unpleasant.”

The penny dropped then, and he realized that he was having a very frank discussion with Sherlock, not as a professional, but as someone whom she felt needed to know that she was taking this step. The probabilities of future occurrences, clearly, related to either sex or pregnancy, and given that she was taking steps to prevent pregnancy, he felt it very obvious that she was informing that she was open to a sexual relationship. In theory. With someone. With him?

Sherlock nodded once, very directly, and he supposed that this was not an answer to his unspoken question, because she acted as though she had merely read the weather forecast and headed off to the loo to shower and change. “Please see that you add the fish oil and probiotics to his dinner, John.”

John absolutely did not allow himself to think about the fact that Sherlock had just discussed her birth control and had plainly stated that she had a high probability of needing it for pregnancy prevention. Instead, he did the supportive and sensible thing, and put a pair of painkillers and a glass of water on her dresser.

Maybe they weren’t ready to talk. He knew they’d have to talk this week. There was time enough to figure out if she’d asked him for a relationship or something, because God knew he could never just have sex with Sherlock Holmes. The idea of a no-strings sort of sex holiday, at her parent’s estate, for God’s sake, was untenable and made dread build in his heart.

When Sherlock gathered her bag, John looked up from where he was sitting with MacPherson to ask, “Do you want me to come along?”

“I…” She seemed to be considering it for a moment, but eventually Sherlock replied, shaking her
head, “It is important not to disrupt MacPherson’s routine.” That stated, she addressed the animal in question, “Please eat your dinner carefully, MacPherson. No one is going to take the bowl, and if you don’t wait 2.5 seconds between bites, you run a 96% of vomiting.”

He knew she would likely be back before the dog could eat, as he could not eat for four hours. It simply was important to issue any instructions she felt pertinent, though he felt it something a vote of confidence that she didn’t tell him how to pack the dog’s suitcase.

“Please try not to deduce the medical staff.” John reminded her, accepting her refusal but thankful all the same for her genuine hesitation and consideration. It said enough that the dread in his heart began to dissipate, “Ask for something if it hurts instead.”

Sherlock huffed and headed down the stairs. John, after shoving all of the suitcases into something resembling a stack, clipped MacPherson’s lead onto his collar of the week, and headed to Boots. Sherlock had used the last few heating pads on some thermogenerator experiment. They were also out of soap, for much the same reason, and John was sure that he was going to need sun protectants this week. Thankfully they sold La Roche-Posay at Boots, and Sherlock declared the scent and texture of any other high street brand untenable.

“What do you make of that exchange?” John asked the dog as he reached for a jacket. Time marched so quickly that it would be winter before he knew it.

MacPherson shook, wisps of hair flying everywhere. John agreed, “Yeah, I don’t know either.”

They headed companionably down the stairs, stopped for a biscuit and a pat at Mrs. Hudson’s, and began to walk down Baker Street. The Boots was right next to the station, and so they made quick work of purchasing the essentials John had previously considered.

John noticed the headline on The Evening Standard. Above the fold, bold type blared: Doctor, Detective, and Dog. Below the headline, an article began to prattle on about their domestic life.

Really, did people not get enough from the blog? Almost weekly, he published a new case and something from MacPherson’s perspective. John’s teeth clenched together when he saw a photo of them walking MacPherson in Hyde Park plastered on the page. Of course they had been sticking close to one another. It had been unseasonably windy and cold that morning. It was fucking London in early autumn. Of course it was cold some mornings.

John scowled, and debating taking the whole load of copies off the shelf and binning them. The bloody paper would see that as fucking interest in their lives. Knowing full well people were watching him, holding a basket of personal care items, as he stared at his own image. John turned away, and he and MacPherson went to the check. He added a Mars bar to their order, because really, he needed the sugar.

When they came out of the shop, there was a shining black SUV loitering at the curb. The back window rolled down, and Sherlock’s archenemy himself demanded, “Get in.”

“No please this time?” John asked, shifting the bag he carried on his arm, “What would your mummy say, Mycroft?”

“I do not care to discuss family matters in public.” Mycroft elaborated, clearly having already had Sherlock’s hacked medical file brought to his attention, “You and the canine will get in this vehicle, and you and I will be having a chat about my twenty-one year old sister’s whereabouts.”

Like hell they would. Sherlock was a grown woman, and if she wanted to do something she chose to
do, Mycroft had exactly zero right to say anything beyond words of support, and even those John knew Sherlock would find puzzling and creepy. The idea that Mycroft had any right to an opinion over any facet of another person’s health was absurd.

John shook his head, “Actually, it’s time for MacPherson to have a bit of postprandial playtime.” He looked to the dog who was standing at attention at his left, “Say goodnight to Uncle Myc, MacPherson.”

John turned and began to walk away with MacPherson as he heard Mycroft exhale. John desperately wanted to turn around and see if he was turning pale or going puce. He did nothing of the sort, and instead continued onward towards Baker Street. He did smile jauntily at the CCTV cameras that were following him home, knowing that if nothing else, they’d succeeded in riling up Mycroft.

He wondered if Mycroft had seen the *The Evening Standard*. John placed his copy in the rubbish bin not far from the door to 221B, and watched with some satisfaction as six cameras swiveled to read the headline. Once inside the flat, he asked, “Not bad for an afternoon’s work, huh, MacPherson?”

MacPherson merely licked his stuffed elk, and waited for Sherlock to come home. John hoped that the flurry of indigent messages from Mycroft were distracting her from the insertion process. At the very least, it would give her a puzzle to focus upon as they measured and a relative to insult as they inserted it. Annoying Mycroft, it was clear, was a panacea for many ills and pains.

Chapter End Notes

Cannon dog is a bulldog named Gladstone, I think, but I gave them a Scottish Deerhound named MacPherson, after the aforementioned historical figure, and immortalized in this song

I was thrown a shower for my dog, before I got him from his previous living situation. I find them more fun than bridal showers, honestly.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Another long awaited update...

This story arc is gathering steam, though, so don't be surprised if I update sooner than two months from today.

Chapter Notes

BAMF!Sherlock, Awesome!Molly, and Spy!John in full supply...

Quoted text in italics. Let me know if I missed any.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sherlock didn’t drive and they didn’t keep a car. It was absurd to consider buying and maintaining a car in this city, with their lifestyle. Though London was spread out, they did just fine with transit. Well, John used the Tube and busses. Sherlock had an army of cabs and cars at her disposal. She sometimes used the Tube to deduce, but certainly never to get around London, much less anywhere outside of Zone One, let alone where they were headed.

However, MacPherson presented a new challenge. Along with Sherlock’s cases, because God forbid she travel light unless pressed to do so, and his own single duffle, they now had to consider a very large canine and his own things. Sherlock had declared his toys, food, bed, leads, collars, and all manner of items his basic essentials. She wasn’t wrong. It was simply a lot to lug.

John swore a blue streak as a case went skittering down the stairs. MacPherson jolted, and dashed to Sherlock’s side from where he had been sniffing at the base of the stairs, quite interested in John’s comings and goings. He was not quite so interested in allowing a suitcase to hit him. He put one of his great paws onto her lap, and she proceeded to hold his hand, a gesture their dog found comforting.

John looked at the pile of vintage suitcases in the entry to Baker Street, having carried them all down the stairs. He’d not lugged things like that since his days as a Private. Poor Peters had been ordered to carry a tree around during training to replace the oxygen he was wasting. Peters was still in the Army. Last John knew, he was alive and reasonably well.

He still had no idea how he was going to fit all of this in the boot of the 4WD that had shown up in front of Baker Street this morning. The keys had been included in John’s morning paper, just atop an article about the Girl with the Deerstalker Hat’s fashion. “You could help load the boot, Sherlock.”

“John, do be serious.” The woman in question looked up from her magazine as she sat on a chair, one she claimed to read for research purposes, though John knew better, “I am minding MacPherson. I do not intend to debate gender dynamics at this time. You should stop considering masculine coded work as more challenging.”
“You’re reading a bloody magazine and petting the dog!” John returned, picking up the case that had skittered down the stairs, “Do you want your hatboxes on the bottom? I’m just going to stuff the boot and hope it closes.”

Sherlock set her magazine down on top of her cosmetics case, not that she even wore cosmetics unless on a case, and looked to MacPherson, “For someone who worked during summers in Uni as a shelf stocker, you would think he’d know better than to joke over such matters.”

“I should have worked as a lion tamer, that’s what I ought to have done.” John muttered, “A lion taming—” John dropped the case on his foot, and hoped Mycroft was enjoying the CCTV footage. “Fuck!”

MacPherson padded along beside Sherlock as they headed out onto the pavement. She stood at the boot, deducing the space available to them. Ignoring the throb of his foot, John lugged the cases and set them in an impressive pile. The customers at Speedy’s were staring, and John didn’t need to be a highly trained soldier to know that the photos they were taking would soon end up on Twitter.

Carefully, Sherlock shepherded MacPherson into the car, so as provide him with a safe place to rest, see his people, and be out of the range of nosey parkers snapping pictures. So began the hard work of shoving, stuffing, and pushing. Between the two of them, they got the boot to close. Primly, Sherlock placed her hatbox and train case on the bench seat beside a wagging MacPherson. John took a scant second to check Twitter, and noted that his blog account, which had been blue checked in the last few months, was blowing up with speculation as to their destination. People were split 50/50 on their reasons for leaving Baker Street, with neither the work or play winning out in the debate.

John turned and gave a slight nod to the people in Speedy’s. Sherlock’s nimble fingers danced over the keys, as she responded to the fuss with a single factoid about the amount of injuries and casualties on British roads. John retweeted it, and watched as the internet speculation grew. That done, they were of one accord as John shut the boot with a grateful exhalation and Sherlock released a happy MacPherson, who was carrying a ratty tennis ball in his great mouth.

Once the boot was loaded, and MacPherson released from his safe spot that had become his own when he had placed himself in the boot upon his first SUV ride, as though he was either curious or meant to ride there, which of course led them to assuring MacPherson in the most sensible way possible that he was to ride in his seat. From the look that day on Sherlock’s face, John had again determined that he would be hunting down his previous owners, and they would be having a nice little chat involving his Browning.

They had long ago released a statement that they did not want pictures of MacPherson popping up on the web, or being sold to the press. MacPherson hadn’t chosen their path, and he would not suffer for it, not when people coming up to him made him anxious from time to time. Pasting a smile on as he freed MacPherson and used his body to ruin any photos of the dog, they three headed inside to go to see Mrs. Hudson. John was keen for a bit of assurance that she would be well in their absence. Mrs. Hudson was happy to have their farewells, but seemed fixated on the traffic in only the way that someone with no pressing schedule could go on about the potentialities of sitting on the motorway for ages. The prospect of a bored Sherlock in a car was horrifying, and John hoped the traffic reports held true.

Though Twitter knew it not, Sherlock’s cosmetics case was filled with cultures and petri dishes under the bench seat, and his gun was in the center console when not in the back of his trousers. John spent a happy moment settling MacPherson into his space with his doggy seatbelt, his stuffed Alces alces, and his blanket. They pulled into the London traffic and set off for Sherlock’s childhood
home.

Almost instantly, Sherlock declared her mind in need of diversion, and synced her phone with the stereo system. Momentarily, Sherlock retreated into her Mind Palace, and seemingly took no notice of Mahler that was streaming with gusto out of the speakers. John would have found The Clash better driving music, but he wasn’t about to quibble.

The Sat Nav guided them along the journey, the electronic female’s cheery voice John’s only company save the occasional noise and interested movement from the backseat that John took as an invitation for conversation with the dog. MacPherson was the better conversationalist of the two of them, but John was a doctor, and that meant being able to talk about anything and nothing.

Once they left the bustle of the motorway behind, John watched bucolic and pastoral scenes pass him by as the roads twisted and curved on the final portion of their drive. He loved the country. He had spent his summers as a child on a farm outside Inverness, as Sherlock had once deduced. His maternal grandparents had farmed, and they had made a home and a haven for him and Harry. Even years later, his best memories, amid cancer and divorce and stress and pain, had been of that stone house and the warmth found therein. He was sorry to say that Gramps was gone, because John often wondered what the man would make of him, if he would be proud in a way that his father had never experienced.

John shook his head to chase away thoughts of Gramps. He had been the reason John had made peace with his choice to join up. He had served in WWII, and on his few visits home, Gramps had been the only one not to ask questions John could not answer. Often in those silences, Gramps had given him answers he’d never known he was seeking, just with the simple filling of a glass and a knowing glance.

It felt strangely good to be out of London. Outside of working and The Work, he hadn’t really been anywhere save war zones and London since University, and he felt that he was returning to some truth within himself as the farms and villages brought memories to the forefront of his mind. In the back seat, MacPherson seemed as enamored of the scenery as he was of his favorite bone. After a time, he placed his great head on the ledge of the door and pressed his nose to the glass of the closed window.

Sherlock roused, likely having perfectly perfected timing this drive from Baker Street, and ran her fingers along the bottom of her coil of hair, tucking a few loose curls away, as though she hadn’t been in her Mind Palace for the entire drive, “Make the next left.”

“I’ve the Sat Nav, thanks.” John replied, doing as she suggested anyway, turning off of a village lane down a winding road that led them farther away from small shops and a country church past farms and occasional drives. There was a few more turns to be made, and John knew that they were seconds away from being dropped into another combat zone. Though it wasn’t a jungle or a terrorist hub, John felt his pulse steady.

In a moment or two, the autumn sunlight illuminated the glass windows of a large, sandy-colored home, with vines climbing up the walls. Sherlock read the thoughts dancing across his face before they were smoothed away. John blamed his lack of a poker face on being distracted by the process of drawing up around the circle drive and parking the car in front, as it seemed the thing to do.

She shoved her slim feet back into her flats, and declared, “What, John, did you think I had grown up in a barn?”

She was making a joke, because he had, in fact, pegged her for a horsewoman within that first night.
She moved gracefully, and he had eschewed thoughts of ballet for horse riding within hours. She was, John was more than amused to note, not the only one skilled at reasoning.

Buttoning her coat, she promptly went and released MacPherson from the back seat. He jumped out with a fluid leap, scrabbling up to lick and paw and woof happily at Sherlock. She simply corrected him, “It is erroneous to greet me, MacPherson, as I have not been out of your presence for a socially arbitrary period of time that would require you to bid me hello or risk social scorn.”

John disagreed as they met on his side of the car, MacPherson sniffing with great whooshes of chilly country air, “I think he knows when you’re in the Mind Palace.”

Sherlock was in the middle of suggesting that she would have to give his theory due diligence and research it when the door opened and Father Holmes began greeting them exuberantly, “Oh, you’re here! You’re here!”

“Father, you know as I do that the journey was not significantly delayed. We arrived precisely as we said we would do.” Sherlock accepted her father’s greeting in her typical fashion, “You will excuse me, I am taking MacPherson to the garden.”

With a winning smile, Sherlock left John behind to her mother’s clutches as she swanned away. Mummy came to the doorway just as Father Holmes led him indoors, chatting on about the journey. John, quick to do as he was told, came out of the chill and removed his coat. Father Holmes himself took the coat, going on that Jane and Tom were away, regrettably.

Mummy, like her daughter, was a curious and astute woman. “She abandoned you, did she?” She came forward and pressed a gentle kiss to John’s cheek, in her formal manner, “Cowardice on the front lines.”

John said nothing, though he knew that Sherlock was more cunning genius than bloodless coward. Mummy had hit far too closely to his thoughts, for he had been put in mind of walking into a battlefield of a new sort. As he had once entered Buckingham, he entered the Holmes home. John, in his first glance, knew that this place radiated Mummy and Father, from the lovely flowers in the entry to the absurd painting of some mathematical concept made art.

Mummy ushered him into tea, and they had only just sat down to making banal chatter when John rose anew at the tap of feminine heels that were known to him as the Jaws theme was known to boaters. Anthea swanned into the room, took one glance at John, and arched an eyebrow before clicking away at her phone. John groaned inwardly as he offered her a greeting, knowing that where Anthea was lurking, Mycroft would soon appear.

Mycroft was still out of sorts about the fact that his sister was a grown woman. When he did show up not two minutes later, he was without his brolly, and that alone made John feel as though he had come upon Mycroft in the buff. Added to this feeling of inappropriateness was Mycroft’s lack of suit. He was wearing cords and a easily buttoned shirt, and John had the urge to look around for a pair of gloves and begin using the medical ‘we.’

“Mycroft, do be nice.” Violet declared, after their greetings. “I swear, every time you take up the notion to limit your carbs you become an absolute bear.”

“Myummy.” Mycroft’s voice was pained beneath its disapproval, “Do you routinely make so free with sensitive information? I shudder to think at the state of world affairs.”

John hadn’t needed the data, but the confirmation was nice all the same. John knew Mycroft had cut carbs from the wrinkle in his brow and the jitter in his fingers. He had a headache and was going
through sugar withdrawal. John knew the symptoms of mild withdrawal as well as he knew the back of his hand or his NHS number.

“I’m a maths professor, dear.” Mummy smiled, “And we rather do like to teach and inform, don’t we?”

John said nothing, sipping his tea, and noted that Sherlock had allowed MacPherson to ramble into the garden just beyond the wide picture window that dominated this sitting room. When she spotted her brother imperiously taking tea with him and Mummy, John pointed with his eyes, and mouthed, “Traitor.”

Sherlock spun around in a wide circle, her arms thrown out to balance herself as her skirt twirled and the dog jumped around, as if to ask, “What’s to stop you from coming here?”

John’s expression shifted, and he knew his thoughts were easily read. He could not just flee to go romp around the garden. Sherlock had lost her shoes at some point, and her stockinged feet were bare in the grass. Clearly, they both knew she had the better end of the stick, though it jarred John a little bit to see her quite so free so soon after their arrival.

Mycroft rose to pour himself more tea, possibly to avoid the chocolate biscuits, and Sherlock darted behind a tree to avoid being seen by her brother, and John determined her quest to have been successful. As Mycroft poured his tea, Sherlock pulled a face, and it was all John could do to swallow laughter and snort into his cup.

Mummy, of course, noticed this, though he think her aware of what Sherlock was doing behind her back. “Is your tea acceptable, John?”

“Perhaps it’s missing the tinge of mold and connective tissue.” Mycroft remarked.

“It’s lovely, thank you.” John answered Mummy before taking the piss out of Mycroft, “I thought you visited for the company, Mycroft. The secret’s PG Tips.”

Sherlock strode purposefully after MacPherson, and disappeared from view just as John smiled at her brother.

Mycroft sipped his very obviously not supermarket tea, and returned, “Oh, I’m sure you have quite a few more secrets, John.”

“Files full of them.” John agreed breezily, biting into a chocolate biscuit. He did not have to elaborate. Mycroft knew full well what he meant, in both contexts. Much of his background was classified, and so John would leave Mycroft to what he could glean. It was both a reminder and a warning. Mycroft could go on thinking he had the upper hand, or John would simply and easily prove that he had only that in his mind.

Mummy was watching them with interest, and John knew in an instant that she had set both he and Mycroft up, and she was killing two birds with one stone via this exchange. John hoped the information would serve her well, because as a guest in her home, he would play the game to a respectable extent. It was, in a way, a hostess gift.

“Mummy,” Father came into the room, clearly having been playing the host, overjoyed at having some of his children home once again, “I’ve just got off the phone with Martha.” Looking at John, he added, “She’s pleased to know you’ve arrived safely. I’ve invited her up, but she’s of a mind to have a holiday at home.”

“I’m sure that’s just the thing for her, dear.” Violet smiled, and it was clear to John that she had made
a game out of not using her husband’s name in front of John. John supposed he could just ask Sherlock what her father was called, but John recognized the puzzle as a gift from one operative to another.

He would not spoil it. The conversation was lively, and John enjoyed watching Mummy and Father. He had long ago wondered how Sherlock and Mycroft could be at once so off-beat and so well-adjusted, and he knew that he had found the answer in observing the older Holmes couple. There was a balance and an accord between them that had shaped their children in the same way that his own parental discord had shaped John and Harry.

He knew, too, that there was an intentional distance between parents and children. The Holmes parents loved their children, but it was clear that they thought them so capable and well-versed that to offer them assistance was beyond consideration. John had long ago wondered why Sherlock never vented or sulked around her parents, and it had become increasingly clear that she did not feel comfortable doing so.

Cup possibly consumed, John rose. Sherlock had long ago slipped away, and he was curious as to her whereabouts. Though he enjoyed visiting with Mummy and Father, he found it best to limit time spent in Mycroft’s company, if only to avoid getting drawn into sibling squabbles. “If you’ll excuse me…”

“Check the stables, John.” Mummy advised, “Sherlock is no doubt either there with the horses or in her lab. I’m afraid we’re all second chair to the animals and experiments. She’s probably forgotten we exist.”

John’s phone buzzed. He didn’t have to pull it out to know he was being called to come at once. John ignored his phone, largely because he didn’t need confirmation, nor did he particularly want to grapple with the direct contradiction of Mummy’s statement.

John was not surprised to find Sherlock in the barn, though the beat up wellies on her feet were something of an incongruence as compared to the £700 jumper she wore. John found her grooming a chestnut gelding. He stopped by the stall door, knowing there was a barn worker not thirty feet ahead of him, likely middle-aged and male. “You deserted me.”

MacPherson trotted out from where he had been sniffing around the barn, and nudged his hand for petting. John complied, and the dog sat down by his feet, his craggy head tilting and his eyes wide at all of the sights and smells that surrounded him. John resolved to keep him close, for he had crime scene training, not barn safety training.

“You’re welcome.” Sherlock smiled her genuine, crooked, smile, and clicked gently to maintain the horse’s focus as she ran a curry comb over the horse’s side. “John, meet Fritz. Fritz, John.”

John returned the horse’s curious gaze carefully. He understood well that Sherlock’s horse was taking his measure. After all, John was certain that Sherlock had learned much in the way of observation from this calm equine, who wise brown eyes shone with knowing and light.

“Hello.” John carefully allowed himself to be sniffed, and when permission was given with the nudge of a heavy head and the happy flick of ears, he patted Fritz’s mane. “It’s nice to meet you.”

John had the sense the Fritz had been Sherlock’s friend and confidante for many years, and so it was no shock to John that he felt as though the horse was telling him he had tarried quite long enough. There was nothing flash or fancy about Fritz, but to dismiss him would be a fool’s venture. There was a bond between woman and horse such that John knew he would never understand it, though he
did respect it.

Sherlock merely rolled her eyes at the maleness of their exchange, and completed the combing almost instantly. Likely, she had timed herself with exactitude, and summoned him at a precise interval. Sherlock patted Fritz, and exited the stall.

MacPherson trotted off, darting to scurry after some shadow or scent John’s human eyes could not discern. “MacPherson, stay close.”

Saying close was one of the first commands Sherlock had taught him. It told him that he needed to stay within a 50 foot radius of either him or Sherlock. John was not sure how they had worked out that boundary line, but it worked well enough. The dog got to maintain his autonomy, which Sherlock was loathe to restrict when he was smarter than most humans who had full autonomy on the basis of the accident of being born human, and they avoided any accident lack of supervision might cause.

Sherlock briefly introduced him to every horse and pony in the barn, and noted that there were several more horses in the pastures flanking the long and winding drive. All told, John discerned that the Holmes family ran toward horse riding as a sensible and reasonable diversion. He had no illusions as to Mycroft’s polo abilities, and added ‘mallet-swinging’ to Sherlock’s laundry list of insults with which to reference Mycroft.

John watched as an man in his late fifties approached them. He was a sparse man, one born to the saddle, with close-cropped greying hair and a confident, quiet, air. “I suppose now he’s met the horses, you might introduce us, Sherlock.”

Sherlock was not chastened, nor had the man’s tone intended to chastise her. He teased her with the ease of the man who had placed her on the back of her first pony, and helped her find her way in life in more ways than one. John thereby extended his hand, “John Watson.”

“Hugh McGowan.” The stable master replied, taking his hand and shaking in the way of two men who were evaluating one another and finding something worth respecting in one another, “I follow your blog. I’m glad to know you.”

“You as well.” John answered, “I suppose the blog is a bit of a laugh for people who know us.”

“Mrs. McGowan and I follow it with interest.” Hugh encompassed Sherlock in his gaze with a single glance, “I don’t suppose you ride?”

“Marsh and John will suit.” Sherlock declared, striding down past the stalls and out to look toward the pastures that flanked the drive.

John looked to Mr. McGowan for his opinion, but assessment sparkled in his eyes. John knew in an instant just who had spent much of his time giving Sherlock her introductory lessons in deduction. The older man simply gesture to John to do as he was bid, and so they followed along until they caught up to Sherlock, designer skirt, muddy wellies, and horse on a halter beside her.

John didn’t know what he was supposed to do, so he simply let the aforementioned Marsh take his measure. The horse was a beauty, glossy and ethereal. However, John saw a vulnerability in his eyes, and simply stood there, preferring to allow the horse to make the choice in their interaction.

John watched Mr. McGowan study them both for a single second. He stepped forward and took the horse from Sherlock after nodding once, leading the horse away, muttering to himself about dinner for the horses.
Sherlock’s eyes danced with merriment. “He deduced you, John. Naturally I made the deduction first.”

John chuckled. She’d made the deduction first because Mr. McGowan had allowed it. John blinked, “Where’s MacPherson?”

Sherlock fell into step beside him, and John had the mad urge to reach for her hand. “MacPherson, come, please!”

MacPherson came bounding out of the barn, holding a tatty equine brush in his mouth. He dropped it at John’s feet. “Oh, you want a brushing, do you?”

“He feels that reciprocity is only fair.” Sherlock declared, as though she could read the dog’s mind, and John wondered just how much of human debated just how much of human deductive reasoning translated to canine culture.

John picked up the brush, and looked at MacPherson’s curly hair. “Well, we should probably find you a different comb. You’ll frizz, mate.”

“Holmeses do not frizz, John.” Sherlock sniffed, brushing her fingers against his own as she plucked the wooden bristled brush from his grasp. He imagined her lingering for a long second, as though she had just given him an opportunity to take her hand.

She and MacPherson were striding away from him when John was left to catch up, both mentally and spatially when it dawned on him that, perhaps, and just perhaps, she had done just that. John shoved his hands in his pockets and hastened along.

Greg was in attendance at dinner, and though it was a very Holmesian affair, nothing particularly notable happened. Sherlock ate little, MacPherson huddled under the table, Father Holmes offered him too many treats, and Mycroft brushed at his place setting for imaginary dog hair, after which Sherlock began to pontificate on the amount of dander in the air. Greg and John discussed cases, and the blog, and Mummy watched, sharp-eyed, for data.

After they finished eating, Mummy looked to Sherlock and reminded her to make sure she took her luggage upstairs. Sherlock set down her teacup, because she refused to drink anything else, and John lived in fear of dehydration. “Mummy, I thought we were your guests.”

“No, darling.” Mummy replied, “John is my guest. You are, and shall ever remain, my only beloved daughter. As such, you carry your own luggage whilst you are under my roof.”

As an aside, Father Holmes offered, “We were always very clear that whilst Mummy and I had household assistance, that no such perks were extended to the children.”

“I was raised around too many posh gits with mush for brains.” Mummy broke in, “And so I decided from a very early age that I would do with my children as Nanny had done with me, and raise self-sustaining people. I have never regretted it for a moment.”

“I regret it.” Sherlock reminded her. “Chores from the moment I could be trusted alone with chemicals.”

“You had chores well before you were twelve, dearest, and your use of chemicals was entirely recreational, as you know we insist upon natural cleansers.” Father Holmes recalled, dabbing at his face with his napkin, “Do go along and get settled in, won’t you? When you’ve unpacked, please feel free to join us in the den.”
Sherlock slanted at glance at John, and he made his excuses as Sherlock rose from the table, “I should really see to MacPherson’s dinner. Won’t you excuse me?”

The aforementioned canine, having heard his favorite word, came out from under the dining table, and wagged with his whole body, “Would you like your dinner, MacPherson?”

MacPherson sat, plopping his large hind-end on the floor with precision. “Good lad. Lead on, then.”

He followed MacPherson out of the room, and towards Sherlock, who had already lifted the boot and begun to stare at her cases, “Why do they insist on infantilizing me?” Sherlock blurted to no one, “I am twenty-one years of age, nearly twenty-two.”

“They infantilize you, because that’s what parents do.” John offered, reaching around her to pull the heaviest suitcase to the ground, whereupon he grabbed the handle and lifted it, easily reaching for another. “It also served to get you some time alone, didn’t it?”

“I could have contrived it without my father highlight my comparative youth.” Sherlock spat, reaching for another case, “I fail to comprehend his aims.”

“He’s proud of you.” John shrugged, leading the way into the house and starting up the stairs, “He enjoys thinking about you. There’s nothing more to it.”

“And in his eyes, I will forever be a twelve year old girl with knocking knees and a collection of bunsen burners.” Sherlock surmised as the rounded the corridor and came to a cluster of doors, “You’re in the room next to mine. I felt it best for MacPherson.”

Sherlock opened her bedroom door, and John had to remind himself that he himself was not twelve, standing in the doorway of a girl’s bedroom. He moved forward and set the suitcases on the bed, all the while taking stock of the room. Sherlock unzipped the first suitcase, and he found it full of her slacks and skirts.

“I’ll go and grab the rest.” John padded from the room while Sherlock turned to MacPherson and began to hang her closet in the wardrobe with the dog’s observational assistance.

John’s mind was filled as he unpacked the luggage and moved the car. Sherlock’s room was entirely her, from the books jammed onto shelves on the walls, to the various bits of lab equipment. There was a shelf of moleskins that no doubt held decades of data collection. It amazed John to see that she had replicated her bedding at Baker Street. It was clear that Sherlock liked what she liked, and hang what anyone might say or think about it.

The room was dizzying in its detail. He had long ago been trained to walk into someone’s room, someone’s space, and read in it a single second. And yet, he could pick out few things that stood out to him as he returned to her room that stood out as particularly telling. Everything seemed to point back to the woman she was, rather than highlighting some facet about her.

There was, however, an electric kettle plugged in on a small table, complete with a small basket of tea, sugars, and any other thing she might want for tea in the middle of the night. John could see her, as she had been at fourteen, developing an addiction to tea and unwilling to wander down to the kitchens for a cuppa.

“You make better tea.” Sherlock whispered, and John realized that she had spent so many years being self-sufficient that that soft statement was a plea not to abandon her. Her parents had demanded it, her classmates had expected nothing else, and Sherlock had learned to be the smartest person in the room by needing nothing and asking for nothing.
John’s gaze met Sherlock’s, and he swallowed. She had changed him. Her very presence in his life was a chemical reaction that had refined him elementally. The John Watson he had been seconds before bumping into her in that corridor bore little resemblance to the man he was today. She had changed him, helped him become more himself, more of his fundamental self, simply by accepting him.

He would, and did, offer her nothing else. Perhaps it was overwrought to even think this, but it was important to him that they both understood that the glimpses of the girl and young woman she had once been was a mere shadow on the wall in the comparison to the person he knew, simply because he could only deduce so much. He did not know the important things about her then as he did now. He did not know the girl who had a Newton poster on her wall, but he did know the woman who collected medical tomes and blogged about color and fabric ash.

“I’ve had enough practice.” John replied, putting MacPherson’s bed down in the corner. He unearthed his bowls as Sherlock measured his food, medication, and supplements. MacPherson hopped around happily, and underneath his happy munching, John felt the electricity in the air.

Sherlock opened the pocket door on the wall opposite her bed, and slid it fully back to reveal a second bedroom. It was clearly a former extension of Sherlock’s space, but had been redone as a sitting room with a pullout. John hefted his duffle and set it easily on the plush bed. He looked to the nearby door, “That’s the loo?”

“Yes.” Sherlock answered simply, and John knew by the set of her mouth that somewhere in the last thirty seconds, he had left being John behind, and had entered foreign territory. It occurred to John that Sherlock had probably never had a friend over before, and the thought pained him. She had found so little acceptance by the small-minded people of the world.

MacPherson came flying into the room, his empty bowl between his teeth as he hopped up fluidly on John’s bed. “You have finished your meal within satisfactory parameters, MacPherson.” Sherlock informed him, reaching for the bowl as she patted his craggy head.

She clasped the stainless steel inner bowl tightly in her hand, “I begin to question MacPherson’s ability to appreciate a trip to the country. It appears that he is contented anywhere.”

John nodded, “He has what he needs, what he wants, and there’s where his contentment is rooted. We could go to China and he’d still be as at home as we are in Baker Street.”

Sherlock agreed, “In this we are alike.”

John knew they weren’t talking about MacPherson’s bed and toys. Sherlock studied him blandly for a moment, and finding what she sought his face, turned away and began to talk about the creasing ability of cotton fibers when packed under certain conditions.

John shoved his hand through his hair, and turned away, having forgotten to lock the car after moving it. “I forgot to lock the car.”

Though he know there wasn’t a soul who would bother the car, it did seem the thing to do. It was, after all, property of the British Government. Never let it be said that John Watson made free with governmental issued property. It was the first thing they told you in basic, and it was not a lesson he saw good reason to abandon.

On his way downstairs, Greg was there, clearly waiting for him. His easy, jocular manner was tempered by concern. “I remember the first time I came here. I about had a panic attack in the shower. Myc and Sherlock…they…”
“Love their parents, so they show them what they feel is acceptable to them, not knowing that their parents, in an attempt to raise self-sufficient children, raised people who haven’t the faintest clue that reaching out for support is healthy?” John finished, “I got that.”

“Sometimes I forget…” Greg looked away. Sometimes Greg forget that John was a doctor, a solider, an officer, a man, and a person with talents he preferred to hide. “You’re sure you’re not the consulting detective in this family?”

John eyes narrowed. The message was received. In being invited here, it was clear that he was being welcomed into the inner circle of Holmsesian confidences. Thusly, it was clear that Sherlock was trying to protect him, trying to smooth the way. She was trying to make sure that no one tried to…to change him. “Jesus.”

“Mummy and Father mean well, but…” Greg followed John out across the courtyard, his voice almost inaudible, “Never let it be said that being the genius children of an MI-6 agent and a celebrated academic was a walk in the park, John.”

John knew that there was surveillance everywhere, and so he kept his voice low and his eyes downcast, “What are you trying to say, Greg?”

“There are ghosts here, John.” Greg replied, “She’s facing them for you. Don’t let her face them alone, even if you can’t see them.”

With that, Greg returned to the house, and to his evening activities. John thought about the first time Greg had been invited here, and knew that Sherlock would have been in the throes of her education, and would have likely been as good as an alien to Greg. What did Greg know? What had he seen? Whatever it was, John knew that he was right to keep his guard up.

MacPherson cried, pitifully whining sounds that were pulled from the pit of his soul. It ripped John in half. The scant moments he stopped crying to pant nervously were hellish in their own way, because he was close enough to hear Sherlock shifting restlessly in her bed, close enough to hear her when she exhaled deeply. It did not take much to keep tempo with the pace of her breathing.

Somehow knowing that Sherlock was mere feet away, actively trying to sleep shook him and kicked his mind and his observational skills into hyperdrive. In this place, it was a side of her he had never experienced. Still, John would rather his own private torment than MacPherson’s pain.

The deerhound would go into Sherlock’s room, settle for approximately ninety seconds, only to cry in a deep whine for an equal period time, and come scurrying back on his long legs, and repeat the process. Sherlock had tried petting him, tried the violin, tried everything. They had moved MacPherson’s bed three times, fluffed his blanket, squeaked his toy. Sherlock had even gone so far as to hum MacPherson’s song, though John knew he was not supposed to have heard the gentle notes crossing her lips. She had a lovely voice, but never sang.

“Come on, mate.” John sat up again, his leg stuck under the weight of the dog, “You’ve got your moose, and your bed, and your blankets.”

MacPherson leaped off of the bed, rattling all of the pictures on the walls, and proceeded to lope back towards Sherlock. “MacPherson.” Sherlock declared, “I must inform you that although I do not sleep as a general rule, I am very tired. My parents are trying creatures. You will feel better if you sleep.”

MacPherson went into Sherlock’s room only long enough to turn round and come right back. He
paced this way for so long that John got up to close the door between their rooms. John knew it might seem cruel to block him off, but at least the dog would have no choice but to eventually settle, and John knew that MacPherson would be happier with Sherlock.

When his foot hit a creaking board, MacPherson barked. He was tired, scared, and deeply unsettled. John wished he understood that, although they were not in London, that he would not be left here. He seemed to need to have them both in his sights at all times. John understood that impulse, but he’d taken MacPherson along to check the windows and the doors and sweep for bugs while Sherlock was in the shower. He’d found two audio transmitters in his room, and destroyed them. He also had a jammer set up, not that dear Mycroft needed to know anything about that little piece of kit he kept with his straight razor.

John reminded him, “Shh, MacPherson!”

“John.” Sherlock called out, gently, “Come in here and close the door. I have a theory.”

John did not have one, except to say that MacPherson could not decide where he felt safer. John moved quickly and silently across the room, and moved beyond the pocket door, and slid it shut behind them. MacPherson leaped upon Sherlock’s large bed from where he had been panting and crying, and settled his great head on her pillow.

Sherlock was sitting on her bed, running her hand over MacPherson’s side. John breathed deeply, knowing that the sight of her as she was in this moment was forever burned into his mind. Far from being entirely sexual, there was a tenderness to her care of MacPherson that only John was privy to, and he knew that to be a gift born out of her trust in him.

John floundered, wondering if he should take the chair to wait until MacPherson fell asleep. In the slanted light spilling faintly into the window, John felt as though he were here on a hit. He’d sooner die than hurt Sherlock, but he knew that this moment, whatever it was, was changing him as war had changed him.

Sherlock’s lithe figure shifted as she remained sitting, to address him softly. “You can take the left side.”

“I beg your pardon?” John blurted, in unschooled tones, not quite sure if his mind was headed down the right track.

“It’s a scent issue.” Sherlock pushed some of the blanket over the dog, making it clear that he was settled where he would remain for the night, so confident was she in her theory, “He is used to Baker Street, which has a pleasing scent that has come to affirm to MacPherson that he is home, and safe.” Sherlock explained, “My room is solely mine, and your belongings are in the next room. He does not understand the circumstances here.”

“You want me to sleep in your bed so our dog can have comforting smells?” John clarified.

“This is not the most outlandish reason a woman has invited you into her bed.” Sherlock replied, rather grumpily shoving pillows in his direction, “I assure you your virtue is safe.”

“Sherlock…” John replied, feeling very much the cad as he climbed into her antique bed. Her sheets here were exactly the same as they were at Baker street, a crisp cotton in the autumn, for she abhorred flannel and declared silk to be a summer fabric. “I’m not a virtuous person.”

“You are the most virtuous person I know, John.” Sherlock replied, turning over onto her side, and shoving her pillow down to make it comfortable, her face towards the dog, and thus, John. “I make a
study of people. It is simple fact and I shall not hear otherwise, especially not from you."

John did not sleep, even though Sherlock fell asleep fairly quickly with her hand placed gently in MacPherson’s hair. The dog wedged himself closer to her, and Sherlock rolled, almost knocking the poor dog in the face with her braid as she turned. John himself was kept awake by the sound of Sherlock’s breathing, the warmth of her skin, just beyond his fingertips, and the memory of the truth ringing in her voice when she declared him the most virtuous person she knew.

John woke with a start.

The dream he’d been having was reality. He opened his eyes to find that the sun was peeking through the window, and that MacPherson was lounging on the sofa in the corner. For his part, John had his arms wrapped around Sherlock’s body, her slim frame pressed to his own. Carefully, hating himself, John extricated his hold, and freed his feet from the tangle of sheets and blankets. It took him a long moment, because he was loathe to interrupt her slumber, something she found so rarely. He was also, he knew, loathe to let go.

There was drool on his shirtfront. John quickly took stock of his person and his physiology, and jolted backwards, launching himself off of the bed and onto the hard wooden floor. Only his training kept from calling out as he jolted onto the floor. John stared up at the ceiling until a craggy head licked his face, and scrambled up. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sherlock’s hand reaching out to where his body had once been, and something within John clenched at the foolish dream that she was reaching out for him.

John shoved to his feet, and realized that he had never felt so much regret at the leaving of someone else’s bed. He had never before quite looked into unblinking, sleep-filled violet eyes, and known in the pit of what was left of his soul, that he would spend the rest of his life wishing he was back in her arms. John did not know what to do with that self-awareness. He broke their shared gaze, knowing full well that the truth was blindingly apparent between them.

MacPherson leaped onto the bed, and nudged Sherlock with the glee of a dog that had been woefully abandoned and neglected for hours, simply hours. John slipped through the pocket door just as he heard her whisper good morning. Naturally, she was speaking to the dog, and not to him. John, coward that he was, wished he had given himself a chance to pretend that greeting was for him.

After breakfast, MacPherson elected to spend time with Molly, who was free with belly rubs, kisses, and happy faces. John found Sherlock saddling up Fritz, whom he now knew to be called after Fritzwilliam Darcy, if the books on Sherlock’s shelves were anything to go by in her heroic preferences.

When he said as much to the horse, Sherlock scoffed and retorted, "It is clear that Austen’s best work was *Persuasion*, John. I am not in the habit of naming horses sentimentally."

John filed that away for private consideration, knowing full well that *Persuasion* centered around a woman who had loved a Captain from afar, carefully considering the match after rejecting it. John thought again that Sherlock was more of a closet romantic than she let on, but he had no intention of taking advantage of her tender heart to meet his own burning desires. He had to be fair to her, treat her with consideration so few people in the world had ever looked beyond their noses to offer her.

Sherlock looked at him askance when he slid expertly into the saddle atop Marsh, the horse that she
had deduced to be the best fit for him. Clearly, she had deduced his skill, but not his comfort or ease in the saddle. That, he knew, had been easily observed by Mr. Hugh McGowan.

“I was an officer, Sherlock, and I grew up principally on a farm. Some of my earliest memories—” John broke off, those memories more painful than even the darkest days in the Army. He was okay talking about the council estate, there was no shame in his mother’s struggle to do her best, but he had never found a way to talk about the farm.

She simply nodded, and they set off, enjoying the cold air in their lungs and the crisp landscape around them. Father Holmes and Mycroft were holding a shooting weekend in the latter days of their stay, and though John had little interest in such pursuits, he had agreed to go along. He felt he had to put on a happy face about it, if only to be personable and to show that he wasn’t the one grumbling about them inviting people out for the weekend. Sherlock seemed to want to enjoy the outdoors when it was free of her relatives. John did not exactly blame her.

Sherlock was not particularly interested in athletics or fitness, though of course she was perfectly capable running about London in four inch heels. He’d known it had to come from somewhere, and had pegged for her a horse mad woman from twenty paces off. However, the pictures of her with tennis rackets, hockey sticks, and lacrosse sticks around the house threw him through a loop. When the slowed to a walk, he asked, “So, you did sports at school?”

“I was not Jolly Hockey Sticks, if that is what you mean to ask.” Sherlock admitted, “I have always been a cerebral person, John. It is my nature. As I aged, however, I found that sports were a good way to focus my mind.” She swallowed, “It was preferable to other methods and was required by the institutions my parents selected for me to attend.”

John heard something catch in her voice, and changed the subject, describing in gruesome detail a case of diabetic gangrene that had popped up at the clinic last week. This, of course, led into heated scientific discourse that consumed much of the afternoon and ended in Sherlock’s lab in the garage, drawing diagrams on the whiteboard.

Much of their days, however, were spent tramping about the countryside with MacPherson, who seemed entirely captivated with everything he saw. He chased his tennis ball for hours, desiring so many tosses that even John’s tremor-free arms grew tired. He lolled in the grass, and splashed in cold streams, and had the time of his short, painful, life.

Mummy and Father were contented to maintain their own lives, though they all gathered for dinner. Mycroft had been called urgently back to London over some issue in some undisclosed locale, and Greg had gone along with him, leaving John to ponder the ghosts of Holmes Hall alone. Of course, the house wasn’t named that, but he did like the sound of it in his head.

In this fashion they passed most of their stay. Sherlock took to her lab in the afternoon before dinner, and handled a few cases. John blogged about them after dinner when MacPherson was tired out, resting at their feet. Sherlock would spend the time he used for writing to read or to decimate idiots on the internet, though frequently she turned her hand to handicrafts.

When John expressed surprise at her talents with fabric and fibers, Sherlock snapped, “How many times do I have to ask you not to express shock at some evidence of my gender when it is stereotypically expressed?”

John swallowed, and knew that there was more than a pair of knitting needles between them. Each night, by mutual accord, he had ended up in her bed, and last night they hadn’t even kept up the pretense of him starting out anywhere else. After three days, it was a natural progression of their day together. He still hadn’t managed to wake up with her, but he wasn’t going to ask for more than he
had any right to want, though want he did, just the same. John knew the tension was palpable between them.

“You think—” John laughed in outright shock, “I’m fully aware, Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s expression revealed her disbelief and her doubt.

“You’re not inside my mind, Sherlock.” John reminded her.

“I should not wish to be in your head, John.” Sherlock huffed, turning back to her knitting. Evidently, she had made some flame-resistant fibers that she was going to begin testing. John thought the square looked rather like a pot holder or trivet, not that he was going to accuse her of such mundane activity.

The party on the first night of the long weekend was in full swing, and John felt as though his head was spinning. He had been introduced to every relative and family friend he thought the senior Holmes’ possessed. When Mummy released him from trotting him around like a pet poodle in dress uniform, he found Molly fuming as she stared daggers at Sherlock, who was dancing with a tall, suave, man of Molly’s age.

John took his measure in an instant and knew him to be a snake. He was sorry to insult the species with the comparison, in truth. His pale grip on Sherlock’s waist and hand, though decorous, made John want to rip off his hands. Someone so without honor, without basic human decency, shouldn’t even be allowed within miles of her. It was, however, not his choice to make.

He knew Molly well enough to know that she would talk when she was ready. John fully intended to be within arm’s reach of Sherlock and earshot of Molly when that happened. He offered the invitation, “Would you care to dance?”

Molly plunked down her glass. “I’d love to shove my heel up his—”

John whisked Molly onto the floor skillfully, trying in vain to gain Sherlock’s notice. It seemed the sum totality of her attention was on the man Molly was considering violating with her oyster colored shoes. “You know him?”

“Victor Trevor.” Molly seethed, “He was a graduate student. If you ask me, he paid far too much attention to Sherlock. She wasn’t even eighteen when he set his sights on her.”

John knew that Sherlock and Molly had made friends largely because Sherlock had found companionship within the graduate students in her various subjects, though he had only ever known Molly to be a lasting relationship from those days. “Molly?”

“I tried to get Sherlock to go to her father. Mycroft. Anybody.” Molly licked her lips, taking some of the sheen of the gloss with her, and John learned quite a bit from that gesture, knowledge that had him keeping his eyes on Sherlock over Molly’s petite shoulder. “I am her friend, but I was also an adult. I should have forced the issue, but she swore he never touched her.”

John could just imagine a young Sherlock, so befuddled and disgusted by Victor’s attentions. It made him sick. “He made passes at her?”

“He scared her.” Molly revealed, though John noted that she did not deny his query. “She never said as much, but I knew grown women who were terrified of him. He would lean into her space, talk over her, twist what she saw, and belittle her, all the while taking credit for her work. He’d been a member of a revision group and his massive intellect hid the lack of a soul from many people. I
threatened to throw acid in his face if he ever approached her when she was alone.”

John felt Molly’s hand trembling in his own, and he knew that Sherlock had been so desperate to prove that she was able to hold her own at school that she would have sooner died than ever admit to needing help. She couldn’t have gone to her parents for support, as their dynamic would have seen anything other than self-sufficiency as a weakness. “What’s he doing here?”

John knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if Mycroft knew any of this, he would have made the bastard disappear. Even if his bloodlust had made him miss the mark as to his reactions, John knew that Victor Trevor wouldn’t be here if any of this truth had come to light.

“He was one of our set until he was expelled.” Molly’s nose wrinkled and John knew that she had had something to do with that, though he could not hazard a guess to what it might have been, “I’m certain he gate crashed. I made it clear I hated him, and Violet would never invite the both of us.”

Another man cut into his dance with Molly, leaving John the perfect opening to do so with Sherlock. His name was Nick, another friend from Uni, though Sherlock was not likely to consider him a friend. He was in medical research, and reminded John very strongly of a young, if slightly jumpy, Mike Stamford.

“I was seconds away from killing him.” Sherlock said, by way of greeting. “I fear you have done the world a disservice by cutting in, John.”

“Sherlock.” John sighed, trying very much not to laugh.

“Oh, don’t be an agony aunt, John.” Sherlock demanded, her voice low and for his ears only as she moved slightly closer to facilitate conversation. “Victor’s motives are simple. He hates women, hates that I am his better in every possible way, and he thinks that a sexual relationship would assert his dominance.”

“I call that predatory, not simple.” John was fixated on the fact that Victor had been pursuing her for years without her consent, “You’re not required to put up with that, ever.”

“Molly says that I am too polite.” Sherlock dismissed that notion with her tone’s inflection, “It would be foolish to discontinue our discourses at this juncture. I made it clear that I was married to my Work, and he became less overt. He has a brilliant mind, even if it is used in less than rational pursuits.”

They were by the terrace doors, and mindful of Father’s matchmaking ways, John guided them off of the floor onto the stone terrace. Sherlock took stock of the fairy lights amid the gardens, and fixed a pin that was sliding out of her wild hair.

John saw no reason to waste time beating around the bush, “Do you want him in your life?”

“No, of course not.” Sherlock returned, looking at him as though he had taken leave of his senses, “I have quite enough enemies. He knows my opinions towards him as a person. I do nothing without good reason, John.”

John knew there had to be more to this whole situation. He knew that Victor knew how Sherlock felt, he simply did not give enough value to her emotions and opinions to take them seriously when they contradicted his own. “There are other scientists with whom to correspond.”

Sherlock read John in an instant, and made a decision. She grabbed his arm and hauled him off into the garden, gravel crunching beneath their shoes as John accepted his fate. It would be useless to splutter and protest, and even more asinine to ask where she was taking him. He’d scoped out the
place, and he knew as well as she did that they were headed beyond the range of the surveillance system.

When they came to a particularly location with spotty coverage, Sherlock sat down primly on a stone bench and settled her skirts around her. John very carefully looked away, and cleared his throat.

“John, do be serious.” Sherlock insisted, “I do wish you would not waste your time reading Heyer novels.”

John rolled his eyes, omitting the truth that he had borrowed the damn novels from her, though she called them research. “I assume there’s more to your interactions with Mr. Trevor.”

“You would have deduced it, had you not given into the urge to follow such a base line of thinking.” Sherlock returned, “You’re free to vivisect him once I have my notes in my possession.”

John inclined his head. How nice to have her blessing. Now he wouldn’t have to be the least bit sneaky about pulling his fingernails out of their beds.

Sherlock inclined her chin in scolding, and informed him, “He stole my work, and I am going to get it back, John. In order to do that, I need for him to not see me as a threat to his credibility. I cannot arouse his suspicions.”

“He stole your findings?” John asked, knowing university labs to be cutthroat places from time to time. There was no question in his mind that Victor had made Sherlock’s safe spaces at University an absolute hell.

“He has my notes, all of my notes, from University. It was a period of great innovation in my life.” Sherlock revealed, “I am close to discovering their whereabouts.”

“He stole your work and you didn’t involve Lestrade?” John asked, knowing at once that the contents would have to be such that she would not want Greg to see them, nor even know that they existed.

His suspicions were confirmed when Sherlock swallowed. “They were largely personal observations, John.”

John wanted to march into that ballroom and settle this, once and for all. A dying man would certainly reveal the location of her notes, if only to keep breath in his lungs. She had been a seventeen year old girl with a diary and Victor had held their contents over her head. He wanted to hold her, wanted to make this go away, wanted to vindicate her. She was Sherlock Holmes, and she needed no champion, save the one she had within herself. However, she did have a loyal sidekick, and so John simply smiled, “What’s the plan?”

Sherlock grinned, “I have yet to ascertain if they’re here, but if he was foolish enough to bring them, getting them back will be a simple matter.”

“And if we know he’s here for the night…” John ventured. “We can simply head to London, get them back—”

“Oh, John. This isn’t a novel, and life isn’t that simple.” Sherlock smiled almost sadly, and fell silent. “If only we could manufacture a case that only I could solve, and thusly use that proximity in order to facilitate their retrieval.”

John grinned. As usual, Sherlock’s reasoning was exacting, if limited by her perceptions of an unchanging reality. “Well, why can’t we?”
“John...” Sherlock cautioned, studying him in the artificial light.

“Where’d you hide my laptop?” John asked, ignoring Sherlock’s skeptical look.

John merely arched an eyebrow. “I was a soldier as well as a doctor, Sherlock, not just the other way round.”

Sherlock nodded. He could take care of himself, and it was time she saw some of that in action. John hadn’t simply been a doctor in the field, after all. It was in silent unity that they emerged from the recesses of the garden, and headed in tandem to the lab, where MacPherson was passing the evening in comfortable solitude.

From behind a few canisters, Sherlock retrieved the pilfered laptop. John powered it on as usual, and tapped a few key sequences at the login screen, enabling a hidden authentication portal to appear. Really, this was child’s play, but if it allowed him to eventually plant a facer on Mr. Trevor, he would do almost anything.

Sherlock’s curiosity was palpable as John entered various databases. “You said his name was Victor Trevor, correct?”

Sherlock elaborated as John filled in search boxes. “He’s from Norfolk. His father is a landowner, a minor community figure.”

Scrolling through data, and clicking through screens, John surmised that the young Mr. Trevor had capitalized on his connections to minor gentry and D-list celebrities to gain entry into his circles, though it was clear from those in the ballroom that Mr. Trevor was tolerated with bare civility, and nothing more.

It took John but a minute to generate a report on Mr. Trevor. He worked in a bank, with a boss by the name of Gloria Scott. He was a security and risk management officer, among other things at this high-end bank in London. He apparently had a proclivity for Westwood suits and paying for sex. He had never had a long-term partner and was a lackluster student.

John, Sherlock, and a sleepy MacPherson spent the night discussing what they had found, for there was no need to manufacture a case, only to wait. Trevor was shady and slimy, and Mrs. Scott had disappeared. Her Facebook said she had gone on holiday to Australia, but it didn’t take Sherlock’s skills in linguistics to note that she hadn’t written those posts.

The game was afoot, and rather than make one up, Victor Trevor had led them right to it. Whether or not they were playing into his hand was immaterial. In the end, Victor would be unmasked, Sherlock would have her Work, and John would have made plain to Victor that one did not harass uninterested women, let alone teenage girls. He would prove to Sherlock that she didn’t need to stand alone unless she chose, that she had her blogger by her side.

It was almost three in the morning by the time they finished this first step of knowing all they needed to know to stay two steps ahead of Victor. Sherlock had deduced that he was already in over his head, having come this weekend for the sole purpose of compelling her to assist him in erasing his debts and managing his aims. John was incandescent, the satisfaction of falling back into roles that had invigorated him for years firing his blood. That he was using these skills with Sherlock’s interest and admiration simply intensified the contentment flooding his veins.

Sherlock was fixated, and her eyes glowed with deduction. It was all John could do to keep his hands to himself as they bolted from the lab back to the house, MacPherson trotting sleepily along with them as they tried in vain to quash their levity. Joy was palpable between them. As they
rounded the landing, Sherlock muffled her giggles in the crook of John’s neck, her laughter like champagne bubbles in his stomach.

“Oh, John…” She bit her lip as she fair trembled with laughter, “Imagine him admitting he needs our help. It’s glorious.”

John merely reached around her to steady her as she kicked off her shoes, and grabbed the fabric to raise the edge of her Saab gown. Their eyes met, and John knew that the only thing glorious about this moment was her joy, her laughter, the power she felt restored within herself, power that Victor in vain to cause her to question. “You’re glorious.”

“John, you’re amazing.” Sherlock returned, “You are fantastic.”

“Yes, all right.” John was a bit bemused by her reaction to a simple database combing. She hadn’t really seen the gamut of what he could have done, and intended to do, to bring Victor down, “You don’t have to overdo it.”

“You’ve never been the most luminous of people, but as a conductor of light, you are unbeatable.” Sherlock revealed, pausing as if hesitating.

“Don’t spoil it. Go on.” John encouraged, not sure if he could bear her hesitation a second longer. Sherlock Holmes was not a woman prone to hesitation and second-guessing. “What have I done that’s so bloody stimulating?”

Sherlock tilted her head, deducing and thinking and deciding in a single instant. “You? Nothing except use highly classified governmental databases to foil an idiot and find me a case.” She blinked slowly, “But I shall best you.”

John knew flirting when he saw it, heard it. “You’re welcome to try.”

Sherlock studied him for a long, breathless second like he was a microscope slide of malaria or the bubonic plague. Then, and then, before John knew what she was on about, her lips were pressed in an untutored fashion to his own. John’s fate was sealed, and before the thought had crossed his mind, he was kissing her back.

It was over in a scant moment, a happy, heated, breathless exchange of heat and light and sensation. John saw unfathomable truths in Sherlock’s eyes. She wanted the doctor, the blogger, the solider, the spy, the man. She accepted the whole of who he was, and she knew the whole of him, and still she wanted him.

John was not a romantic man. He had never had a relationship beyond a few dates, beyond a few months at the most. It had never seemed right. He’d had a sick mother, a family to help support when his father had fucked off, and a sister to protect who had enough romantic drama to put him off the whole of it. Then he’d had patients to treat, wars to fight, intelligence to gather, and an injury to overcome. But now, he knew. He’d been waiting his entire life for Sherlock Holmes.

“How did you know I was ready?” John asked, throwing the idea of pretense between them out of the window.

“John, you’ve told me things about you tonight, things no one else would believe, and you trusted me to accept you, even when you showed me proof.” Sherlock elaborated, “That’s enough to get on with, don’t you think? My data suggested things would progress within two days, anyway.”

“What data?” John asked, knowing at once that she had been treating the evolution of their relationship as a case from the start. It was totally endearing, right down to the experiments she’d
been conducting with her footwear.

Sherlock merely chuckled and headed up the stairs. “You have to be up hideously early for the shoot.”

“Bloody Mycroft.” John muttered, following woman and canine to bed. This time, he knew he would wake up in Sherlock’s embrace. It was enough to make him glad of the two hours of sleep he’d be getting this night.

John did not see the point of tramping about the countryside in packs of jacketed, booted, men. He had understood as it a solider, but he understood it not at all as a civilian. It seemed these men enjoyed feats of manliness, which included shooting at defenseless animals and boasting of their closeness to said creatures. John knew that there wasn’t enough coffee in the world to chase away the chill that had enveloped him after extricating himself from Sherlock’s embrace.

John made no bones about hiding a yawn in his elbow, shifting his weapon to do so. Victor was keen, it seemed, to make friends, even though they had been following the system for pheasant hunting that provided little room for discussion, as John had drawn the short straw of driving the birds down to the guns with Greg and the dog that had taken to Greg years ago. “Don’t you shoot, Dr. Watson?”

Over their tramp through the words and through the brambles where the pheasants would hide, Greg had read a great deal into John’s tiredness, his reliance on coffee instead of sleep, and his un fashionably early departure from the party on the arm of the world’s foremost expert on the science of deduction. “Of course he does, just not for fun.”

“Oh, it’s fun sometimes.” John replied, off-handedly, thinking of clay pigeon shooting as a child, one of the skills Gramps had picked up from the Yanks and passed onto him. John let light and truth bleed into his eyes, and knew that Victor had come face to face with the solider, the fighter.

Mycroft grumbled, looking away from where he was conferring with his father over grouse John had intentionally scared off to better observe Victor under the stress of not getting what he wanted, not that they knew why the poor things had startled and bolted. “Gregory, don’t encourage him.”

“No, I’m just surprised you came, Dr. Watson.” Victor elaborated, “Sherlock has erroneous opinions about shooting. She fails to see how it assists the management of wildlife populations.”

John bristled behind his cool exterior. This man had never attempted to know Sherlock, to respect her, and in the tone of his voice John heard mockery. Mycroft’s eyes narrowed, and The Ice Man’s eyes blazed. One did not mock The British Government’s little sister. Greg put his hand on his husband’s arm, and Mycroft relaxed slightly.

“She’s merciful.” John stated, “But don’t worry, Victor, I’m nothing of the sort.”

What Victor did not know was that he had played right into their hand, with his facade slipping so. His phone already out, Mycroft was no doubt in the process of ordering a watch on Mr. Trevor. That saved them the trouble, really. Sometimes, deduction and the prediction of people’s actions were dead useful.

Father Holmes looked a bit harried, “Luncheon will provide opportunities for discourse, gentleman.”

Mycroft offered Father Holmes with his insight that they should move South, and so they headed off. They returned hours later, having bagged a paltry few pheasant. John was glad, that he had not fired a single round that had ended a life. For him, that was not sport. It never had been, and it never
would become a lark.

It was just that to Victor. He fired shots without thought and consideration, killed anything that moved. He’d unflinchingly pushed off illegal kills onto other hunters in the party. He moaned about ear protection, moaned about everything, really. John had observed an endorphin rush in him way outside of the range of normal responses to hunting. His instincts were confirmed. John wondered if he was overreacting when he decided he was staring at a killer. Mrs. Scott could well be alive, and so John withheld that conclusion.

At breakfast, John joined Molly and Sherlock, who were discussing one of Molly’s latest cadavers. Sherlock was angling to get the fingers for experimentation, and John used their interaction as a cover to watch his own prey eat his own breakfast and annoy at least two of Sherlock’s aunts, who John knew were known to Victor’s mother, though she was not known to the aunts, who were figures in the charity scene. They were forever after Sherlock to endorse some cause. This morning, Sherlock had declared her charitable efforts to be the toleration of idiots in the world around her.

Gossip John overheard said Trevor’s mother lived most of the year in Italy. No one blamed her. John would have fled the Western hemisphere to avoid Victor, had he been his parent. As breakfast concluded and Molly’s bargaining chatter had eventually relented to hand over the fingers, Victor came to them. He pulled out the empty chair next to Sherlock and sank down, taking ownership of the space in the way that spoke to his very fragile masculinity.

Molly barely hid the disgust in her voice, “Vicky, you gate crashed.”

“I’m certain my invitation was delivered.” Victor purred, “Wasn’t it, Sherlock? You couldn’t have a weekend without me, now could you?” He didn’t even give her time to speak before he was going on, “I’ve been swamped with work, and Seb didn’t forward my mail to my office.”

“Well, you know older brothers.” John interjected, very much interested in the confirmation that work wasn’t going quite so effortlessly. Then again, the tension in Trevor’s brow when he checked his phone had told them enough, “They never quite do what one expects.”

“You know of my brother?” Victor glanced toward John with unhidden disgust in his eyes, “I gather Sherlock’s mentioned me. How nice. I knew you cared, Sherlock. Actions speak volumes, don’t they?”

“I never waste my time with irrelevancies.” Sherlock declared, her blue eyes flashing, “John merely deduced you.”

“Read you like a book.” John agreed, flashing a grin, one that was small and had been the last sight of too many people to count. He failed to mention that he had also looked the man up, and could recite his family back at least six generations, knew every detail of his daily coffee run, and knew that he preferred dark-haired sex workers.

He also knew that he was quite connected with a man named James Armitage, who was wanted for several violent crimes, drug-dealing, and being a general piece of garbage. He had no doubt that this James was Victor’s drug dealer, among other things. James was a bit of a ghost in the way that spoke to people being in his pocket, and John had decided to run several things by people he knew. He still had informants, contacts, as it were, that had nothing to do with Sherlock’s Network, but who were just as reliable in their own way. If James existed anywhere, they’d find him.

“Quite.” Victor replied, not quite meeting John’s gaze.

Molly hauled Sherlock off to the loo, who delivered a pointed Sherlockian barb in Victor’s direction.
and swanned away, leaving John with his prey.

“Well, now.” Victor declared, “Aren’t you going to warn me off? Despite Sherlock’s precious little schoolgirl crush, I can assure you, our bond runs deep.”

“I have no need to play Sir Galahad.” John replied, “Nor am I in the business of judging her relationships. She’s my friend, after all.”

After all, not matter else what they were to one another, they were friends. He wasn’t going to judge her over this, over anything. He had no need to play Sir Galahad, for Sherlock had no doubt done that for him, was that for him. He had no need to play the hero. Heroes had scruples in protecting those they loved. John did not.

Something John knew to be triumph bloomed behind Victor’s eyes. He chuckled, “My, my. You really don’t know, do you, Dr. Watson?”

John let his gaze clear, as though genuinely confused. He let his resolve flicker across his face, “I know enough.”

“Perhaps, but…” Victor smiled, and John knew that he had just painted himself to be another hapless victim of the cruel Sherlock Holmes. He hated being allied with Victor in his mind, but this would serve them well. “Perhaps not, my friend.”

With that, John drained his tea and strode away. He had a dog to walk and a detective to meet in a secluded location.

John was rounding the corner into the library when he heard Victor hissing, “What would you do, Sherlock, if I found your precious doctor?” Thinking quickly, John dropped behind a wingback chair near the door, straining to hear the whispers of the conversation in the far corner, “What would you do, if I told him all you had done?”

So, John thought, here came the blackmail. They’d known to expect it, though John considered it a stroke of luck that he was here to hear it, simply because he wished to avoid having to hear about it secondhand. He knew Sherlock well enough to know she would dismiss it and downplay it, and this was something John could not bear to see dismissed. He also knew she would cheerily omit details if she thought it would protect him.

Sherlock swallowed and continued petting MacPherson, who growled low in his throat at the sound of Victor’s smooth, plummy, voice. He was protecting his mummy, it seemed, though her concern was for him more than anything.

“Would you beg? Would you plead?” Victor continued, almost gleeful at the imagery he was painting in his twisted mind, “What would you do to keep your very heart beating?”

“You are foolish.” Sherlock retorted, her voice soft and soothing, not for the man before her, but for her dog, “You have no plans to reveal anything you think you know.”

“Maybe.” Victor agreed, as though they were discussing the weather, “Knowledge is power, after all.”

“I trust we’re done, here.” Sherlock continued petting MacPherson. He was no doubt trembling beneath his wavy hair. John could see his eyes, wide with determination that the monster that scared him so would not hurt Sherlock. He was a brave lad, he really was.
“Oh, dearheart, not quite.” Victor began to speak, his voice beneath MacPherson’s warnings, “There’s a personal matter requiring my attention. I require you to deduce James Armitage within an inch of his very life. This is a case, nothing less. You will take it when I offer it to you, as a gesture of mercy, and you will deduce for hire, as you were once happy to deduce for attention.”

“And if I don’t?” Sherlock retorted, calmly and coldly, as though her back wasn’t pressed to library bookcases, as though there wasn’t some man looming in her space, a predator.

“Then…” He smiled, John could hear it in his voice, this chilling note that steadied John’s hands as he lingered nearby, ready to put a bullet in the back of the prick’s head if he so much as touched Sherlock, “I will burn the heart out of you.”

Sherlock was ice and condescension, “I have been reliably informed that I don't have one.”

“But we both know that’s not quite true.” Victor noted, “After all, I have it in writing, don’t I?”

John crouched steadily behind the wingback chair, feeling very murderous indeed, as Victor slunk away to slough his skin.

After a long moment of calming MacPherson, Sherlock called, “I suppose you heard all of that, John.”

John unfolded himself just before MacPherson’s eager licks made contact with his face, “He’s a psychopath, Sherlock.”

Sherlock moved away from the shelves she had clearly been browsing, laying in wait for the fly to come to the spider. “This is your medical opinion, Doctor?”

“Yes.” John stepped forward, and petted MacPherson. “You’re a good dog, MacPherson.”

MacPherson lapped up the attention, nudging John’s hands for further petting. Sherlock blandly stated, “It has two hours, forty-two minutes, and twenty-nine seconds since we have last kissed, John.”

“Well.” John took note of the fact that Sherlock was keeping data like this in her head, “I’d hate to skew your data.”

“Don’t…” Sherlock seemed to be shaken by the reference to her data, “Don’t unless…this is not a game, John. Don’t do this unless you want it.”

John couldn’t help but reach out and smooth a hand down her arm. He had to hold her with a desperation equal to his desire to simply march upstairs and forcibly remove Sherlock’s notes from Victor’s person. “He really rattled you, didn’t he?”

“Don’t be absurd.” Sherlock sniffed, leaning her weight against him, “I am establishing clear lines of communication regarding the tone and development of our relationship, as I have attempted to do no less than sixteen times over the last fortnight alone.”

John closed his eyes beneath the enormity of that admission, knowing full well what she had just told him. There were no stopping his words, no wondering if they were ready for this truth between them, “I have wanted you since I saw you smoking that cigarette, using the Queen’s china as an ashtray. I have loved you, Sherlock, from the moment I saw you.”

“John.” Sherlock’s sharp gaze, though soft, missed nothing in his face, accepted his truth for what it was and nothing more, “There are things you should know before you declare yourself. There are
things between us. It does not behoove you to be…spontaneous, no matter how genuine you are being.”

“The only thing that’s between us is a nine stone dog who thinks he’s a lapdog.” John agreed, redirecting MacPherson gently, to the point that he got the message and trotted off to find his ball that had rolled across the library when he’d dropped it earlier. “Don’t do yourself the disservice of not trusting yourself. I don’t need you to say anything. I just need you to know, before this goes any father, before you are pushed to tell me things you think I haven’t surmised already.”

He knew that there were notes about him, copious amounts of them. He wasn’t stupid. She’d found that file from Mycroft when she was fifteen, and no doubt she would have dissected him to within an inch of his life. She would have, simply because that was how she related to people, sometimes. When she was scared or interested or felt deeply, she sought data. He had no illusions that there was a moleskin somewhere with information about him in it. He knew that Victor likely had it, and although he was interested in knowing what a fifteen year old Sherlock had said about a sun-burnt soldier, it had little bearing on the woman she was in this moment. Hell, at fifteen he had done some pretty stupid, foolish things, the least of which compared to keeping a notebook analyzing a girl.

Sherlock was still intent on warning him, “You have insufficient data to make that determination.”

“I really don’t care, as long as you’re with me because you want to be, as long as you want me as I want you.” John paused, “Would anything he’s holding over you change your choices with me?”

“No, I find the outcome to be…” Sherlock paused, “far more pleasing than even my most generous conjectures to ever risk.”

“I wouldn’t risk you, either, Sherlock.” John affirmed, “Not you, not MacPherson, not the Work, not even the severed head in the fridge.”

“I should tell you that love is a chemical deficit.” Sherlock relaxed in some minute but profound way, “And that you may change your mind when the newness has worn off and you are…more aware. I will not hold such an occurrence against you.”

“Well, I would.” John knew in the pit of his soul that nothing could erase how he felt. He knew it would change, would grow, would develop, but he was certain that his feelings were the outgrowth of a foundation that nothing could shake.

Sherlock licked her lips gently, “I’m sure this is being recorded, somewhere.”

“We’ll put a screenshot on the Christmas card to Mycroft.” John whispered against Sherlock’s lips, “With a chocolate cake. Happy Christmas from Baker Street.”

“You are spouting absurdities, John.” Sherlock admonished, “Have you nothing better to do?”

Actually, they both did.

Things did proceed swimmingly, if one could describe finding themselves in the middle of a possible murder investigation as something positive. Within twenty-four hours, they had made vague excuses to Sherlock’s parents, let Lestrade know that they had a case, and trotted off to London like good little crime solvers under Victor’s watchful eye. It was thrilling to know that they were two steps ahead of Victor, and the anything he really wanted to know was nothing John hadn’t already looked up, no deductive reasoning required. The deduction told them, however, that there was more to this than the data suggested.
Within two days, they had determined that Victor was indeed unhinged. Sherlock had found a real case underneath the veneer of the assignment, just as they had expected. Not only was Victor blackmailing her, he was desperate to keep the disappearance of his boss under wraps. He was setting himself up as her successor at the bank, and was in debt up to his eyeballs, and was intent on blackmailing the aforementioned client to pay him off.

Within three days, they were digging into a confirmed murder case. It came together quickly. John was dizzied by it all. Gloria Scott had discovered Victor Trevor’s gambling ring, his embezzlement, and the fact that this hard to find James Armitage was in on his schemes. Gloria Scott’s ticket to Australia had never been used, and her body had been found in a skip. John knew this, presently, because he was staring at her remains with a grim look on his face. “Point blank to the back of the head.”

“Weapon?” Sherlock demanded, studying everything about the placement of Gloria’s body.

John didn’t need to take more than a cursory glance to know that it had been a hunting rifle. He named the model, and they shared a look between them. She had been shot with a hunting rifle just like the one lovingly caressed by Victor Trevor.

Sherlock nodded, a scene coming together in their minds in tandem. Mrs. Scott had been killed likely in her office, as she wearing a perfectly tailored Hobbs suit. The scenario played out in John’s mind, right down to the suppressor Victor had used. He’d eschewed the ear protection he’d bitched about on the pheasant hunt because the sound of the bullet breaking the sound barrier and ending life had ben a thrill for him. John knew it was likely orgasmic for Victor.

Within moments, Lestrade appeared at the skip in the bowels of London, and arched a silver eyebrow. He was wearing a worn jumper, jeans, and a tired expression. “I suppose you’ll tell me why you’ve discovered a body at two in the morning.”

Sherlock was silent as Lestrade called crime scene. He did not call Anderson, which John supposed was a nod to Lestrade’s gut instincts.

“We can’t be involved in this case, Lestrade.” Sherlock primly picked her way out of the skip, “Prior cases prevent it.”

Lestrade’s gaze narrowed. “Which one of you shall I arrest? One of you is going in, and we’re not leaving until I get something more than, ‘Greg, we’ve a case, don’t ask questions…’ even as Myc wakes me up in the middle of the bloody night that you two have stepped in it again.”

“I cannot think what you would presume to use as cause.” Sherlock declared, shoving her hands back into mittens like a sensible person, “It is perfectly reasonable to be out for a stroll.”

It was bloody well freezing out here. He made a mental note of the weather conditions so as to inform Molly. They were running out of time. If Victor had any sense, he was getting ready to bolt, taking Sherlock’s work with him.

“Yeah?” Greg retorted, “Where’s MacPherson, then?”

MacPherson was with Molly, largely because Sherlock and John both knew they were in deep. MacPherson was not allowed within a mile of this case, and they were of the opinion that if anything happened, at least the dog would be safe. “Why would you bring a dog out in this, Greg?”

Greg retorted, “Why would you bring me out in this, John?”
“Oh would you both—” Sherlock’s phone began to buzz, and she looked at it carefully before tilting the screen towards John before answering. It was Victor, calling again as he had done several times a day in the last several days.

He had called several times in the last few days, but nothing so blood-chillingly on point as this moment. John could not hear the entirety of the conversation, but a penny dropped behind Sherlock’s eyes. She ended the call abruptly.

She put her phone in the pocket in her primly knotted Belstaff coat, “I am afraid John will be the arrested party tonight.”

“Why?” John blurted, knowing that there was some plan within that beautiful brain of hers, one that she was intent on excising him from in entirety.

“Nope, you’re both going in.” Greg cut through what he clearly saw as Sherlockian bullshit, “And we’re talking about that cryptic phone call, believe you me.”

Sherlock submitted far too willingly to their detainment. Clearly, her protest had been for their observers. John yanked Greg close when he cuffed him, “Check for cameras around the body. Say nothing if you find them.”

“Shit.” Greg breathed, turning to Sherlock and nodding once, before asking, “Sherlock, who do you think murdered this woman?”

Greg never asked for Sherlock’s deductions in such a way, but he knew what he was on about, for it almost blindly clear that Victor Trevor had planted cameras in the area, like a murderer watching over his kill. Sherlock nodded, and met Greg’s eye. “The killer is James Armitage. The victim’s name is Gloria Scott. She discovered that he was engaged in shady money laundering practices, and he killed her. Would you like more? Even Anderson could find the killer with his name.”

Lies, all lies. However, it bought them time to get the whole story explained. John merely shrugged as best as he could, cuffed loosely as he was, “We’ve been working on a tangential case. Several parties have been interested in security at the bank where she worked. Her name came up.”

“Right, well.” Greg shoved a hand through his hair, as was his way of dealing with stress. John knew that one day he’d tell him about that habit, and help him break it. Today was not that day, because his mind was already focused on getting out of here, and getting to Victor Trevor before he figured out that the jig was up.

A text buzzed in John’s pocket, the results of some contact with a few people in the know, at the highest and lowest positions in this society. By the time he read it an hour later, Sherlock was gone and he was grappling with the knowledge that there was no James Armitage anywhere in London or in Europe, save a boy who had died years ago. Seconds later, as he was processing that information and composing a text to Sherlock, a text came in from her number that sent him flying across the pavement towards a black car that had pulled up five minutes ago.

Greg called out as John leapt into the back of the cab, ditching the cuffs he’d worked his way out of in seclusion that Greg had insisted upon, “You’re still under arrest, John!”

John saw the thick tome in Sherlock’s grasp, clutched to her chest from where she was tied to a kitchen chair. There were countless other notebooks on the table, each and every one flipped open and rifled through or shoved aside to find the one she was clutching protectively. Thick piles of findings and reports had been shoved to the floor around their kitchen table to find the correct book,
and he could see Sherlock in his mind’s eye almost falling upon the table to make sure that one book end safe in her grasp. It was that gesture that told John everything he needed to know.

It was old, certainly, but the spidery handwriting on the cover confirmed what he had known from the moment he’d watched her cradle the book. The book her in her hand was not chemistry work. It was her file on him.

“Oh, God.” John breathed, as chemicals were open around her and there was a pot of God knew what boiling on the stove. Upon second sniff, it smelt of acid and some corrosives. He did not know what the madman had planned, but the chemicals said quite a lot. Molly’s words rang in his ears, below the steady thrum of his pulse, *I told him I’d throw acid in his face if he ever approached her while she was alone.*

“John, I swear I can explain.” Sherlock’s face was bloodless, but her voice was rock solid as Trevor pointed the gun at her heart, “It’s not what it seems.”

“It is exactly what it seems!” Her tormentor returned, “You were set up from the start, Johnny. She always pretended she was so much different from other women, but really, actions speak louder than words.” Victor Trevor snarled, his suppressed hunting rifle exchanged for a legal pistol that was on a revoked and expired firearms certificate to James Armitage. “All of that intellect, totally wasted. Imagine! Thirty-seven pages alone deducing how much you loved your mother and how that boded well for your ability to be a functional member of a nuclear family. Fairy stories.”

John checked his phone to find it jammed. Victor saw John reaching for his gun, which was exactly what John wanted him to see. “Drop it and kick it here! Are you willing to risk her, Doctor Watson?”

John let the magazine fall, carefully checked the chamber, leaving the slide back. He made a show of unloading the gun, and then lowered it to the floor, kicking his Browning towards the madman with the gun pointed at Sherlock.

“You’re jealous because I’m famous.” Sherlock taunted, driving a knife right into the heart of Victor’s insecurities, “I never wanted the fame. All I wanted was my work.”

“Your work!” Trevor snapped, adopting a girlish tone that was manic, “I’m married to my work, Victor. I’ve no time for men, Victor, I love only the work.” Victor’s eyes darted between them as the shoe dropped, and John realized that the work to which Sherlock had been referencing was him. She had cleverly told the truth, and kept herself away from Victor.

“And what did I find your work to be? Not paper after paper on fiber forensics, no, but a tawdry, grasping, plot to get a man who wouldn’t have looked your way had not your brother—”

Well, he wouldn’t have looked at her at fifteen, but there was a span of time between fifteen and nearly twenty-two, that was true. However, he drew the line at giving Mycroft any credit whatsoever for their relationship. There were things that were just not done, never done.

“Mycroft has nothing to do with this, Victor.” John interrupted, “Sherlock and I covered for you, and there’s nothing Mycroft has ever done but open his home to you.”

“Oh, ho!” Victor retorted, “Have we been keeping secrets, darling?”

John studied Victor. He was far unlike the man John had met in the country. John had known his gentleman of ease persona had been a hard facade to manage, for it had slipped a great deal in moments of stress. He supposed it always shocked him, seeing people without their masks.
Sherlock shook her head, and John saw a bruise blooming on the side of her face, a bruise that filled him with rage. Clearly, Victor had struggled getting her into the chair, and had used more than just his boiling pot of acid to compel her. Had he kidnapped her? “What is your aim, Trevor?”

“My aim!” He screamed, “James Armitage is the alter-ego I developed as a nom de plume for work, actual work, that was mine to be published. But no!” John saw that his alter-ego had been his murdering guise, never used to create, but to destroy. James, and thus Victor, was wanted on several major drug charges, and was wanted in the assault of several sex workers. “Professor Barten gave you authorship, her pet, a woman boosting up a woman on the basis of gender and not merit. Now, just as I’m off to Australia, I find that my identity has been frozen. It seems big brother is still watching you!”

He was off on a rant, and looked to John, giving Sherlock the time she needed out from under scrutiny to begin to extricate herself, “You know, it was easy enough to befriend The Freak. It was easy enough to peek at her notes, only to find that they had nothing to do with the work in the lab, and everything to do with her activities. It was easy enough to set her up to lose everything, not once, but twice—”

“Shut up.” John barked, totally done with give this lunatic the floor, “You’re angry with Sherlock because she is a better scientist than you. She didn't waste her intellect. She has so much of it that you were enraged she could focus on anything but the lab. You were incensed because even while she had a high output, still she had a life outside the lab, when you were barely scraping by, socially and academically. You could never get a girl to go out with you and you still can’t.” John didn't get a rush from sharing what he knew, preferring to keep it close to the vest and use it, but sometimes a bit of showing off reminded criminals just who they were dealing with beyond the doctor's touch and faded jeans, "It ate you up that Sherlock, someone you deemed below you because she had innately the qualities you seek to cultivate, had someone she loved. You’re deluded if you think Barten ever thought to provide you authorship. You were expelled due to academic theft and a drug habit. You stole her work in more ways than one. Tell me, who was it that went to the committee on you? I can’t deduce it.”

“Molly.” Sherlock told him, and that was code to tell him that she had her knife in hand, and could begin to saw at the ropes that bound her tightly. John noted that she had dislocated her left shoulder, lending validity to his conceptualization of the struggle, “There is a reason she hates him.”

John again cut through the bullshit, because really, this was more than anyone should be expected to endure. He figured they could have Victor in prison for murder within the hour if he would just get done with the meaningless rants and confess. “The reason she hates him, Sherlock, is because he’s a piece of shit, and everyone knows it.”

“I’ve a gun to her head!” Victor screamed, “I’ve killed and I’ll kill again. I killed Gloria, and I did it in cold blood, she knew and she had to die! Be careful whom you denigrate, Watson! You won’t be so quick to defend her when you know that she used her political pull to keep tabs on you for years, that she—”

John forced himself not to roll his eyes, “When are you going to tell me something I don’t know, Victor?”

Sherlock’s eyes widened in genuine surprise. John addressed her and her alone, “I can put two and two together and end up with four, Sherlock. I don’t call it deduction, but I can make a passable attempt at inductive reasoning.” There was a reason that Mycroft had thought them uniquely suited, after all. He understood that some might find her picking up where the file left off a bit off-putting, but truly, he knew that Sherlock had been true to herself, and he would never ask that she be anyone
“I never, ever, violated your free will, John. I wanted to meet you, but that wasn’t what you needed.” Sherlock spoke, providing him the distraction he required as the acid on the stove began to boil over and eat away at the enamel. “I just…needed to know you were safe.”

“It’s not a big bloody deal, Sherlock.” John told her, “Mycroft’s a mallet-swinging, file-shuffling, bureaucrat, but if his machinations meant you were thinking of me while I was over there, I don’t mind it. I do wish you’d been encouraged to explore other—”

Victor stood behind Sherlock, and moved his gun to her temple. The cold metal against her pale flesh brought out the blueness of her veins, even those that clasped a knife behind her back. John blinked out a bit of morse code, and began to count to thirty in his head as he heard boots coming up the stairs under Victor’s maniacal cackling, “Oh, she tried! She tried! In New York—”

Counting to thirty in his head, John bit out, “Vatican Cameos!” and in a flash, Sherlock threw her weight backwards, sending the chair flying, knocking Victor into the pot of boiling acid as the gun John kept as backup in his jacket put a bullet in his heart.

There was movement around them as the apartment was flooded with officers. John dropped his backup, and moved across the floor, stepping carefully across notes and theories to meet Sherlock, who had flipped off the cooker and launched herself gracefully away from Victor’s corpse, as the scent of burning flesh filled Baker Street.

“I stabbed him.” Sherlock declared, something bubbling in her eyes that had John reaching out to embrace her.

“I shot him.” John added, “He concocted his own acid facial though.”

Looking at one another, they simply cracked up. Sherlock began to giggle as John laughed at his own joke. She muffled her giggles against John’s leather jacket, and pressed her lips against his pulse point, as though to prove that he was alive and whole. “Oh, God, John, he was such a bad scientist. You should see how he cooked up that concoction, like something out of a cartoon. I tried to offer advice, but he just went along throwing things in the pot!”

Stop!” John tried in vain to chase away mental pictures of Roger Rabbit and The Dip, “We can’t giggle, it’s a crime scene.”

Sherlock laughed all the harder, and John bit his lip, brushing away tears of laughter from her eyes, “Stop it.”

“You’re the one who shot him.” Sherlock swallowed more laughter, she fair vibrated with it, “Don’t blame me.”

John sobered, unable to focus on anything but Sherlock. He saw someone covering Victor’s body, and told her for only her to hear. “I love you.”

“I’ve loved you longer.” Sherlock replied, “Really, my devotion is a thing worthy of great study.”

John resolved to do as she directed, and kissed her soundly, being careful to mind her cracked rib and her bruised side as she pulled him closer, wrapping her uninjured arm around his neck to keep him closer, as if he had any intention of going anywhere.

“Alright!” Greg cried as bodies moved around them, “I want to know just what the hell is going on here, before—”
“Gregory…” Mycroft came into the room, interrupting his husband in a pained voice, “I told you they shouldn’t have met until she was at least thirty-two. But you convinced me not to interfere, and now this is what you’ve done.”

"You were the one who sent that invitation, Myc." Greg returned, "For god's sake, stop being an idiot."

John couldn’t help it. He pulled back, blinked at Sherlock, who tilted her head in her brother’s direction, and returned, “In a decade it is likely that John would have foresworn romance after divorcing an American spy, gone grey, and developed distressing vascular issues owing to poor diet and stress.”

Sherlock stepped back and primly adjusted her clothing around her dislocating shoulder, “But don’t fuss, Mycroft, I’ve already taken significant steps to alter that path of events. I assure you, John shall not be a shell of himself in his dotage, even if he does have the jumper addiction six years ahead of my projections.”

“I quite like my jumpers.” John returned, half-amused to know that Sherlock had just informed her brother that she had every intention of keeping him around, not that he had any intention of going anywhere, even if the flat did stink to high heaven. Thank god for crime scene techs who opened windows and cleaned up acid spills. They didn't have the supplies for that, although they should probably put that on the shopping list...

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter ties up some loose ends in this chapter and gets, shall we say, a bit more M-ish...

The case in this chapter is horribly mangled and lifted from a cannon case.
A Sherlockian Prologue

Chapter Summary

This entire chapter is born out of one bit of dialogue in the first chapter. Father Holmes tells John...

“Our Sherly graduated Newnham at 16 with a first, did her graduate studies, went to Vienna, spent time in New York, don’t mention it, she hated that city, and came home.” The Holmes father was so proud. John could hear it in his voice, “She was let go from her research post for becoming too involved, shall we say? The rest is hers to tell, but I’ll see that you get a file. School records, hospital reports, etc. etc. etc.”

Father Holmes did not keep everything in order, but he knew what he was on about...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cafe Cafe

Brussels, Belgium

Age: 15

Sherlock streamlined the whirling of her brain to focus on the important details. She had long ago determined that scope was not always as important as depth of awareness on a minute matter. In this moment, she wanted nothing more than to deduce depth, depth that would enable her to logically and carefully alter her projections. After all, charlatans made predictions. She had science on her side, and Sherlock Holmes made projections on the basis of data.

Mummy had hauled her to Brussels for half-term, but it suited Sherlock just fine. Thereby, she packed her luggage, stowed her violin, and accompanied Mummy with only token protests regarding her holiday plans. Typically, Mummy had left her to her own devices for much of their stay, as she was attending a summit. Under no circumstances was Sherlock permitted to even know that this summit was taking place.

Sherlock thought that utter tripe. She was Sherlock Holmes. When would Mummy learn that nothing, especially something as critical as an international summit relating to war and peace, escaped her notice? Mummy was an excellent spy, and stateswoman, but all things told, she knew very little practical information about her youngest child.

Thusly, she had been free from Mummy’s calculating gaze as she had read a brief this morning that had been delayed by Piecroft’s inefficacy. She had just had enough time to shove away her boiled egg, dash into the shower, and join the steady flow of traffic outside the hotel. Deduction had occupied her on her journey here, her eyes flitting from person to person and deducing them in a second before moving on to the next person. People were so simple, so pedestrian.

There was one person who neither simple nor pedestrian, though he was confusing and annoying in his logical application of his own form of reasoning, which did not strike her as logical at all.
Sherlock narrowed her awareness and felt a calm precision settle in her mind, a parameter of sorts that sought one thing and one thing only. She had no data leading her to this cafe. Deduction had told her that it was the sort of place a young British male would think he could best blend in this city of internationals. It was neither too French, nor too British, nor too Belgian. It was a cafe suited to catering to everyone by catering to exactly no one.

Sherlock looked down at the journal Grandmere had given her two Christmases ago, upon the occasion of her thirteenth year. A young lady, Grandmere had said, deserved a sacred space for her innermost thoughts and feelings. Though Sherlock did not wish to waste paper on such banal things, she did tuck it away until a case arose that suited its format. Sherlock had only unearthed this book when the idiot Mycroft had set something into motion. After much consideration, she was ready to add to her body of research.

She refused to continue down that train of thought. Giving Mycroft credit for anything in her life was unthinkable and disgusting.

Sherlock finished deducing the waitresses, and settled on the one who was certain to possess what she required, based solely on the stating on her fingertips and the organization of her apron pockets. That done, Sherlock sipped her tepid tea, looking for all the world a absurd middle-class tourist from Leeds. She had selected this outfit with care, though of course she dressed for the case, not for her own pleasure, or she wouldn’t be wearing bloody Topshop.

She had but waited a few moments when a blond head entered her field of vision. Sherlock made notes of everything she saw, everything she noted, about this man. He had tired eyes, and likely a Vitamin B12 deficiency. There was something…something she couldn’t define in the way he gripped his menu card.

His hand was shaking. She saw a slight tremor in the menu card before he set it down.

Sherlock watched him for a long moment. She deduced that he was not working. That's what she had struggled in discerning, because it was not his default orientation. This was a rare moment where John Watson was simply John Watson, homesick, tired, lonely, and so tired of the fronts he presented to the world. Sherlock, too, was a master of fronts, though she applied it largely to survive Cambridge and not war zones. He needed to know he wasn’t alone in this world full of people. He needed to know that there was another like him in this world, another who saw everything.

Sherlock had originally assumed, on perusal of the file, that they would be colleagues. After all, she was a scientist. He was scientist. She was devoted to empirical findings, in maintaining order in the world. He was devoted to finding meaning, seeking truth, though he found the truth in the most illogical ways. She had not, until this in-person observation, been entirely certain they would get along as people.

He was stubborn. She was correct. He was giving. She was not, by nature, willing to prioritize anyone above her own needs. Survival of the fittest required, after all, that she understand that she was superior. John Watson knew in his soul that he was a superior human being, and this bone-deep knowing was his drive, his impetus, to give to those who could benefit from his gifts. He would deny it, should anyone articulate it, but Sherlock was adept at seeing the truths others sought to avoid.

Though the cafe was busy, Sherlock’s gaze never wavered, except to blend and to make careful notes. Studying this man, Sherlock looked at a person she once thought to be her equal, and now knew him to be her friend. In that moment, competition and comparison dropped away. He was John. She was Sherlock. That was enough.

It was, to some small-minded pie-lovers, illogical to call a man she had never met her friend. And
yet, she would now do so without a single doubt in her mind. She knew things about John Hamish Watson he did not know of himself, and she accepted them. She accepted them, and she accepted that solely his presence in their shared universe meant that they neither of them were alone. There was another person, out there, somewhere, who had a similar brain chemistry and structure. Though they each walked their own paths in terms of application, she deduced that he would understand her as she understood him.

She took a nondescript piece of paper out of her folio, carefully so as to remain unseen. It had an insipid Union Jack on it, and underneath the flag, Sherlock wrote a small message. She folded it in half, and tucked the implements back in her bag. There would be nothing of her left here when she left the cafe. Sherlock set down her mug, and slid her leather journal and pen into her bag.

She had enough data for projections, projections that were altered fundamentally. No longer did she see John as someone with whom to compete, but rather to collaborate. Many great scientists had benefited from the collaboration that only came when they found another mind uniquely suited to their aims. She was entirely confident she had found that person in John Watson.

Adopting the ideal persona for her mission, she addressed the waitress. She blunted parts of her accents so as to slide from public school to utterly forgettable, and asked, “That man in the corner. He asked me to flag you, said you looked terribly busy, and if it wasn’t too much trouble, could he have some PG Tips?”

“Well, I…” The student from Manchester trying to see something of the world on her gap year was trying to ring up a ticket and remember that table four wanted water and table six had a gluten allergy, “I don’t know that we have any. I mean, I do, in my apron, but…”

“Could you spare a soldier a bag or two?” Sherlock hated playing on people’s sentimental dehumanization of their armed forces, but for John she would stop at nothing to ease the pace of his thoughts and isolation.

As Sherlock had known she would do, the girl brightened and nodded. “I’d be happy to. My cousin joined up after 9/11. He’s in the Marines.”

“Semper fi.” Sherlock replied, knowing full well that the girl’s cousin was from somewhere in the American Southwest, likely Texas or Arizona. Sherlock spent a moment arranging with the waitress to take care of John’s bill, handing over cash she had withdrawn from her own account. John would object entirely to Mycroft’s funds footing his bill, and part of friendship was accepting his personal wishes, however illogical. “Please give him this note, and whatever you do, please don’t mention me.”

“It’s very kind of you to do a good deed for someone else.” The girl told her, “I won’t say a word.”

Sherlock knew that wasn’t true. She would rush home and call her mother, and then her aunt, who had married an American man and given up a perfectly decent homeland for a place with too much fast food and no appreciation for accessorizing. Still, Sherlock’s sole aim was that this girl not tell John.

Sherlock breezed easily from the cafe to meet Mummy back at the hotel, wishing she could have stayed to see some of the tension bleed from John’s body as he sipped at that insipid, tasteless brew. She hoped her note brought him some solace. In her most nondescript hand, she had written: Be well, please.

She knew it was prosaic. She didn’t particularly care if he was happy. Happiness was a changeable, fickle thing. She just wanted him to be well, him to find some measure of meaning and freedom from
the mire in which he found himself that enabled himself to keep air in his lungs and life in his body. John Watson, was someone like her, and she knew what it was to be like them, probably better than he did. She knew what it was to want to die just to make their brain stop, and she knew that was a rare quality amongst people. After all, she had made a great study of the human species and had never encountered another like him.

She knew that one day, John Watson just might think of her as she thought of him. She just hopped he survived long enough for that day to come.

On the walk back to the hotel, she texted Mycroft. Needs must, and the kevlar vests soldiers in the field were receiving were subpar, and John, even though he was here on some act of espionage at great risk to his person, was more concerned about better kevlar and injury prevention for the young men and women he worked with in the field. Sherlock had no personal investment in their welfare, and was more concerned about John’s own protection. However, she understood that any member of the armed forces wellness and survival meant a great deal to Great Britain as a whole. That was her rationale to Mycroft, for it was as sound and as commendable as anything.

What did he know, anyway?

Age: 16

Glasgow Airport

Glasgow, Scotland

Sherlock carefully stored John’s voice in her Mind Palace. There was a whole space there, filled floor to ceiling with boxes marked ‘John.’ When Sherlock had the incentive, she would walk amongst those boxes, and sometimes unpack one or two, mental boxes that held the scent of PG Tips or the color of his nondescript shirt at Cafe Cafe at 10:42 on a bright morning during half-term.

There were so many boxes that Sherlock often dreamed of them burying her, of drowning in the knowledge and truth of John Watson. It was sometimes enough to make her brain slow and her breathing even. When everything was too much or not enough, she surrounded herself with every bit she had of John Watson, and for a single second, she felt enough balance to go onward. It was simply that she had been deducing John for years, and the way she organized him in her mind reminded her of systems and logical deduction.

That was all there was to it.

His voice was careful, tutored. His sister had a faint accent. He did not. This spoke volumes. He had worked hard upon his entry to the Army to sound like Joe Bloggs, and in doing so, he had discovered a talent for languages. Sherlock knew that one day, there would be a moment in time that he cared only for truth with a depth that she would hear his real voice, and not the one shared with the world, even if accents as a general rule did strike her as inefficient. Gavin said she had an accent herself, though that was absurd, because she had never once discerned it for herself.

Sherlock stared over the top of the insipid magazine that allowed her to look like a fellow traveler. John hadn’t wanted Harry to come along today, but she was trying out sobriety once again. It wouldn’t stick, Sherlock knew, but the deeper motivation here was clear to her, just as it was clear to John. Harriet didn’t feel that a soldier should have no one to see them off, even if their mother had
died, their Grandmother was aged, and their father had absconded.

Sherlock thought that certainly she would be a better person to bid John farewell. Certainly his sister wasn’t making this parting any easier for him. Sherlock wasn’t going to have word of him for months, and she had skipped out of boring tutorials just to come and see John, not his sister. And still, Harry was still making this entire thing about her. This was not about Harriet. This moment was about John. Did no one in his blasted family understand that John was his own person, far their superior in ever way?

It seemed that John too was running out of patience, though he hid it so well that only Sherlock saw it. As ever, trying to soothe his sister, as though her sobriety was his responsibility. “Harry, please don’t make a fuss of this. We knew this would be my life when I joined up, and I’m glad I did. The Army suits me.”

“I know. Mum was so proud, Johnny.” His sister replied, her voice echoing Inverness in a way that John’s own cadence had long left behind. Sherlock watched the way John shifted his weight. He was not ashamed of his service, but he was…regretful…that…ah, his mother…regretful that it distanced him from memories of his mother. “John, I’m sorry.”

John picked up his bag. It was the only thing that marked him as military, and Sherlock knew in her bones that much of what he was doing was a cover for something bigger in service to his country. It infuriated her. Why should John risk himself? Why, when he was unique amongst all people and there were hundreds of other idiots who were hopped up on patriotism? Why did they deserve the very best the world had to offer?

Sherlock knew why John chose to serve. John loved to help people. In this fashion, he helped a lot of people, and the risk to himself ceased to matter. It was why he traversed the grey areas between Army Doctor and Army Soldier so well. It had taken her ages to understand this about him.

No. Sherlock would not lie to herself any more than she would lie to John. It had taken her an instant to perceive it and months to accept it, largely because it came with unacceptable risks to his person.

Sherlock was not so foolish to imagine that his final wave as he approached security had anything to do with her. She knew his eyes never even fell upon her, slouched in the row of chairs as she remained. Still, that gesture emboldened her. Sherlock gathered up her things, and wrote a note on the scrap of paper that had come with her disgusting Costa tea.

Harry’s sobriety would not stick if she went it alone, again. Clara was not in a position to help her, as she enabled her in the way of a loved one in a dysfunctional dynamic. Sherlock quickly added variables to her projections, and selected a new course of action with ease. She wrote yet more information on the note, and concluded with a simple directive. Harry was to call this number, posthaste. In time, Harry would assume John had done this for her, and in essence, he did deserve the credit.

After all, when battling addiction, it helped to ask the richest and poorest person one knew. While Sherlock only knew what she had read and deduced of poverty, she had quite a lot of money. Money, that was, that and Father and Mummy refused to let her properly invest, but that was a consideration for another matter. She simply knew a great many people who had gotten sober or clean, and had all contacted this same number.

Carefully, she bumped into Harry Watson, and in the ensuing echo of ‘sorries’ that made them British, Sherlock slipped a name and number into her pocket. Dr. Sutcliffe was an expert on alcoholism and would sooner turn her back on Harry than Sherlock would turn her back on John. The bills would be astronomical, but Harry would never see one.
Sherlock headed out of the airport, only to see Mycroft there, tapping his umbrella. “Sherlock…”

“It’s your fault, or were you so busy inserting cake into your face that you forgot?” Sherlock hefted her bag, and pulled out her phone. She had banking arrangements to put into place, and she did not need meddling getting in the way of her plans.

Mycroft fell into step beside her, “Mummy said this infatuation would pass. I note that, despite no connection between you and Dr. Watson, that it has developed.”

“I am not infatuated with him.” Sherlock hissed, a blush suffusing her face. Infatuation was based on the superficial, the reflection of self and selfishness in another. Sherlock felt none of those things for John Watson. She had read Molly’s magazines, solely for research.

Her pulse did not race around John Hamish Watson.

It slowed.

*Age 18*

*United Nations Headquarters*

*Turtle Bay, New York, NY*

Sherlock Holmes hadn’t seen John Watson since his deployment date. It burned into her mind. She had read military briefings, received occasional images, watched a great deal of news. That was, until October, wherein she had stopped that arm of her research as abruptly as possible. It was an issue of safety.

She slipped into the town car. She might not have Mycroft’s job or Sherry’s standing, but she had her own means, and she absolutely refused to ride in those yellow monstrosities New Yorkers called taxis. They were an affront to her senses, even if the drivers were some of the most interesting and personable people she had ever come across.

She had to trust her brain, now. No more notes. Her notes had made John vulnerable. Nothing about that was acceptable. The rage and the pain she had felt as Victor had drugged her, held her captive, and mocked her were nothing to the fear and the hell she experienced knowing that he posed a risk to John, that he thought it acceptable for John’s name to pass his lips.

Sherlock had expanded her Mind Palace since October. She had left Cambridge for New York in December, and had been here since, Ph.D. in hand. Molly was due to land this afternoon for what she called a ‘girls weekend.’ She had not dissuaded Molly from the notion that she had gone through a breakup after getting something Molly called a reverse ‘Dear John’ letter.

It was an impossibility for John to send her a letter. Only a fool would fantasize of such a thing. Only an idiot would hypothesize that there was somewhere, inside of him, that knew Sherlock Holmes as Sherlock Holmes knew John Watson. He did not have enough data to reach that conclusion.

Her town car brought her the United Nations, complex. Sherlock exited the car, smoothed back her hair, and strode toward the Secretariat Building with purpose. The security was an annoyance, and she did not appreciate any impediment upon what was a natural course of events.
However, one does as one must, and she tolerated the process that marked her as an official visitor. She had long ago discerned that it was time to introduce herself to John, and if that meant attending a meeting about what she herself might do on behalf of the United Nations, she was willing to do it. After all, if things went according to her present conjectures, there was every reason she should be based in the Middle East, and she might as well go with something worthwhile to do between cases. Damn Aunt Marian for insisting she learn how to be charitable. It was something she found she valued, though of course so long as it didn’t interfere with the Work.

Sherlock tuned out most of the meeting. Whatever she needed to know, she would deduce with ease when she was in her role, and she was assured she would have a capable assistant. Sherlock let her mind focus upon what she would need to pack for her time in the Middle East, though a permanent post had yet to be selected. She might do some shopping with Molly this afternoon.

When they were done with the meeting and the tour of the buildings that ended in Assembly Hall, she checked her watch, and headed to the toilets to bide her time. If she reapplied lip balm, and refreshed her hair, it was merely to have something to do whilst standing in the loos. Sherlock ran through several possible openings as she stared at herself in the mirror, watching her hands smooth and twist.

Captain Watson was too formal. She might as well march up to him and declare, “Treat me like one of your subordinates, John! Take an interest in my career and tell your mates I’m like the little sister you never had!” She’d have better luck tripping over him in these handmade platform heels and letting her eyes go wide and telling him that she loved him for who he was, and she really wanted to name their eldest son Hamish, because that wouldn’t scare him or have him advocating for a psychological evaluation, of course it wouldn’t.

Sherlock almost screamed in frustration. Her mind was going too quickly. She didn’t know what to do. The sensible choice seemed so absolutely banal and fraught with nothingness. Spying a woman leaving one of the cubicles, she asked the woman in her native tongue, “When meeting a man, what would you say?”

“Wilhelmina,” Said she, who was supposedly the leader of a country, though Sherlock could never remember which one, only because there were more important things to deduce. The woman was on personal terms with Mummy, and had known Sherlock long enough that Sherlock considered it unless to inform her that she did not use that hateful forename. “I would simply say hello.”

“Oh, and you’re supposed to be chemist!” Sherlock declared, picking up her handbag and stomping out of the bathroom.

Once back in the corridor, Sherlock found that the water on her hands refused to dry. Holmeses did not perspire. To suggest that her palms were slick or that her knees were knocking was the height of absurdity. It was the shoddy atmospheric conditions in this building, which was probably overpacked with gawking tourists bent on conspiracy theories that had no basis in rational truth.

Sherlock heard footsteps, and exhaled. Her stomach jumped, though of course that was simply because she had been subjected to the coffee here, and had drank two cups out of sheer boredom. She made her way slowly, ever so slowly, back to her escort as she heard a voice say, “Captain, we certainly welcome you to New York…”

Sherlock looked around, and cursed her stupid Nanny. Nanny had never told her what the sensible thing to do was in moments wherein she was seconds from meeting the man with whom she had every intention of incorporating into her future plans. Nanny had always said that he would speak to her, not the other way around, but then again, Nanny was forever believing fairy stories.
Sherlock ran through her projections very quickly. Every single outcome was laden with risk she was not prepared to take. But no. John needed her. He needed her. She needed to know that he was safe.

And…he walked right by her, unseeing, not noticing her. That absolute prat! How could he care more about making polite chat with some American political blonde? How could he do this to her? Sherlock fumed as her guide escorted her to the lifts, only to find that the APB and John boarded the same lift.

Sherlock, from the back, observed John. Her deductions had been incorrect, driven more by her own emotions, her own fears, not by truth, not by knowledge, not by fact. This failing lanced through her as had her previous failings with Victor.

John was, in every possible way, doing well. Harry was sober, functional. His career was taking off in leaps and bounds. He was happy. His career was finally stabilizing, and he was engaging in more overt work. He was up for promotion, as well. Sherlock could deduce that easily. Mycroft had cut off her reports at Christmas, not that they ever told her much. She had to rely on deduction for anything worthwhile.

Sherlock found she could not muster up anger towards John. Anger would be rational. And yet, she could not be angry. He was happy. There was a lightness to his bearing that told Sherlock he felt that he was on top of the world, and there was nothing she could deduce to detract from that finding. John was being sensible.

She had achieved her aims. There was nothing to suggest that Victor’s taint had touched John. Her mistakes, her errors, had not impacted John. She would not ruin the one bright soul in her life. She would walk away, knowing that John Watson had everything he’d ever dreamed of having, not out of privilege and right and rank, but out of hard work, determination, and care for others.

She would devote herself to her work, as John had devoted himself to his own undertakings. Sherlock knew that to say hello would be to drag him into a world of seedy criminals, grasping debutantes, and female geniuses carrying absurd torches for men who, while uniquely suited to her, wanted different things of life.

And so, separating with a nod from her guide, Sherlock watched Captain John Watson stride confidently into his future. If she kept her Oliver Peoples firmly on her face until she and Molly were ensconced at dinner, that was no one’s concern but her own. After all, she had learned the truth. There was never any pain in the truth.

Mycroft would be happy. She had just saved him several thousand pounds on a new wardrobe. With the wedding coming up, surely he would consider her lack of spending as an ideal wedding gift. After all, she wasn’t buying them a toaster.

Age 19

Vienna Opera Ball Rehearsals

Vienna, Austria

Sherlock was not one to be an alarmist. There were enough debutantes in this room who suited that definition well. She had never wanted to make her bows, but after the debacle in New York, she had
decided with much consideration that she needed to understand parts of herself, parts of the world, that she had heretofore neglected. In a way, it was research.

However, when Lestrade called her from Mycroft’s personal cell number, something told her to excuse herself from the rehearsal and take the call. It was not as if she needed all of these rehearsals and refreshers for their own sake, and there was only so much data one could collect about young women in social settings in one evening at a dinner amidst their obligatory rehearsals.

“Sherlock…” His tone alerted her to danger, and Sherlock’s mind filled with thoughts of Grand-mère. She was not very far from Cannes, after all, and Grand-mère was presently at her villa, which although not in Cannes itself was close enough that going there was the most direct route to her side. Sherlock had just visited her last week and assisted Grand-mère in writing down some of her latest compositions for the piano.

Sherlock snapped, already striding away from the ballroom towards the lift that would take her to her room to collect her passport from the safe. “I will go to Cannes. Have Mycroft send a plane. I will —”

The hotel staff was already looking Sherlock’s way. Set the smoke alarm off once, and these imbeciles never left one alone. She could have gotten a flat, but the committee insisted she be here for the final rehearsals as part of international bonding and togetherness. Sherlock had met at least two semi-passable young women with whom to converse and deduce, so at least the stricture wasn’t altogether absurd.

“Mina, no. Grand-mère is fine, just fine.” Gavin continued, “John, beetle-bug, it's John.”

“John is no longer my concern. As you say, he never was my concern in the first place.” Sherlock insisted, trying not to let her mind recall all of those hateful discussions at Christmas. Why she had ever gone home was beyond her. “I refuse to continue this conversation unless you tell me why you have chosen now, after all this time, to discuss him.”

“John’s been badly injured in theatre.” Gavin revealed, his voice choked with tears, “Very badly injured. They do not expect him to survive his flight to Germany.”

Sherlock was shoved into her Mind Palace. She found herself reaching out in the lift, reaching and reaching and reaching, and unable to touch John. Sherlock felt her pulse begin to race as she moved away from the lifts that were before in reality and began to rocket up the stairs, her feet pounding, brushing past a girl arguing with her parents and a couple avoiding indiscreet rumors.

Sherlock knew that his injuries were significant if those overseeing his care decided to call upon Americans to provide him care until he was stable enough to go back to the UK. The time between this place in Germany and UK soil was small, but meaningful. It could mean his life. John would not want to die anywhere but her arms. He did not know this in his waking mind, but she was the world’s foremost expert in deduction, and she knew it enough for both of them.

“Who is this they?” Sherlock demanded, bursting out of the stairwell and onto her floor, “Clearly, they do not know John. He would never let himself die. He plans to retire after another few decades, to buy a small farm in his retirement. He wants a dog, several—” Sherlock was reluctant to discuss family planning with her brother listening in on the line, “He has plans. Nowhere do my projections include a possibility that he may…”

Sherlock fumbled with the key card, ignoring Gavin’s words. They distracted her from her purpose. She had taken up languages and international customs not only for research, but for the Work. She had learned languages because she wanted to do it, but also because it would prove useful for John’s
eventual postings, where she might take cases in the native language. She had long ago abandoned
the flight of illogic that had been their separation in her mind.

She was in her room, shoving aside clothing and shoe racks, to ransack the safe in her suite, and
pack a small bag. She did not know the weather in Germany, but it hardly signified. She was going
to Rammstein, more specifically Landstuhl. Sherlock shoved everything she could possibly need in
her bag, and was bolting down the stairs as Gavin’s voice came through her iPhone once more,
“There’s a plane waiting. Mycroft and I are on our way. You’re not alone, Sherlock.”

Sherlock hung up the phone and tossed it in her bag. If John died, she would be alone in a way that
Lestrade would never comprehend.

Sherlock retreated to her Mind Palace the second she was ushered onto the plane. She visited in her
way with the Doctor Watson in her mind. As ever, he was full of vigor and sparkled with
intelligence. He was forever after to eat more, to move more, to drink water, to go outside, to tell
people what she thought, to sleep. This time, however, she found him standing in a operating theatre
in her mind, explaining all of the things that could be wrong with him. This John in her mind
couldn’t be worried, for he dealt in medical facts, in statistics. He didn’t understand her terror, her
fear.

She kept the John that wanted to hold her locked tightly away. Instead, she conferred with Captain
Watson, standing in a tent in some war torn locale that was home to the biggest sky that Sherlock had
ever seen, either in reality or in her mind. This John typically helped her solve cases, avoid being
shot, and told her how to fend off attackers. Now, though, he simply stood out in the sand, staring
down at a pair of dog tags and a helmet that bore his name.

Sherlock found his reaction impossible to handle or comprehend. She sought out the John in her
mind who focused on espionage. He had been a near constant companion during her time as a
debutante, for the undertakings were similar. This John sparked something within her, so that by the
time the plane landed, Sherlock had one plan. She was going to get to John, and keep him alive, no
matter what it took.

Sherlock was not a total stranger to military installations. Still, landing at Rammstein was something
that required careful concentration. Even at this hour, planes were queuing and depositing people and
cargo at rapid paces. Sherlock was quickly and efficiently checked and ushered into a waiting car,
which moved speedily on private motorways that were closed to the public.

There was an Americanness to the street signs as she moved towards her destination, weaving
through streets, past buildings, past men and women in military dress. Sherlock tried to remember
what she and John had discussed, though she felt slightly detached from herself. Doctor John had
told her she was in shock.

Quickly, and yet so slowly that Sherlock wanted to scream, she was let out in front of the building
that would lead her to the ICU. Her phone had a floor, and the name of a person who was to meet
her. Still, when she went inside, there was someone waiting for her directly. He was a man religious,
who believed in a God of goodness despite the fact that he stood on the front line of a war and
witnessed carnage and loss. Sherlock kept her deductions to herself.

Sherlock felt that anyone working here had better things to do than tend to her. She was perfectly
capable of finding her way to the Intensive Care and she told the chaplain as much in no uncertain
terms. There had been so many people on that tarmac, that certainly, certainly, he had somewhere to
be that did not include escorting her through the corridors.
“Let’s just get you where you’re going.” Chaplain Parker told her, reminding her a little bit of the clergy at home, who had, despite her distaste for anything religious, had treated her with a fond respect and consideration she had not found in many people of faith. “Landstuhl can be a confusing place.”

“I am not confused.” Sherlock told him, following him down hallways and around corners, knowing that this place contained people who had done things she would never understand. She had never understood John’s choice to go to war, never understood why a country would ask that of its people, but she understood well that she was seeing human resilience around her. “I am here to see John, and arrange for his transport to the a military hospital in the United Kingdom.”

Chaplain Parker had obviously flicked through John’s file, because he knew enough about John to use that information to talk to Sherlock. “Captain Watson is a hero, ma’am, and we’re glad to have him here with us as long as he should need us.”

Americans overused that word, as a general cultural trend. However, she could not find fault with his statement. “John would want me to tell you that he was doing his job. However, I…” Sherlock struggled for a long moment, “I have never known him to be anything less in my eyes. Objectively.”

“Of course.” The Landstuhl chaplain’s phone buzzed, and he looked bereft for a second before he hid it, in service to what he considered his duty, “You will excuse me, for a moment?”

Sherlock did not let on that she knew that someone was dying, somewhere in this vast complex. John was functionally atheist, but he believed in things like goodness, like meaning, like hope and kindness, mercy and compassion. She thought about what she should say in this moment, and tried her best to smile, “Take as long as you need, please.”

He hurried away, back into the hive of people. Sherlock looked at the desk at the front of the ward, and back at the locked doors that she had come through mere seconds ago. Swallowing, she approached the desk. The nurse looked up. She deduced, however badly, that she had not been expecting a young woman wearing workout kit, flats, and a horribly tatty Barbour, who was mumbling to herself unless spoken to in direct tones.

Sherlock gave her name as Sarah, knowing that there could be no trace of her here. After John roused, he would be told of his young wife, and Sherlock wanted to make sure that it sounded like a fairy story. She would no sooner trap John than she would spit on the hospitality the Americans were offering him.

“Sarah Watson.” Sherlock blurted, too rattled and too focused to school her voice in a flat American accent that sounded vaguely Northeastern, the nondescript toneless accent that was all over American television.

After all, her name was Wilhelmina Sherlock Sarah Holmes. The only thing she had lied about was her surname. She knew enough of protocol to know that she was pushing it, even showing up here under the guise of John's wife. She cared not one bit for protocol. She would see John.

“I’m sorry, ma’am…” The woman’s gaze softened when she made assumptions about their connection. Sherlock cared not for her sympathy. She wanted her efficiency. “I am not authorized to let anyone onto the wards. You’re not in any access record I can locate, ma’am. Did you arrange your visit with the base?”

Things, the nurse’s eyes told her, were different in this case. There was something different. Sherlock preemptively decided that the difference rested in the fact that they were British, and had nothing to do with John’s prognosis.
Sherlock inhaled. “Check again.”

“Mrs. Watson…” There was sympathy in the woman’s tone. Sherlock wanted nothing to do with her emotions. She wanted her to do her job, her bloody fucking job.

Sherlock thought of a long speech that burned on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to snap, “I have the backing of no less than five governments to stand in this spot. My father is interested in advocacy and charity, not very political true, but my older brother, well, we call him The British Government. They call him The Ice Man in America, but then you are prone to drama as a people. We Brits, on the other hand, mean what we say. Your President Obama plays golf with my father and my brother. My mother is a mathematical genius, friends, you may be told with the German Chancellor. Now.” Sherlock fantasized about snarling, “Would you care to spark an international incident? Or would you like to check again?”

Sherlock would never through her familial weight around, for her own reputation far exceeded anything Mycroft might have done. However, what she wanted to do buy him some time to have her alias put into John’s records.

Instead, Sherlock deduced the woman. She paused. What she said in response to that deduction, changed her, introduced her to a strength she was not sure humans honestly possessed. “You have never let a patient die alone. You held their hands when mortar flashed. You’ve helped some to say the Sh’mma when you yourself are Baptist. You close your eyes, and you wish you could give every last one of them their families, just one more time. Please.” Sherlock knew her voice was breaking, “Please.”

Something shifted between them. She didn’t even touch the computer. Nothing about this visit would be on record. The nurse was trusting her own deductions and putting her neck out for Sherlock.

The nurse rose. “I’ll escort you back myself. He’s going for surgery soon.” Sherlock noted that she did not say that if he survived that one, that there would be several others when he went home. The object of Landstuhl was to stabilize John and ship him off with their good wishes.

Sherlock walked alongside the nurse. When she came to the room that contained the click and whoosh of a ventilator, and the beeps of several monitors, she reached out and touched Sherlock’s arm. Normally, Sherlock would have recoiled. She simply froze. The nurse seemed compelled to remind her, “He doesn’t look like himself, honey. He’s still in there. He’s just…in his mind. You understand that, don’t you?”

Sherlock fought not to think of October last, and nodded. She was suddenly very afraid. She looked around, and there was no one beside her but the nurse. “I’ll stay with you a minute. You’ll want your privacy, I’m sure.”

With that, she guided Sherlock over the threshold. There was a chair waiting, probably because of the Chaplain, who cared not that she was an atheist and John rarely darkened he door of a church. Sherlock pulled her eyes from the horrible wooden chair, and felt the bottom drop out from under her world.

Sherlock said nothing. She saw everything. She memorized every bruise, every scrape, every break, every swell. She considered getting as close as she could, but she thought that might be permission for him to go, and he had to stay. He had to stay, and they would fight this, everything, all of it, together. Any potentiality could be overcome, so long as he lived. So long as he lived, there was nothing he could not do.

She simply sat down on the chair and reached for John’s hand. She had never touched him before,
and their first touch was marred by medical tape, needles in his hand, and swelling. His other arm was immobilized. Sherlock did not remove her gaze from his face, marred by yet more tape and tubes, except when she watched his chest and fall.

She wondered if this counted as holding a man’s hand, which she had never done before. It had not mattered, and then when it did, she wanted no placeholder in John’s place in her life. She wondered if this would one day count as a meeting between them, though she knew she would hold these moments deep within her Mind Palace. They were not ones she would easily recount. She wasn’t sure she even remembered how to breathe.

After a long moment, she looked to the nurse and forced out, “We’re best on our own, now.”

The nurse nodded, but Sherlock didn’t see it. She simply stared at John, and began to tell him of his medical condition. She ran out of things to say there, and tried to think of something to say. She had nothing to say. She wanted to scream, to cry, to mourn this pain, but she owed John the strength he had shown at their last meeting.

And so, she simply spoke. She recited poetry, Burns and Pound, Cummings and Bradstreet. She knew as well as anyone that brain activity in sedated patients changed when someone talked to them, spoke to them of things they enjoyed. She knew nothing about rugby, but she played a passable game of Cluedo, so she set up a board in her head and deduced John’s moves. She hummed, songs she’d deduced years ago were the sort of song that made him dance around in his absurd way. She swore she wouldn’t complain if he hated Liszt and Mahler, if only he would wake up and tell her the words to songs she’d deleted.

Time was irrelevant, but she eventually heard movement by the door. Thinking it the nurse to come again and tell her that John would be taken to surgery now, she looked up quickly and saw Lestrade lingering by the entry. Sherlock nodded, and he entered the room, looking as uncomfortable as she had ever seen him.

John and Lestrade were two of the best men she knew, and she knew they would be close, when they had the chance. Now was not going to be their only, or even their first, chance. “I’m not going to introduce you. If you want to meet John, you’re going to have to wait until he is not incapacitated.”

Lestrade nodded. “Sherlock, we can’t stay much longer off the books. Mycroft’s going to talk to the doctors. After that…”

“I won’t leave the base, until John leaves for Sully Oak or another hospital.” Sherlock didn’t care if she couldn’t be with him. She just wanted to be near him. She did not care that her parents were going to be landing in Vienna in mere days, nor that she was expected at an International Ball shortly after. She would, she knew, not leave John’s proximity until he was well.

She would go and stay with Aunt Sophie or get a flat, depending on the location. No matter what, she intended to get a position at the hospital where John ended up spending his convalesce. He would not wish to know her as he coped with the trauma he had experienced, but she assured herself that she would be nearby. She would stand for nothing less.

Lestrade accepted the steel in her words, and swallowed. Sherlock focused on John.

Mycroft came into the room. He deduced her, and Sherlock hid nothing. Everything was laid bare before him. She felt a strange sort of strength suffuse her. It came from the depth of her being, somewhere that knew and accepted that she loved John Hamish Watson, of Inverness, lately of Helmand Province. She loved him, and there was only strength in that truth.
It was in light of this truth that Mycroft began to speak, “They believe he has every possible chance of survival. There will be nerve damage. He will never hold a scalpel again.”

“He’s an Army Surgeon!” Sherlock flew to her feet, knocking the chair back unsteadily. He had worked for so long to balance the more clandestine work with his overt work as a surgeon in the field.

“When he returns to London, he will be in need of a new profession.” Mycroft broke this news in his cold, impersonal way. Sherlock did not blame him personally. She blamed so many others that the only person to which she could affix her rage was herself.

It was this pronouncement that sent agony ripping through her body. John loved the Army. They didn’t understand, they were all stupid. The Army was John’s whole world. He helped people. He was a good man, a good man, who made a difference. He used his pain to connect with others, not build walls of ice and intellect. He was a good man, so far beyond anything they could even begin to comprehend. She wished it had been her. She would give up science, give up deduction, if it meant that he could do that which he loved and make the world a better, happier, place, just by being alive in it.

Lestrade’s arms wrapped around her as Sherlock realized she had crumpled to her knees on the cold hospital floor. Those horrible, rasping, keening sounds were coming from her own body. The sobs that ripped through her soul, if she actually had one left, were agonized because John had lost everything he loved. The other part of her soul rejoiced that John lived, John lived, and he would live. A planet that held John Watson was the only fitting place for Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock sobbed in Lestrade’s arms. She had not cried in front of another living soul in her memory. And yet, she cried openly and brokenly for John Watson. Tears still seeped from her body with every other sob. She shook so hard that Lestrade physically placed her in the chair and then shoved his partner out of the door to give them a minute.

Sherlock took a few seconds to steel herself. Carefully, she pressed a gentle kiss to the only unbruised part of John’s face not covered by tube, tape, gauze, and wire. “I love you, John Hamish Watson. May you know it as I know it.”

Sherlock joined her brother and his partner and left the ward. She paused only to thank the nurse, knowing that this woman was a tangible connection between her and John, and that if anyone deserved thanks, it was the nurse. Though it was a risk, Sherlock took it.

Within an hour, she was settled in a room on a base of about fifty thousand people, at least for the night, but her mind was centered on one life that was even now, hanging by a thread under a surgeon’s scalpel.

Age 20

Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham

Birmingham, England, United Kingdom

John Hamish Watson was one of the first patients at the new QEHB following Sully Oak’s closure. Wilhelmina Sherlock Sarah Holmes was one of the first new hires in Research and Development for
several projects in the Royal Centre for Defense Medicine. She had a research degree in hand, and a desire to be in Birmingham. She could tap dance through an interview with harried committees, and had a job offer before her clearances had come back, though of course those were rushed to the front of the pack.

Sherlock Holmes was, whether anyone knew it, a frequent visitor to John Watson’s medical records. She occasionally visited the physiotherapy rooms, occasionally noted that there was a blond man in the pool or standing in agony at the parallel bars. She was a ghost on the edge of his vision during the months of his stay, never noticed, but always near.

After several months, Sherlock knew she had lost weight. She said she had lost her subcutaneous fat from her late teenage years, though she knew she had stopped eating, stopped sleeping as she ought to do. Her last two menstrual cycles had been uncharacteristically troublesome. The Doctor John in her mind despaired of her, and told her she was not a swan.

She was not depressed. She was terrified. John was on the verge of suicide, and he was hiding it behind stoicism and a carefully crafted mask. Not another soul in this hospital saw it, not even the physiologist who thought he had John’s care well in hand. He had been hiding for months, and now, today, his plans had the capacity to come to fruition. She did not know how, but she could read it in the lines of his body. It terrified her.

He was hiding himself from everyone, except from the one person who saw the world as he saw it. He was hiding everything from everyone, except the one person who saw him in the sum totality of who he was, as a person, as the only other person in the entire world who was not simple and predictable. Stepping away from where she had been covertly observing John, she made a decision on the basis of her tea break deductions.

John had a plan. He had several plans. He had the means. He had the resolve. He would hate her for sharing his vulnerability with the world, but she cared not, so long as he was alive to do it. A long time ago, she had desired nothing more than his friendship. Then, and then, she had wanted his happiness. Now, all she wanted was for him to be alive. Not for her, but for himself. Damn the consequences.

Sherlock raced off on a tear around the unit, heading with unashamed haste to John’s psychologist. He was an idiot, but he could take action over time to actually help John. Pausing in front of the man’s office, Sherlock tucked her hair back, smoothed down her blazer, and knocked on the door.

After a moment, Dr. Norwood bade her to enter into his office, and Sherlock did so, coming to her point rather quickly, “Your patient, Captain Watson…” Sherlock chose her words very carefully, “I have reason to believe he is experiencing some undocumented psychological symptoms.”

“Excuse me?” He turned from his paperwork to face her. To equalize the discussion as one of peers, Sherlock made a point to take the other chair, “Who are you?”

Sherlock ignored the question. She was not the focus in this discussion. John came above all else. “John presently is questioning his basic humanity. The Army formed a large part of his adult identity, and its loss is…beyond him.”

Sherlock did not furnish the man with data, for that belonged solely to her Mind Palace, and she would not violate the privacy of the bond forged between people who saw everything, “He questions his very personhood, his ability to be of service to people around him, his right to be here, with every breath he takes.”

“I am not prepared to discuss my patients with practitioners who are not involved in their care,
“It is Doctor.” Sherlock snapped, very aware of her Ph.D. in this moment. She was the John Watson expert in the room, indeed she was the only one in the world, “John is in agony, in deepest despair, you have done nothing to ease his burdens in the months you have been overseeing his psychological care. Perhaps you are more interested in your grant work. Perhaps patients with TBIs hold more of your interest. Perhaps you are concerned about the professorship opening up at your old college at Oxford? I care not.” Sherlock deduced the man in front of her quickly, “Your duty is to John, and you will do your duty.”

His gaze sharpened for a moment, though Sherlock knew his powers of observation were not honed after years of comfortable assumptions and easy conclusions. “Are you known personally to Captain Watson, Doctor?”

Sherlock shook her head, “This is not a conflict of interest. As a professional, I am coming to you with observations regarding a patient in your care. I have reason to believe that John would benefit from an alternate modality of treatment. You fail to recognize that John is a caregiver, a protector, a man of his word. He feels that he is not a man, not a person, any longer. You must impress upon him that there is a world beyond what he knows, that there is a world waiting for him.”

“What else must I do?” Dr. Norwood asked, clearly none too pleased with being told what to do, but somewhat intrigued by her appearance at his door. Briefly, Sherlock wished herself older-looking in appearance. She was frequently dismissed due to her age and her appearance, “Have you any thoughts regarding treatment, then?”

“You must stop the psychoanalysis.” Of this Sherlock was entirely certain, “John is easily twice your measure in raw intelligence, and he is five steps ahead of you at all times. Psychoanalysis is a game of strategy for John, and while it helps him to feel like a warrior once more, it does you no therapeutic good to look like his enemy and an idiot besides. Though really, I suppose you cannot help it.”

Sherlock paused to inhale a breath quickly, “Your interest in his thought associations, dreams, and fantasies do nothing provide him a context to get under your skin and see what makes you tick. You will note he often takes control of the session without your awareness, I’m sure.”

Dr. Norwood blanched, clearly having been working under the assumption that he had headed John off at the pass frequently. The possibility of being outfoxed had not occurred to the man, for which Sherlock cursed him mentally. She was not a trained psychologist, and yet even she could take one look at John and know that psychoanalysis was the last thing he needed. His mind was sacred to him, and he did not appreciate anyone toying with it. His mind was not someone’s play yard.

Sherlock reigned her scorn and rage. Did he have to do the man’s job for him? Was this the kind of care the United Kingdom felt their best and most heroic deserved?

Sherlock rattled along, “You need to better understand positive psychology, and humanistic approaches. John fundamentally believes in the goodness of humanity, and a limitless capacity for humanity to rise above its mundane interest in division and hatred. He’s simply forgotten that he, too, plays a significant role in this quest, and that he has his own goodness.” She paused, “You are, I trust, at least passingly aware of Carl Rogers? I would start there, and should you fail to at least appear to be genuine in your attempt at empathy, look at more existential modalities. On second thought, perhaps he would be better suited to working with Dr. Phillips. She seems at least competent.”

“Well.” Dr. Norwood polished his glasses, “I…”
“Most of your problems, Dr. Norwood, would be solved if you simply stopped pretending to be the brightest man in the room.” Sherlock replied, “Thank you for your time.”

Sherlock rose and strode from the doctor’s study, and went back to her office. She was confident that she had done all she might do for the moment, but all the same she kept an eye on Dr. Norwood. It never occurred to her that Dr. Norwood was keeping an eye on her.

John seemed to, within weeks, work through something within himself. Sherlock was glad to notice that he was once again eating his weight in horrendous foods like salad and vegetable stew. If the psychology department now received copies of various journals relating to humanistic and positive psychology, Sherlock considered it but a reminder to Norwood.

“Dr. Holmes…” The review board’s chair glared at Sherlock, “We have no choice but to let you go. You are a brilliant scientist, but are perhaps not suited to the interpersonal boundaries that must be maintained in a hospital setting.”

Sherlock bit back acid on her tongue and addressed Dr. Grosseman. “I am a capable research scientist. Dr. Chatterjee has no complaints with my work, of that I assure you.”

“Complaints, ma’am, do not come from your department.” Dr. Marshall boomed, “You have violated conduct guidelines, accessed sealed documentation, and stuck your sticky beak where it does not belong.”

“If you refer, Dr. Marshall, to my single meeting with Dr. Norwood regarding observations I made —” The man went to interrupt her again, and Sherlock’s eyes blazed as she continued, “I swore to uphold the dignity of human life when I took this post! Is that lip service, or would you have had me look the other way when a man decorated by no less than four governments at the highest levels put a knife in a light socket because idiots on your staff were blazing failures?”

“You have no proof!” Dr. Marshall, the Head of Psychology at the hospital blustered. He took it very personally that she had brought knowledge to his employees, for he felt that his ways of being and doing were the only ways of being and doing, as was very common in privileged White men. Sherlock hated the patriarchy, just as she hated the way he embraced it.

“John lived!” Sherlock retorted, “He’s alive! What more proof do you require? The fact that he smiled last Tuesday or has begun to lead peer support groups on his ward? The fact that he talked to his sister? What do you want? A cake with your picture on it? The only person who deserves commendation for John’s recovery is John, for you were content to abandon him to the vagaries of a system not designed for exceptionalities.”

They went round and round in this fashion. Sherlock wanted to deduce them all to a pile of rubble, and perhaps she did, at least to Marshall and his cronies on this panel. It was only logical that those in this room who held them in esteem understood that they were the embodiment of the issues facing the NHS and their medical community in general.

“Dr. Holmes, security will escort you off premises, as soon as you have cleared your office.” Dr. Grosseman sighed as she signed yet more documentation that signaled the end of this hellish witch hunt that had spanned weeks. “If you will permit me, you are a very bright scientist. I commend your desire to assist others, but suggest to you that your unique talents and abilities would be better suited to a more solitary, academic, post.”

Sherlock swallowed. Finally, Grosseman spoke again, “Lastly, we are agreed that this matter, upon the advice of those involved in his care, will not be brought to the attention of Dr. Watson. We
ourselves have no desire to prolong this unfortunate episode nor to derail his progress.”

Sherlock burned with that parting shot, that suggestion that she had hurt John.

Sherlock wasn’t entirely sure that was a legal determination, but she accepted it. She was given her severance documentation, and released from hellish captivity. Her back hurt and she felt like vomiting. Still, she said nothing to her colleagues as she packed her desk and cleared her computer using security techniques Mummy had taught her in primary school, though of course they had evolved in response to new technologies.

That done, Sherlock marched right out the front door. She was not ashamed of what she had done. She was not ashamed.

John lived. John lived.

“I warned you, did I not, on several occasions?” Mycroft asked, standing as he was, right outside the doors.

Sherlock hefted her box, and shoved it at her brother, who took it up with something of a shocked look on his face. He smoothed it away after a second. After all, his nanny had raised a gentleman. “I achieved my aims regarding this venture, and it drew to a close.”

“Do you intend to take up the mantle of a charitable socialite, Sherlock?” Mycroft passed the box to his driver as they approached his governmental vehicle.

Sherlock climbed inside, “Hardly. I’ve plans to set up my own business.”

Mycroft sighed, and slid into the SUV. He no doubt despaired of her entrepreneurial spirit, but Sherlock could see herself now. She intended to go to London, solve cases, and explore the intrigue and danger that awaited her with mindfulness and gusto. After all, London was a world unto itself.

Chapter End Notes

Back to the end of Chapter Three next update.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Back to the present in this chapter...

Warning: Sherlock discusses Victor's assault, which includes drugging her. Mind your triggers, and if you need to, go ahead and search for "They sat in silence for a long moment" and you'll be past her discussion of his drugging her into a stupor.

John hated being on the other side of the interrogation table. And yet, here he was, again, being poked and prodded to share every moment of his actions and his day, like a debriefing. It sent a chill up his spine. Additionally, these long, drawn out regurgitations with Greg felt like a reminder that for every time he had sat on the other side of the table, he would be sitting here.

Still, John hashed another tally in his head, and the scales balanced a millionth of an increment more, which was some consolation.

They were done. Greg shut off the recording devices, but he did not remind them of dinner, or sigh and tell them to call when they got home. Sherlock did not remove the ice he'd all but shoved under her crisp shirt after their decontamination showers and patching her up, nor did she stand.

John looked away from Sherlock and back at Greg. He knew what was coming, he just hadn’t expected it be coming in this moment. John thought Greg would give Sherlock some time to retreat into her Mind Palace, to process, to think, to analyze, to plan. She needed that space, but it was clear that Greg was not prepared to offer her any of it.

Instead, he spoke anew, his voice soft. The boxes of notes found in Victor’s flat had become central in his plot to seek his revenge, though he had not made good on his plan to murder either of them. “Sherlock, I need to know.”

John gripped his paper cup of tea, the too-hot water having cooled to be tepid and tangy with the undertones of London’s water. John steeled himself. He knew what was coming would not be pleasant, not when Sherlock visibly detached herself from the world around her in self-preservation.

Sherlock stared straight ahead, and began to set the scene very factually. “I did not willingly relinquish my data or my notes. I was very close to the final breakthrough on an extraction process I had been perfecting for my dissertation. As ever, Victor was present in the lab.”

John knew that he had inserted himself everywhere, and having met the man, John could just picture him sticking his nose into whatever anyone else was doing, so as to position himself to steal the credit. John could just see him rifling through people’s bags and violating basic lab etiquette to get ahead. He could also see a young Sherlock training herself to ignore him as she had long ago trained herself to ignore irrelevant annoyances, like a draft or a burnt out light bulb.

Sherlock continued speaking, “The date was October 14th. I had received a report earlier that day, about a mission John had led, information I had been awaiting for some weeks.”

It took John a minute to remember whereabouts he had been in that year in the autumn. He thought it
the time he’d spent dashing around Iraq and Afghanistan on clandestine operations, sometimes sewing people up, sometimes doing the exact opposite.

“All I knew for sure was that he was alive, and I was much relieved. I resolved to enter this data in the relevant section while I waited for lab results. My mistake was attempting to maximize efficiency, as I took the book to the lab. It was there that Victor saw my more personal observations. Governmental data was coded, but my personal…” Sherlock searched her mind for a word that applied, and it broke John’s heart to hear her continue onward, “reflections were unfortunately candid. In my desire to maintain exacting, precise, records, I was less than circumspect.”

Lestrade followed Sherlock’s lead, and kept this professional, though John knew that the man who had taught Sherlock to fire a gun and ride the Tube was breaking inside. He could see it in the way Greg was clenching his pen, the way his body was rigid in his chair. “Did he say anything to you then?”

“No.” Sherlock’s tone was absent from her voice, and the fact that he could discern nothing of her feelings told him everything he needed to know about her internal state. “He did not mention what he felt he knew until I was under the influence, and powerless to contradict him.”

John wished he could bring Victor back from the dead just to kill him once more, and this time, slowly and painfully. Sherlock was hyper-aware of medications, really anything that would alter her perceptions. John had accepted it as her usual modus operandi. After all, if she had determined that she was in possession of the perfectly ordered mind that saw everything and lost nothing, why would she want to alter it with chemicals synthesized by some robot or some pleb in an industrial lab? Now, however, John questioned her motivations.

“He came to my flat the following weekend. He expressed to me that he regretted his behavior in the past and wished to make amends. Though I did not believe him, he…” Sherlock shook once, and then found the steel within herself, and continued, as though she was talking about the difference between lavender and mauve. “He…compelled me to share tea with him. The tea was dosed with what I later determined to be an oral dose of midazolam.”

“Midazolam?” Greg asked, searching his mind.

John let his eyes close for a single second. He allowed himself no other reaction. This was not about him, and to make anything she had suffered about his own emotional pain was not something he was prepared to do.


The penny dropped for Greg. Though midazolam was not as well known in the media as compared to other medications, it was cheap and easy to get one’s hands on in the black market. It created memory loss, increased suggestibility, made a person essentially frozen in their minds until they fell asleep, aided oftentimes through sedation, or passed out from low blood pressure in an uncontrolled environment. “He—”

“No. Not that.” Sherlock shook her head, “It was just enough to render me aware of my surroundings, but to keep me silent, compliant. It was the worst experience of my life, barring that night in Ger—” Sherlock blew out a breath, finished the word, “Germany. Just before I felt the drug take effect, I tried to scream, knowing that it was pointless. I hadn’t tasted anything in the tea.”

John figured that there had been a calculated amount of the drug in the tea, just enough to pull a needle out and insert it into Sherlock without protest. She likely had no memory of it, and he wasn’t about to tell her something she hadn’t asked about her own trauma and assault. Sexually based or
not, Trevor had violated Sherlock, violated her safety, her trust, her mind.

"I didn’t know what to do, what I should do." Sherlock was factually describing the confusion and the lack of anxiety that midazolam produced. “My brain was functional, but nothing…” Sherlock drew in a breath, and it was broken, ragged. “Could be expressed. Can you imagine, even for a second, what it was to be trapped in my brain, with no hope of escape, no hope of expression?”

John couldn’t possibly imagine those circumstances, not for a moment. It would probably be a hell unlike any other, to know that there were a million thoughts in her brain, but none were able to come out. He’d put patients on midazolam before surgery as a comfort measure, and they mostly blinked, leaned into comforting voices and touches. John had never spared a thought for their thoughts, beyond assuring them both that all would be well when they woke and they wouldn’t remember a thing. John couldn’t believe that he had ever thought that a comfort. Sure, it had wonderful uses for seizures, insomnia, and in end of life care, but it could also be used in executions.

“I sat on the sofa.” Sherlock then recounted various medical responses, the rate of her breathing, how many times she blinked, her pulse rate, the way she began to sweat and feel increasing nausea as her blood pressure slowly dropped as the drug took effect. She then continued on, “Victor ransacked my room, my things, until he found my shelf of notes. He didn’t chiefly want my chemistry notes, though he took them in a box when he left and made significant use of them, which led to his dismissal.”

Sherlock spoke anew of the notes he had sought. “He read excerpts of my deductions and projections, and then took great pains to tell me what he would do with the information I had given him.”

Greg wisely did not ask her for details she did not offer. Victor Trevor was dead, and forcing Sherlock to recount his exact words would either highlight what she could not remember or could not forget. John did not know which would be more distressing to her.

“And then, he was gone, his words ringing in my ears.” John knew, then, that what she recalled was horrific. “I tried to speak, to stop him. But he was gone…” Sherlock shivered, “As the door slammed, I lost consciousness, as the drug had intended for me to do. I woke, five point seven hours later, surrounded by my own vomit.”

John did not expect her to wrap her arms around herself, but she did just that, drawing her body in around itself as though she could protect herself from the onslaught of the memories time had not dulled. John understood then that she was panicking, on some level, trying to get away from memories she kept locked away in the Mind Palace’s dungeons. Rather than draw attention to a reaction she would never want Greg to understand or internalize, John wrapped his jacket around her. Around them, the heat in the interrogation room kicked on and began blowing gently.

They sat in silence for a long moment. Greg, John knew, had been instrumental in raising Sherlock. John could not imagine the thoughts in his mind, as he gasped for air and fought valiantly to push away the urge to punch something, scream, or cry.

“Why didn’t you come home, Mina?” Greg asked. It was the first time John had ever heard anyone reference Sherlock’s legal name, much less call her a diminutive of the long mouthful. It spoke volumes, “You never—”

Clearly, Greg blamed himself. A girl he loved as a daughter had been assaulted, traumatized, and she had not said a word to him. He was no doubt asking himself where he had failed, what he could have done differently, both before and after that day. It weighed heavily. John saw a new weight settle between his shoulders, and John knew it would be a long time before it lifted.
“Oh, how could I have done?” Sherlock cried, impatient with Greg’s emotionalism and his inability to just know, just see what was readily evident to her. “Mycroft was consumed with the middle east, and you were on the edge of promotion.” Sherlock explained, “What could I do?”

“You were so sick, at Christmas.” Greg clearly was putting things together in a way he never had done before, and it was enough to profoundly shake him. He looked to John, “We were beside ourselves.”

Greg’s reaction was normal, but John wasn’t going to allow Greg to make this about him, not right now. They needed to focus on Sherlock, who was looking at Greg as though he had grown three heads.

There was one thing he needed to say, one thing he needed to make sure Sherlock understood. “He violated you, Sherlock.”

“Me!” Sherlock blurted, looking at him directly, “Have you lost your mind? I outed a spy, John, in a theatre of war! I calculated new projections every day that went by, projections that assured me I had been the author of your death.”

John forced his jaw not to drop. He wasn’t stupid. He knew well the depth of Sherlock’s devotion, and if he hadn’t known it last week, he sure as hell knew it after this week. He knew. He knew it in the way she accepted him, loved him, pushed him, irritated him, filed every broken spot inside of him. John knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was deeply and profoundly loved and valued, and had known it from the second she had emerged from the shadows in Buckingham. Victor had nothing to do with it, though he did know now how much the man’s taunts had hurt Sherlock. When she loved, she loved fully and deeply, and Victor had attempted to use her vulnerability and her strength for his own gain.

“That’s why you went to New York.” John stated, knowing full well that her terror had driven her to seek out new data. What Greg did not know was that, two years ago, he had been in New York for a time. Officially, he had been there representing Army Medical staff to talk about needed drugs and medical systems in Iraq and Afghanistan. He had spent a week in the New Year at the UN with a tidy cover.

“I couldn’t stay, watch everythingimplode.” Sherlock affirmed that she had graduated and taken the post in New York, with the simple but profound admission that there were things she was unable and deeply unwilling to do. “And I won’t stay to rehash meaningless details.”

She rose regally to her feet, and relinquished John’s coat to him, though he would have let her keep it. John drew on his coat, and did up the zip and the buttons, just to give Sherlock a moment she desperately needed. He made a great process out of cleaning up his refuse and pushing in his chair, as well as Sherlock’s own.

She drew in a heaving breathing, attached her head to an invisible string and drew herself into effortless posture. Just like that, the vulnerable woman who had been shaking in his arms not five minutes ago was gone, leaving behind a self-assured facade in its place. She clicked a few buttons on her phone, and looked to Greg for a long moment.

The facade did not slip, not for a single second, as she reminded him. “I suppose you’ll make a nuisance of yourself in the afternoon, Greg.”

“My name isn’t—” Greg paused, shocked, when he realized that Sherlock had used his name correctly. Greg understood what it was that she did not say, and nodded gamely. “I’ll ring, Sherlock.”
They exited the interrogation room, and John knew at once who had turned up the heat. Sally lingered nearby, and just before Sherlock looked her way, John saw regret and pain flash across her expressive face. However, when she spoke, it was only in her typical greeting, “Freak.”

Sherlock took it for what it truly was, and added a bit of extra venom to her response, “Bitch.”

Sally smiled. John simply nodded his farewell, knowing that Sally would keep her mouth shut and would do her best to maintain their dynamic.

They continued on their way through New Scotland Yard. John said nothing in the lifts, though he did reach for Sherlock’s hand. She accepted the gesture, twined their fingers together, and moved even more closely into his space as the car glided downward. John fought the mad urge to stop the car mid-descent and wrap his arms around her, stare into her violet-tinged eyes, and forget the whole world.

Sherlock read his thoughts easily, “We’ve a whole flat, John, you do realize.”

John stiffened slightly. He wasn’t sure he wanted to go back there. Sherlock just squeezed his hand as the lift opened, and she led him onward, guiding them through the wide doors onto the pavement. There was a black car stopped by the entrance, its rear door open. Mycroft himself was climbing out as they approached, and John knew this was no accident. Sherlock had, after all, summoned him for Greg’s sake.

“You’ll never hear me say such a horrible thing.” Sherlock retorted, horror in her voice as she studied her brother.

Silently, he took a set of keys out of his pocket. The locks at Baker Street had all been changed, though John knew he would be checking every window and and lock himself. “Do try not to destroy the stove this time. The restoration expert had to be brought around with smelling salts and a considerable bonus.”

“It’s neither my money nor my concern.” Sherlock climbed into the car after John, and pulled the door shut in Mycroft’s face, but not before John saw some of the concern leave his face.

As they zipped through London in Mycroft’s car, John let his eyes fall closed. So much had happened in his life in the last two years that adding the knowledge that Sherlock had come to New York in the hopes of finding him changed his whole perception of that brief moment he’d spent in America before being back on the front lines of a senseless war. “Why didn’t you speak to me?”

“Oh, John…” Sherlock smiled that smile, the crooked, endearing one, one only he ever saw as she clicked away on her iPhone. “What makes you think I hadn’t already said hello?”

John let the matter fall, determined to search his memory. He would have remembered Sherlock. He knew they had never so much as crossed paths in New York. He would have known the second she showed up in his life. He would have pulled strings, would have done anything to keep in touch with her. He would have, once assuring himself that she was nineteen, left spy craft behind for an evening and took her to dinner and watched her deduce everyone in the room. He would have invited her back to his, and then he never, ever, would have spent another day without the sound of her heartbeat in his veins.

By the time John fruitlessly searched his memories of New York, they were back at Baker Street. It was getting on to six in the morning. Soon Mrs. Hudson would poke her head upstairs with a mandatory invitation to a post-case fry up, and soon Molly would bring MacPherson home where he belonged. But for now, he was faced with the monumental task of going in there and looking at their
flat like everything about it hadn’t changed since he’d rushed inside to find acid boiling on the cooker.

John followed Sherlock up the stairs, watching as she unlocked the door and passed the keys over her shoulder to him, for she never bothered with something as pedestrian as keys when picking a lock or banging on the door was more efficient. They walked inside, and John gaped.

The whole place had been repainted, the stove replaced, the flooring repaired. There was nothing to suggest that anything had gone awry, at any point. Their things were perfectly placed in their haphazard fashion on the table. The only clues that someone had been here were the awareness that the flat was spotlessly clean and the bouquet in the vase on the counter.

Sherlock huffed, “I do wish she would dispense with the floral arrangements. They just die.” She took a look at the riot of colors in the vase, and John, though he knew nothing of flowers, knew them to be rare blooms. “Of course, Mycroft insists, the odious man.”

John resolved to investigate those flowers a bit more. They’d already had the dubious pleasure of decontamination showers before being given clothes from their wardrobes here at Baker Street. John had popped Sherlock’s shoulder back into place, taped her ribs, treated her bruises, and assured himself that her health was not, at least presently, further compromised.

John sank into his chair gratefully. Sherlock, however, had other plans. Perfunctorily, she climbed into his lap, and pressed her chapped and cracked lips to his brow. “John, my John. We survived, and we’re together.” Their eyes met, their gazes held as her weight settled over him, “Don’t forget that, not now.”

John could no sooner have stopped himself from kissing her properly than he could have gotten out of this chair and walked out of Baker Street. Within a moment, Sherlock’s nimble, violinist fingers left his hair to wage war on his shirt buttons. John declared turnabout fair play, and made short work of sending buttons scattering for the second time today, knowing full well that the skittering of Sherlock’s pulse and the rise in the intensity of her rosy blush was a harbinger John rejoiced in noting. Whereas many of their previous encounters had been rooted in joy and happiness, this was fire and gasoline, and an absolute inferno of want and need and passion.

John watched emotions, sensations, dance across Sherlock’s expressive face. He wondered how he could have ever thought her dispassionate or closed off from the world. Her body was as warm and magical as her soul, and fought with his control to have this moment with her as she was, in her brilliance and wonder. She was electricity personified, even when she breathlessly scolded him for thinking too much. He had no way of telling her that the only thing he was thinking about was the way she wasn’t cataloging her physical and physiological responses to his touch, the way she had thrown herself fully into feeling and being entirely in this moment with him. He had no way of finding the words to describe to the textures of her skin against him.

Sherlock’s responses were more musical than he had ever dreamed, though he did his damndest to swallow her cries with the firm press of his lips and tongue, simply because he wanted to make the absolute most of what they had in this moment. Their pulses thundered in tandem, and John grinned as he realized that they had likely instituted a post-case ritual far more satisfying than shooting the wall, screaming at one another in hushed voices so as not to upset MacPherson, and watching crap telly.

Sherlock read his thoughts easily, and laughed musically, her tongue darting out to taste the sweat along his clavicle. John thought now might be a good time to start going through the periodic table, but his eyes and resolve were held captive by the gentle way Sherlock kissed the scratch her zipper had left along his wrist.
When John took notice of the fact that blunt fingertips were digging into deltoid muscles and he yanking Sherlock’s lethally tight skinny jeans down even further as though she wasn’t still quivering with aftershocks, his higher functioning kicked on and he exhaled raggedly. This chair, while featured heavily in a great many of his more lurid fantasies, was hardly the ideal location for anything right now. “Sherlock?”

“Yes, fantastic idea. Brilliant.” Sherlock’s blue eyes glittered, as she paused and stared into his gaze very intently, more memorization that deduction. A heartbeat passed between them, punctuated with yet another breathless kiss.

“Take me to bed, John.” Sherlock declared, on her feet and kicking off her jeans before John could process that she was gone from his lap and her knickers were purple, as well as being tissue cotton against his fingers.

Before John could so much as blink, Sherlock was stumbling on trembling legs toward her room. John laughed, wondering just which of them was taking the other to bed. In the end, such distinctions hardly signified.

John got the words out before his resolve failed, knowing that if he didn’t do something to alter the course of events, they’d end up back where they’d started. “We have to talk.”

“No, you want to talk.” Sherlock corrected, all wild hair and naked flesh, “So talk, then.”

John couldn’t help but kiss the fine indentations on Sherlock’s freshly realigned shoulder. There was only the faintest bruising and swelling to indicate her pain or the trauma of the last day. “I just want to make sure you—”

“Are you attempting with any level of seriousness to furnish me with what is colloquially known as the sex talk, John?” Sherlock took in their present location, and the twist of her eyebrow seemed to say that it was a bit late for all that, “I do assure you that I did have a nanny, and while Molly may project a certain primness, she is in fact very sexually open and was more than willing to furnish me with information that my nanny neglected to provide.”

John slid his hand up Sherlock’s hip, feeling the gentle swell of her unabashedly feminine form under his fingertips with great reverence. “Well, actually I wasn’t, but I’m glad to know that wasn’t left to Greg and Mycroft.”

“Do not spew nonsense, John.” Sherlock considered her words, pulling the sheet that had ended up between them away, to more fully settle against his chest, “Actually, please do. I will debase you of your antiquated notions. I find myself in possession of considerable goodwill towards you at the moment. I do wish you wouldn’t squander it.”

“I haven’t antiquated notions, Sherlock.” John replied, wondering how on earth this woman, who was brilliance and light made flesh had ever decided that he was worthy of her, “I’m simply saying that there are factors at play here that need to be openly discussed.”

“I am shocked. You are a highly educated medical professional, and here you are, embracing patriarchal notions of sexual innocence.” Sherlock couldn’t quite muster up the proper tone of indignation, and it was enough to set John to thinking about more pleasurable activities. Her voice was a bit hoarse, but it was nothing a cup of tea wouldn’t fix. “I am well, John. You’ve never hurt me, and you certainly didn’t now, and I won’t have you all twisted up over meaningless social constructs.”
John knew that if he had taken care not to hurt her physically, he had not been so careful with her emotions in the time they had been living together. He needed to apologize. “Sherlock. Don’t romanticize me. I have hurt you, been incredibly blind to your feelings, and—”

“I was flattered by your insistence that you needed to remain with Sarah.” Sherlock replied, brushing her fingers through his hair with heartbreaking tenderness, “It’s rooted in your subconscious.”

“I beg your pardon?” John asked, reaching out for Sherlock as she rolled over and found her feet.

John glanced at the clock, and cursed under his breath. He had to get to the surgery. He peeked out the window, and noted the press hanging about their door, hoping for a quote. MacPherson would be back any moment, and John did not want Molly to find their clothes all over the flat and neon signs that pointed to impassioned lovemaking everywhere she looked. He wasn't being circumspect for himself, but he knew Sherlock to be a very private person. She would want time to catalog things in her Mind Palace before discussing anything with Molly.

Sherlock dragged the top sheet off of the bottom of the bed, and proceeded to use it like a toga as she moved off to the loo and started the shower before replying. Dropping the sheet, she climbed in and began to speak, “It hardly concerned me. Not only were you woefully sexually incompatible, you dated her largely because you felt you should do. It had far less to do with heteronormativity than you think. As I said, I found it reassuring.”

After doing a bit of tidying, John threw their clothes in the hamper near the bathroom sink, and figured Sherlock’s huff was permission enough to use the shower she was abandoning. “I don’t understand that at all.”

Sherlock sighed, and looked at her mussed curls in the mirror. “Oh, there’s no hope for it after that shower this morning, never mind your fascination with my hair. MacPherson and I are going to have my hair attended.”

Sherlock swanned out of the bathroom, muttering to herself about a lack of conditioners on offer in decontaminating showers. John called out, “Communication is very important, you know!”

John was drying himself off and throwing on the clothes that a sneaky Sherlock had left on the toilet lid when there came a knock on the door. John heard Molly’s happy farewell to MacPherson, and MacPherson’s nails skittering on the hardwood as he accosted Sherlock, happily woofing and jumping around.

John finished buttoning his shirt just as Molly was heading off, needing to get to the lab. MacPherson looked none the worse for wear as he sniffed the great many new scents in his home. Then again, Molly was easily one of his favorite people, and Toby was his buddy.

Within minutes, Mrs. Hudson popped her head round their door, declaring that breakfast was ready with a very knowing look on her face. Sherlock clearly chose to ignore it, though John did make special note of the faint tinge of blush that painted her collarbone as she ignored Mrs. Hudson to make an emergency hair appointment.

After a hearty breakfast, John stepped onto the stoop to face the interested press. He waded through the few stalwart reporters, and bade them good morning, but said nothing in response to their queries beyond assuring them that their interest was a bit overblown, as there had not been a bomb anywhere near 221B Baker Street last night. John, on his journey to work, began to draft a update for the blog, checked his Twitter, and made provisions for the next month’s bills to be taken from the bank account.
When he arrived at work, they were glutted with the first swoop of late autumn’s colds and bronchial issues. John spent the morning providing scripts for nebulizer treatments and steroids. Over lunch, John ate his insipid pot noodle, ignored the looks of interest from the nurses, and went to address Mr. Frank’s gout. It was simply nice to have a patient who had little clue who John was outside of being his doctor.

As they were finishing the visit, Mr. Frank noted, “I guess I’ll head home and tell my wife all her fussing was for nothing.”

John closed down the computer’s records, and advised his patient, “I wouldn’t say that, Mr. Frank, not if you don’t want to find yourself out in the cold.” John did not add that the man had very much required medical intervention, but Mr. Frank wasn’t the sort to be told that the missus had been bang on the money. Mr. and Mrs. Frank loved to bicker, after all.

“Bah.” The elderly man rose to his feet and donned his scarf, “My Sarah’ll just be glad I headed home safely in all this bluster and ice.”

John paused in thought for a long second, before heading to the next exam room, opening the door, and saying, “Hello, I’m Dr. Watson. How are we today?”

Of course, the evening papers were filed with news of Victor’s duplicity and his death. John was almost certain his father would be bringing some kind of spurious suit, so he left a message for their much beleaguered legal professional, and tried to keep his head down in the London crowds. He was spotted twice on the tube, and accosted in the Tesco Express. John felt that he was rather aggressively hounded for getting the milk, boneless chicken breasts, and some garlic, but what did he know?

Sherlock was the proud owner of freshly cared for curls when he came into the flat. There was paper taped up on the wall, and various chemical reactions made plain in various colors of ink. “The third one on the left isn’t properly balanced.” John noted, setting the groceries on the counter and petting MacPherson in greeting.

Sherlock made an inarticulate sound as she slashed more letters and subscripts on the butcher paper. John figured she might eat if he put dinner in front of her, and set a skillet on to heat while checking MacPherson’s log.

He’d just been out, and probably wanted attention. John engaged the dog in happy chatter, and put chicken on to sear. Sherlock was, John realized, upon quick study, testing the various compounds in MacPherson’s vitamins, if her experiments were anything to go by in deduction. He was due for the vet in a week, likely she wanted to have her list of questions ready. The poor vet had learned the hard way to just clear his morning for the three of them.

Sherlock turned away from her work promptly on schedule, and fed MacPherson before sitting down to a plate that had been waiting for her for less than two minutes. John considered that a gift, really, because he hadn’t honestly been expecting her to eat. Sherlock chewed her broccoli carefully.

John sipped his water, growing faintly curious under her exacting consideration. “What?”

“Would you care to read my notes?” Sherlock asked, and John knew that she was talking about the thick book in the box on the coffee table, “I am amenable. It would likely answer some questions you have with clarity.”

“I just want to know what you care to tell me.” John refused her offer. Really, he didn’t feel any need to invade her privacy. She had grown, changed, and though he was glad to know anything she
felt she wanted to share, it was important to him that it came from her.

“I am not typically forthcoming.” Sherlock replied, before catching MacPherson going after her markers sneakily, “MacPherson, markers are not a sound part of a canine diet. Cease in your quest to ingest plastics and ink.”

The dog lumbered away to his bed in the living room, and stared forlornly at the objects of his affection as John replied, “Whatever you think I need to know is what I need to know, Sherlock.”

Sherlock studied him, and John knew that he’d just turned this discussion into something of an experiment. Adoration and desire sparked low in John’s belly as Sherlock smiled. Confusion joined them, though, when she simply sipped her tea, and revealed, “My middle name is Sarah, John. I have been known to use it as an alias.”

John speared some cubed chicken, and dragged it across his plate, soaking up a bit more soya sauce. “It’s pretty risky to use your own name as an alias, Sherlock.”

“I was not the one in danger at the time, John.” Sherlock returned. Underneath their banter, John was quickly and carefully decoding what she was saying, though he was having very little luck in contextualizing it. He knew that she was referencing the danger of his work, and had one question he needed to put to rest. “Please tell me you weren’t in an active war zone.”

“No, never.” Sherlock affirmed, “I was at the edge of one, once.”

John filed that away for later consideration. In turn, he offered up something she neither knew nor had deduced about him over the course of years, “My cadaver in Uni was a lorry driver by the name of Ross White. I kept a notebook of things I learned about him during the term. When I figured out that he had a Nan in care, I went to see her a few times when I was out that way.”

“You sent flowers to her funeral.” Sherlock paused, and tilted her head in consideration. “Why?”

John did not need to expound on how he was never supposed to have ever used details he’d picked up from the corpse to learn his name, nor was he to ever become personally involved with his story. And yet, he had used his ability to, in Sherlock’s terms, deduce to do just that. John felt no shame over it. It simply wasn’t something he had ever told anyone.

John thought for a long second, “It seemed the right thing to do.”

Sherlock deduced him for a single second, and nodded, reaching for her mug of tea. John fleetingly hoped she’d gotten enough fluids today. It was extremely easy to become dehydrated in the winter, and tea was a diuretic. Sherlock huffed fondly.

“Dehydration promotes wrinkling, too.” John noted, “It’s why people who smoke and drink too much tea and coffee tend to have skin like leather.”

“Oh, do shut up.” Sherlock retorted, “Your feeble attempts towards manipulating me into self-care are asinine. Appreciated, but entirely asinine.”

John grinned.

They passed the evening in companionable silence. John took MacPherson for a run, blogged, and pretended not to watch the trashy show Sherlock was decidedly not watching. He considered it a win
when the bowl of ice cream he’d pressed into her hands was mindlessly consumed before MacPherson sniffed at the dish.

Before he fell asleep, John considered the changes in his life that the last week had brought about in the most mundane ways. He now had a side of the bed, the dog snoring on top of his feet, and Sherlock within centimeters of him. Poor MacPherson put the breaks on anything amorous, which was just as well because they hadn’t actually slept in a few days.

John’s sleep was deep, and calm. He woke in the dark, to the sound of a pen moving against paper next to him. He cracked an eye to make Sherlock writing down a composition with fluid movements.

Before he could express surprise she noted, “I went to boarding school, John. My roommates were horribly attached to a sleep schedule. I can do everything in the dark except my hair.”

Somehow, in sleep, John had made sense of various facts he’d come across over time. John knew something with blinding, calming clarity. “You were at Landsthul.”

Sherlock paused, and set aside her pen and pad on the nightstand before replying, “Yes. I was at Landsthul.”

John was absolutely gutted that she considered that night to be the worst of her life. He could not imagine what it had been like for her, not one little bit. Somehow, he pictured her sitting at his bedside, rattling off facts that would impress upon him that he had no choice but to survive. “I’d like to hear about it. Right now, though…”

Sherlock pressed herself against him, the darkness heightening his awareness of her touch. “Ask Lestrade.”

John understood that Sherlock was trying to help Greg. He was the sort that needed to talk things out over a pint, and John knew that Sherlock was giving him permission to do just that with her brother-in-law. “Right now, my primary concern is for you.”

Sherlock’s breath tickled John’s ear. “How is that any alteration from your normal orientation? I’m well, John.”

John felt her grin against him as he reached for the hem of her entirely extraneous camisole. “Someone who didn’t know the earth goes round the sun should not be quite so smug.”

“Why not?” Sherlock retorted, pausing in tossing the offending garment over her head, “Your world revolves around me. That’s more important than heliocentrism.”

John’s heart paused in his chest as he turned and found Sherlock beneath him. There was nothing but truth in that statement. He’d intended to contradict her, just to hear her laugh, just to rile her. Instead, John gasped into Sherlock mouth, and celebrated that truth.

Nothing could shake John’s sense of rightness, not the media swarm, not the kid who’d vomited on him at the clinic, not the spilled coffee on the tube. Sherlock had once again told him that he was still experiencing the chemical highs of a new relationship, but as she’d said this in the midst of boiling entrails and an ensuing argument about health codes and basic human behaviors, John quite doubted her explanation.
Tonight was his pub night with Greg. His mates had their own schedule, but he and Greg had found over time that they met once every other week, and it was a habit they had cultivated. John started their rounds off, as it was his turn, and ensconced himself in a corner with Greg, keeping an eye on the entrance as they talked about everything and nothing for a good while.

John looked over his pint to Greg, who looked like utter shit. “It’ll help if you talk about it.”

“To you?” Greg took a swig of his beer, and made a face. “How, exactly?”

“Look, if you really need me to do it, I can compartmentalize. I may not have a Mind Palace, but I have my ways.” John replied, knowing that he had some of his skills left, and would never hesitate to use them, “I’m not pushing you, but you can’t go on like this, and maybe, just maybe, I might get it. Sherlock thinks we should talk.”

“I don’t want to fuck anything up for Sherlock.” Greg blinked steadily back at John, and John understood the glaringly obvious subtext easily. “You think you know, but you cannot possibly imagine how much she loves you. It would break you.”

John said nothing. He wasn’t going to spout off to Greg about the inner workings of their relationship. It wasn’t the type of thing you talked about like two idiots in University. In the first place, Greg was as good as a father to Sherlock, and in the second place, their emotions were private. The world was interested in their private affairs, and that alone made John even more protective of their privacy.

Greg began to speak, “Sherlock made a habit of observing you. I only know of the events that made it back to Mycroft. At fifteen, she observed in a cafe in Brussels. At sixteen, she watched you ship off and didn’t speak to anyone for a week. She became an expert on the war in Afghanistan and Iraq within days, and made a fucking olympic sport of snatching Mycroft’s briefings until he simply had copies forwarded to her.”

John wondered how that information made sense, knowing that Sherlock had no idea who the PM was. Then again, he’d never asked her what she knew of the war, and he wasn’t about to do so. She had made it clear on several occasions that she wanted something to be made plain between him and Greg, though she had told him to come home after, as though her projections had told him he might go somewhere else.

“At eighteen, she went to New York to get away from everything here. She became a debutante when she realized she had not developed the capacity to talk to anyone socially, because she stood frozen in a lift, two feet from you, and couldn’t bring herself to speak your name.”

John gaped, forcing himself to swallow his beer before doing so. “She told you that?”

“In other words, naturally.” Greg admitted, “She said it behooved her to learn various soft skills for the Work, for cases, but it wasn’t hard to discern that she was taking a scientific approach towards learning to get out of her shell a bit.”

“I…” John knew that from earliest childhood, Sherlock had been educated by example in terms of sociability, and been quite contented to do the logical thing rather than the expected thing. However, it had never occurred to him that she had made a scientific study of social behaviors. Then again, doing so was really only logical, at least from Sherlock’s worldview. He could hardly imagine her speed dating.

Greg grinned, “Well, she never did learn a new skill by half. And if she was going to learn to be social, she decided to learn from the best. She did make a few friends, but none eclipsed Molly.”
John supposed women that performed autopsies together bonded. Sherlock and Molly had a uniquely profound bond that wasn’t traditionally apparent, but was forged of iron.

Greg’s grip on his glass changed. “John, are you sure? What I’m about to tell you…”

John knew where Greg’s concerns were rooted. He wasn’t exactly known for committing to women. In the time Greg had known him, he’d barely dated, and the stories his mates had told about Three Continents Watson hadn’t exactly painted a flattering picture of John as a partner. What his mates had said in Greg’s hearing hardly assured Greg that anything with Sherlock was more than an aberration.

“I’m not backing out on you.” John promised him, focusing on Greg’s emotional distress rather than assure him of anything regarding his relationship with Sherlock. Those sort of assurances were hers and hers alone. “You’re not alone in this, Greg.”

Greg ran his hands through his hair and studied John for a long second.

“Mycroft got a phone call when you were shot.” Greg revealed, “We waited. We were certain you were going to die, and Sherlock was in fucking Vienna. I had watched her grow into herself, grow more confident, grow into a young woman, and I knew that your loss would decimate her.”

Greg took a swig of his beer. Personally, John wished they had something a little harder for this discussion. It was probably better that they didn’t, since John rarely drank. He had a family history of alcoholism, after all.

“Then, and then, we got a call that you had crashed in flight, and they were rerouting you to Germany.” Greg continued, “I was the one who called Sherlock and told her that...that…”

John asked a simple question, just to keep Greg moving along. He knew how easily somebody could get trapped in a memory, and he didn’t want that to happen to Greg. “What did she say?”

“Told me to send a fucking plane.” Greg recalled, “I don’t know that she recalls what she said, because she was rattling off medical facts, statistics, started talking in three different languages. Her Mind Palace was in disarray for a minute or so.”

Greg’s voice dropped, grew thicker, “And then, she stopped. She stopped. It was like a wall had come down, and she was a tower of steel, a laser beam of purpose.”

“Mycroft had a lot of work to do. I won’t bore you with the details. What I will tell you is that she begged the nurse to see you, treated the fucking Church of Scotland— or whatever the fuck they call themselves in the States—chaplain with kindness, and let Mycroft deduce her, just to sit by your bedside and hold your hand.”

If this revelation should have shocked John, it didn’t. He didn’t know what he felt in this moment. He only knew that so much suddenly made sense. He only knew that their was air in his lungs because Sherlock had moved heaven and hell to be with him. He had nearly died several times, but something about his time in the American hospital on the proverbial edge of a war zone had ensured his survival. Sherlock had ensured his survival, and no one would tell him any different.

“The nurses told me later that her voice was magical.” Greg’s voice was clogged with tears, “And then when Mycroft tried, in his own way, to break the news that you would live, she said nothing. She simply refused to let you die. When he told her that you would be discharged, that you would never be a trauma surgeon again, she…”

Greg looked vacant and grey. John’s training took over, and he knew that he was asking Greg to
face something that had deeply shaped him, deeply traumatized him.

“It’s over, Greg, and we’re all okay.” John told Greg what he knew Sherlock had intended him to impart when she’d insisted upon this topic of discussion. He knew that she had asked him to talk about this with Greg for the simple reason that he would, and could, help Greg lay some demons to rest, “You’re not back there.”

“She cried. She sobbed. I will never forget what she said that night.” Greg whispered, “She said that she wished it had been her, that you were the very best of men, that deduction was nothing in the face of what you did to make the world a better place.” Greg visibly shuddered, “And I held her as her knees gave out from under her on that hospital floor, and she sobbed like her soul had been ripped in half, because something you loved had been taken from you.”

“My God.” John breathed. He took a long moment to collect himself, and revealed something to Greg. This reciprocity was important, and he hoped it would help Greg to hear it as voicing it helped him, “When I woke up before transfer, there was a nurse there that told me I was safe, that I was going to be okay, that I was going home to my wife.”

“And I tried to remember if I had been working an op, but I couldn’t remember anything.” John searched his memory, “She told me that Sarah had a lovely voice.”

“Sherlock stayed on base at Rammstein until you went to Birmingham.” Greg told him, draining the last of his beer, “Naturally, she followed you to Birmingham until you followed her to London.”

“She worked at Queen Elizabeth.” John confirmed, no longer wondering if the small things that had seemingly just happened were coincidence or something bigger.

“Got herself fired for watching over you.” Greg took one last look at the untouched food between them, “She never told me the details but that I know.”

“She got me a new psychologist the day I’d decided to end it, and had the means to do it.” John told him, knowing that the time for secrets was past. “I’d written the note, everything. That same day, they hauled me down to the psych’s office, and I was given some vague explanation that I was now working with Dr. Phillips.”

Something about the rapidity of that intervention had convinced John to try and let his fate play out.

“That sounds about right. Mycroft went and stuck his umbrella in the whole mess, but she was remarkably happy about getting canned after weeks of an inquest.” Greg replied. “After that, she came down to London and focused on her caseload. Mycroft…”

Was a sappy git, though John would never reveal that knowledge to his husband, who clearly knew it well enough. “Decided enough was enough?”

“Basically.” Greg agreed, rising and adjusting his own coat and scarf, “He sent you that invitation to Trooping the Colour. Sherlock went ballistic. She said we were forcing you when you were vulnerable. She never once manipulated your free will, though I will admit she did…arrange a few things in your life to her satisfaction.”

“Meaning she helped Harry get sober, arranged for various governmental inquests during the war…” John reached for his gloves where they were stuffed in his pockets, unwilling to reveal more private
interventions. “I should thank her.”

“Are you kidding?” Greg blurted as they headed for the door, out into the wintery night, “She’d just glare and put salt in your coffee.”

John laughed, his breath escaping his body in cold puffs, “Are you alright, Greg? You’re welcome to come with me and walk MacPherson.”

Greg shook his head, “Thanks, but I’d rather not freeze. Did you get a chance to look at the file I sent?”

“It’s pinned up all over the flat.” John assured him, “And I heard discussion of an autopsy tomorrow morning.”

“Great.” Greg replied, hopping up into the car that had appeared as though summoned. “See you, then.”

As Greg’s car moved off towards his home, John took special care to wave at a CCTV camera or two that tracked him home and around the park. After all, bedeviling Mycroft was a noble occupation.

The news of their relationship broke in the week between Christmas and New Years. They’d been spotted looking rather cosy, John supposed, and their pictures had been plastered all over the papers. Sherlock had clipped the headlines and had them couriered to Mycroft. It rather did beat a chocolate cake.

On the third day of such coverage, Sherlock created a remarkable blaze in the kitchen sink. John came into the main room to see flames popping in the sink, and cried out, “Jesus Christ, Sherlock!”

“This morning’s speculation was spurious, and unfit for anything but kindling.” Sherlock declared, her sleeves barely avoiding catching fire. Nearby, MacPherson was wearing safety glasses and rolling around in discarded sheets of newsprint.

“Sherlock, the glasses are meant for you, not the dog.” John sighed. It was too bloody early in the morning for this drama. He was of half a mind to put something on the blog just to shut people up, but everyone who needed to know they were together had known for some time.

“MacPherson likes them.” Sherlock declared, adding more newsprint to her blazing fire. John wondered if he should cook his breakfast there or on the stove, not that he had time for anything more than tea and toast, “Do not stifle his individual preferences, John.”

John shrugged, rummaging around to make a cup of tea and a slice of toast, “You do you, mate.”

MacPherson abandoned rolling around and growling at the newspaper that had so offended his mummy, and sniffed hopefully at John’s raisin bread and butter. John glared gently at the dog, who proceeded to take a running leap and slide into his paper horde, glasses firmly on his face. “When he chews that, I’m not cleaning up the messes.”

“Why are you so irritating this morning?” Sherlock tended her fire carefully, actually encouraging it.

John ignored the sass in her tone, and studied her over the top of her mug.

“Do cease in the direction of your thinking.” Sherlock grinned, “There are more pressing matters to address than your passing thoughts of intercourse.”
“If you say so.” John abandoned his tea, late for work already, and shrugged on his coat, “Please try not to burn down the flat.”

Sherlock had already tuned him out. She was muttering under her breath in some mixture of angry French and Italian. John hoped whatever she did in revenge was something he could observe, because he did rather enjoy her vengeful moods.

John patted MacPherson, and trudged off to work. He’d barely made it down the stairs when his phone began to blow up. There were countless tags, pings, and notifications on his phone. John steeled himself and opened up the news apps.

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, earning himself a colorful telling off, as he stared at the pictures that were above the virtual fold. Somebody had gotten shots of them from last month, after the Christmas party Lestrade threw for his team. They all had a great time, and it had been a welcome period of joviality after a couple of rough cases.

And so, there they were, on every front page in London, walking together to their flat in the soft glow of the streetlights. Naturally, the pictures that took center stage were the ones that featured Sherlock Holmes, her back pressed to their front door, reaching behind her to open the door as John picked her up and—

Well, John had been there, and all he had to say was that they had been inside and upstairs in the next thirty seconds, and Sherlock had been wearing dark tights. So yes, her legs were almost around him in the last shot, but it wasn’t as though anything had been going on, not really, at least in that respect. She’d just been a bit knock-kneed, picking her up had facilitated getting inside.

John groaned, and shoved his phone back into his pocket, ignoring all of the texts.

Right. It only looked like they were thirty seconds from having sex on their doorstep, and that was a generous estimation.

Fuck.

John made his way to work, ignoring the looks of the nurses, and the radio coverage he’d overhead that were going on about the sexual compatibility of a woman in her early twenties and a man in his thirties. John had pretended not to notice anything around him, and looked to Sarah, “Busy morning, I suspect.”

Sarah sighed, and John knew that the stressors of trying to balance facets of his life were not helped by the nosey parkers showing up at the clinic for non-medical reasons. “You know, we’re going to have to figure out a way to weed out people who are coming to see Dr. Watson and people who are making appointments to see Dr. Watson.”

John paused, and let his pen still over the paperwork requiring his signature, “I’m sorry, Sarah.”

“Tessa’s back from maternity leave, John.” Sarah reminded him, her resolve overriding her genuine concern for him, “When she’s settled, we’re going to have to evaluate the feasibility of keeping you on as often as you are now.”

John took in the lines on her face, and knew that this announcement distressed her. John decided in a split second to make this easy on her. Sarah did not deserve to shoulder the burden of people coming here, making appointments, and then keeping them for non-medical reasons. Sarah had done a lot to accommodate him, and he would ask no more of her.

“Would I be putting you in a tough spot if I finished my shift today and went on my way?” John
asked the question, and read the truth in the relief Sarah tried quickly to hide, “I’ve heard of a few openings, and this might be a good thing for everyone involved.”

“You can count on a splendid reference, John.” Sarah agreed, quickly enough to tell John that she did not want him to back out of this decision, “You are really a good doctor.”

John finished his shift, thankfully without any intrusion of anyone interested in his Sherlockian escapades, though he did have to turn off his phone to avoid it buzzing like mad in his pocket. When he bade everyone farewell, he tried not to be personally offended at how relieved they all looked.

He met Sherlock in the park, to let MacPherson blow off some steam and burn off some excess energy that came with being a consulting canine without an active case. John threw the ball, and told Sherlock that he had resigned his post. “I’m not sure what I’ll do next. I just hope it doesn’t make the fucking papers.”

“It won’t.” Though she had no real way to make that promise, John believed her. Something blazed in Sherlock’s eyes. “It’s clear, despite my occasional musings to the contrary, that you need a post as a doctor.”

John took the slobbery ball from their dog, and considered it as he replied, “Well, I might be home a good while until I find something.”

“That is unacceptable.” Sherlock declared, MacPherson flying after the ball that was arcing through the air, “You will grow increasingly depressed and angry, and our discourses will devolve into arguments, biting silences, and angry sex. None of this is permissible.”

“Well, what would you have me do, magic up a job?” John retorted, her projections hitting far too close to reality. He’d been without a job for less than an hour, and already he was fixated on what he might do in the morning. “I can hardly go on interviews with everyone in London talking about how often we have sex.”

“Men in committed relationships are more likely to be hired than single men.” Sherlock informed him, “Now is not the time for emotionalism.”

“What are you going to do?” John snapped, frustration blooming in his veins. How like her to think there was some easy solution to a problem. How like her to totally disregard anything that got in the way of her goals, even reality. “Swoop in with some solution?”

“Well, I was going to tell you about a List-Serv Molly was nattering on about earlier today, but now I’m just going to tell you that your fragile grasp of your own masculinity is not becoming.” Sherlock’s eyes glinted, and she looked every inch the warrior queen the press made her out to be when she shoved away so hard that John had to blink as she strode off, collected the dog, and threw the tennis ball at his head.

He barely ducked in time. “Oi!”

Sherlock didn’t look back.

John cursed roundly as he went after the goddamned ball.

After a few seconds, he felt like an absolute cad. Sherlock had only ever tried to help him, support him, be there for him. And yet, he had thrown everything she had ever done for him in her face because he felt powerless right now. That wasn’t okay, it wasn’t fair to her, and it wasn’t something
he intended to let fester between them.

John strode quickly through the crowds, and found Sherlock and MacPherson making their way quickly. He fell into step beside her, “Look, that wasn’t okay.”

“No, it was completely unacceptable.” Sherlock agreed, “I am not a joke. I am not a mooning girl. I am not a silly child running after you in a desperate bid to earn your affections. Everything I’ve ever done, I did because it was the right thing to do.”

John wished he had half of her certitude, her confidence. He wished he could simply not give a shit about anything other than the truth. “It’s been a shit day.”

“That’s not my fault.” Sherlock reminded him, “As I recall, the encounter that has captivated the minds of others was entirely consensual, and therefore to subconsciously blame me is neither fair nor logical.”

John realized that he had been blaming her, but really, none of this was any more her fault than it was his. It was simply a bad situation, and blaming each other didn’t really help. “I know.”

“Your position at the clinic hardly made efficient use of your expertise.” Sherlock continued, “You took the job because it suited you. Despite your over-qualification in every area, you chose to be there. This awareness will assist you in your consideration of open positions.”

John knew that now was not the time to discuss the massive amount of privilege in that statement. Though Sherlock spent a lot of time with impoverished people, she did not understand what it was to need to work so as to have food on the table. “What you’re saying is that anywhere that hires me is lucky to have me.”

“You’re John Watson.” Sherlock nodded, as 221B came into view, “The only person you should ever go cap in hand to is unlikely to be ever found working in the medical arena.”

John hid a small smile at that, knowing full well that she spoke of herself. “I’m still sorry you got fired.”

“I’m not sorry you quit.” Sherlock declared, staring down the road, looking confidently into a future he himself could not see but trusted to be there because she alone saw it.

John tried his best to take Sherlock’s advice to heart over the coming weeks, and tried to keep a handle on his perspective. He interviewed at a lot places. The hospitals rightly demanded a set schedule he could not offer, and struggled with the awareness that the private clinics that were so eager to have Dr. Watson on staff wanted more of the minor celebrity and less of the doctor on staff than he was comfortable providing. Last week, he’d nearly walked out on an interview that had the gall to mention Sherlock as though she were some kind of arm candy to boost the awareness of the practice. Presently, he was itchy in the suit he’d had to wear, never mind the bloody tie.

He took it off and balled it up in his bag before he reached the end of the block. He was content to leave the sharp dressing to Sherlock, as he had neither her legs nor her gravitas.

John took in the homeless shelter and felt the spark of annoyance that rose when he thought of the doctors he’d spoken to just now, who were such big-headed fools that they were totally unaware of reality. John was walking past the shelter when he heard a voice call out, “Hey, Doc!”

John paused, and saw Skinny Pete heading towards him, coming down a ramp and hastening towards John, weaving through a queue to get to his side. “Morning, Pete.”
Pete slowed to a hasty stop in front of John and took a big bite of his doughnut, the filling dripping onto the ground between them, frosted over once more with the fresh snow. “Have you had breakfast? They’ve got a pretty good spread on, if I do say so.”

“Looks it.” John noted that people from all walks of life were queuing up in British fashion for the line to continue on through so that everyone could have a hot meal and a place to eat it on a cold morning in late February, “I’m really alright. Thanks, though.”

“Aw, alright.” Skinny Pete accepted his refusal affably, “Hawker was wanting to see you. He’s got that thing, you know?”

“His face is bothering him again?” Hawker was another member of the Network who occasionally popped round for medical care, alarmingly distrusting of both clinics and anyone in authority. Hawker had never had his wisdom teeth out, and his dental care was nonexistent. Though John was not a dentist, he knew an oral infection when he saw one. “You know, Pete, I’ll take you up on that cup of coffee.”

“Good man, Doc.” Pete returned, leading him nosily and confidently in through the exit.

John followed Pete down a hallway that was glutted with people, as they walked through a wide room decked with tables facing a canteen line.

Pete made no secret of his mission, confidently slapping his friends on the back and alerting them to his companion as they passed. John was stopped three times to chat, and watched as people put aside their meals to see the Doc. John knew he was going to be here awhile, and hoped he could at least talk some people into going to A&E or at least a clinic.

“Hawker, Skinny Pete tells me your mouth is in a bad way again.” John addressed the sickly man with the swollen face, and wan expression.

“Aye, Doc.” Hawker spoke slowly and carefully around his compress, likely in a massive amount of pain. John thought the flannel he was using to be very similar to the ones at 221B, but he wasn’t going to ask. He wasn’t sure how much Hawker cared to make their connection via Sherlock known, and that was entirely Hawker’s choice. “I’m out of the antibiotics you gave me last.”

John would bet the contents of their savings account that Hawker had not taken them as directed, and had rationed them when he felt pain, meaning that the infection had come back with a vengeance. John conducted a cursory examination, glad that he carried a small kit with him most everywhere, though it was geared toward more Sherlockian emergencies than anything else. “You’re going to need that abscess drained, an oral rinse, and antibiotics, mate.”

“You know I hate dentists, Doc.” Hawker eyed him speculatively, “You wouldn’t happen to know what you were on about in there, would you?”

John considered his options as he looked around the packed room. Hawker would sooner die than see a dentist. John couldn’t leave him to suffer, and while technically he shouldn’t touch the situation with a ten foot pole, he knew he was going to help Hawker. It was useless to pretend otherwise, even for a second. “I’ll see what I can do about borrowing a corner of their kitchen.”

“You’re a gem, Doc.” Hawker replied, holding a hot rag to his swollen and angry round face, “Thank you.”

“No promises.” John reminded him that he had said he would try. However, Hawker seemed to have this sense that anything John said he would try to do, he would succeed at doing. John blamed The
Lady’s mystique for that, as her Network all thought she hung the moon, not that she paid an ounce of attention to lunar cycles.

As John made his way towards the kitchen, he was stopped another five times. One person wanted him to look at a scrape, another had a rash, and so on and so forth. John answered what he could then and there, and told the others that as soon as he saw to the people who had asked for a moment of his time first.

John was terribly sorry to bother the staff, who was incredibly busy. He was redirected twice to the site director. It took him a minute to find her in the bustle and din. Janet was a stern woman in her mid-fifties that had been on the front lines of the war against poverty since before John Watson had been born, and she knew it.

“I’m sorry to bother you—” John began, but he was cut off quickly. She didn’t spare him so much as a glance as she continued on with her work.

“If you’re here to volunteer, go talk to Frank.” She was busy mixing up something in an industrial sized pot over a huge stove, “If you’re press, go talk to the patrons. Just stop talking to me, I’ve got two seconds to myself and we’re out of porridge.”

John made his point quickly, knowing full well that she was a squadron leader if he ever saw one. “My name’s John Watson. I’m a GP. One of my patients needs care, can I borrow a burner to sterilize a few things?”

She paused, and John saw a flick of recognition cross her face. He steeled himself for some comment, but all she said was, “Clean up after yourself.” She reminded him, “There’s a kit in the cupboard, use whatever you like.”

John accepted this marching orders as someone else called out, “Janet, any news on that porridge?”

“We’re good?” Janet asked, and stated, before stirring the oats one more time, and declaring them finished, began to lift the pot.

John got on with his objectives, carving out a corner at the back of the nearly empty prep kitchen behind the service kitchen, using a burner that plugged into the wall and was meant for coffee in order to put a chair nearby and use the counter to set up a workspace. After a minute, he left the water on to boil with his tools and fished the tiny bottle of oral rinse out of his bag. He kept it there for various reasons, but was glad to have it for professional ones in this moment.

John had done more dangerous work with much less supplies, and so he set to, feeling quite able to put Hawker at ease. The pus from Hawker’s gum was quickly drained, and was not as bad as it had looked upon cursory glance in the canteen. John thought the infection had come from a lack of flossing and brushing, and told Hawker so, adding that if he wanted to avoid dentists he needed to make his teeth a priority.

They talked about strategies for tooth care while homeless, and John gave away his extra toothbrush. John scribbled off a prescription for both an oral rinse and antibiotics. Hawker might not take them, but John gave him a sound lecture on their importance, and told him to get word to Sherlock if he had any trouble. He arranged for the shelter to pack him up some extra food to take with his pills today, and knew that would continue.

On and on this went. He treated a few burns, what looked like an old knife wound, splinted a sprained wrist, gave out a handful of tampons, and diagnosed two cases of bronchitis as well as one case of walking pneumonia. There had been a queue of about ten people, and John was cleaning up
his area when saw the director approaching with a mug in her hands. John knew he was in for it, as he had rather commandeered the woman’s prep kitchen, “I know that got a bit out of hand.”

She simply thrusted the mug in his direction, “Are you looking for a job? If so, I’m looking for a doctor.”

“I thought this was a food kitchen…” John blinked back at her, wondering how he had just stumbled into a job offer, “Do you employ—”

“Dr. Watson, I oversee a staff of two full-time caseworkers, three part-time assistants, a housing advocate, a volunteer coordinator, a veteran’s advocate, and a few other people.” Janet replied, “The place doesn’t look like much, but we serve upwards of 300 meals a day, and offer service coordination to a smaller number of clients to assist people in finding and maintaining sustainable housing and employment. We serve everyone who walks through our doors, and I haven’t been able to keep a doctor in the place, not for want of trying.”

John digested her words, “I suppose you see a lot of do-gooders thinking they’re the answer to homelessness, and then they get burned out and leave?”

Janet nodded. John thought she suspected that he, too, had been around the block a few times. “We deal with a frustrating lack of supplies, a continual lack of communal support, long hours, low pay, and frustratingly little to show for our efforts.” Janet confirmed, “So, are you in for a two week trial?”

John felt compelled to warn her, “I don’t know if you know, but I bring a bit of baggage along with me.”

“I’m not above using the press that’ll camp out on my door to raise awareness of the suffering right under their noses so long as you’ll do the doctoring.” Janet replied, “And frankly, what you do on your off time is your business, right down to the crime solving. Anyone who says otherwise can do KP duty.”

“That’s remarkably forward thinking.” John commended her, “In that case, I’m happy to accept. Do you have a clinic space?”

“We’ve got a bit of one.” Janet informed him as he finished cleaning up and closing his depleted bag. “We’ll do what we can to help you outfit the place, but this isn’t NHS, Dr. Watson, and we haven’t its funding or backing. The people who seek us out are often without leave to remain or are people who massively distrust authority figures for heartbreaking reasons.”

John had spent time working with refugees and asylum seekers before, both here and in the Army. He knew what he was facing, and was undaunted. John knew that a great many of his patients would come from word of mouth, once the Network spread the word.

John followed her along, back through the main corridor, earning introductions to the staff members and clients that stopped Janet no less than four times in her attempt to get to the rooms she had set aside for medical work. Right near the vestibule, there was a simple wooden door that had once held a sign. Unlocking this simple door, Janet showed him into a small set of rooms. John could see that his predecessor had taken much of the equipment with him.

John was now in possession of a desk, a few chairs, a filing cabinet, and a locking case for supplies. His supplies included a box of cotton swabs, a few other random bits and bobs, and an a cupboard that he didn’t want to explore. The space was clean, but clearly disused but for some storage in the front waiting area.
“Well,” John liked the look of this challenge. “This has a lot of potential.”

“Are you always this optimistic?” Janet laughed. “Optimistic or deluded, either works. We’re happy to have you, Dr. Watson.”

“John, please.” John asked her, “I suppose we’d better discuss hours and salary.”

“I’m Janet, then. The only one who calls me Mrs. Murphy is Mr. Murphy when he’s in a strop.” Janet replied, “Look, as far as I’m concerned, the whole medical side of things is in your hands. You’ll get a line in our budget outside of your salary, will be expected to manage your own budget and your own practice. I’ve enough to do and I need a self-starter on this, John. Still want the job?”

John nodded, and they headed back to Janet’s office to discuss the particulars.

John took inventory of his stock, making a mental list of the supplies he would need, as the basic tools he would really rather have to begin a practice. A lot of more modern tools walked a line for him between a want and a need, and so he made another mental list and decided to discuss them with Sherlock.

He found Sherlock staring into her microscope, and MacPherson sleeping on the sofa. Before he had so much taken off his coat and hung it up, Sherlock was deducing him, “You’ve a job, not at the private clinic. Somewhere else. You saw Skinny Pete, and treated several injuries, enough to deplete your kit and lead to significant creasing in your clothing.”

John allowed himself to be deduced, watching Sherlock’s smile light up her face. “Anything else?”

“You were in an industrial kitchen.” Sherlock rattled off a few more facts, including the fact that Janet had an orange cat, and quickly came to the conclusion that he had been providing medical services there, “I will allow you to tell me your news in your own fashion, so as to preserve communication and allow for emotional bonding.”

John moved the clean laundry off of his chair, and sat down. “I’ve my own practice, after a fashion. A lot of people without leave to remain or who have refugee status or who are homeless can’t or won’t use the NHS.” John explained his meeting with Janet, “And so I’ve got a job. It pays almost nothing, but I’m trying not to worry about it.”

“I hardly think you need to worry about money.” Sherlock replied, “You know most of your salary will go into outfitting and supporting the clinic.”

“How do you feel about it, Sherlock?” John asked, knowing that the Work had just taken on another dimension in their lives, “Seriously.”

“It suits your need to empower the poor and disenfranchised, and allows you to apply medical skills that you learned in the Army that are not widely accepted as the norm in traditional civilian settings.” Sherlock affirmed, “It allows you to largely work independently, but remain a member of a team, both of which you deeply value. I think it suits you admirably, makes good use of your competencies, and meets the emotional needs that attach you to your career.”

“It was lucky that I saw Skinny Pete…” John murmured.

“Oh, wasn’t it?” Sherlock noted, reaching for her mug of tea in a very telling fashion, “Though I should remind you that the Universe is rarely so lazy.”

“Did you arrange it?” John asked, not fussed either way, placing the flannel that Hawker had been
using as one of their own.

“I had nothing to do with your wandering into the shelter.” Sherlock replied, and John believed her. “Though I will admit I encouraged your interview this morning despite the fact that I knew it would end badly.”

“Did Hawker drop over this morning after I left?” John asked. His gum had been in a bad way, and he couldn’t imagine him not coming over, not when he knew their door was always open.

Sherlock nodded, “I offered to give him a sterilized needle, but he said would keep his eye out for you.” She flopped down on the sofa, cuddling up to the dog, “Do you know what this means?”

“No…” John ventured, kicking off his shoes and wiggling his finally freed feet into the threadbare carpet, “What?”

“Think, John, Think!” Sherlock demanded happily, patting the dog and putting her other hand beneath her chin, “Now hundreds more will have access to my services. Oh, think of the cases you’ve given me, you wonderful man.”

John chuckled, “What, a one-stop shop for anyone’s medical and deductive needs?”

Sherlock hummed gently. She was already in her Mind Palace. John swiped her tea cup, and found it steaming. It was a bit too sweet, but he drank it anyway, gazing fondly at Sherlock and MacPherson. Quickly, he snapped a picture he would never share with the world, and began a blog post that he would happily broadcast everywhere.

Today was an interesting day, in quite a lot of ways. In the first instance, Sherlock perfected experimentation on newsprint, and used the data (shared on The Science of Deduction) to compose a letter to the editor pointing out how much ink and paper had been wasted printing up rumors of a pregnancy here at 221B, as well as other salient facts about the illogic in printing such unfounded speculation. That’s largely all we have to say about that particular violation of both our privacy and good sense, and we will not be responding to any questions regarding our personal life at this time. MacPherson enjoyed rolling around in the discarded newsprint and being an able assistant, as you will see in the photographs below.

In other news, after several weeks of being a full-time Boswell, I have accepted a new post to begin 1 March. I will be opening a medical practice under the auspices of House of Hope, a social service agency focusing on empowering people experiencing homelessness in London run by Janet Murphy. As you might expect, medical care will be provided, no questions asked, and fees by donation only. More information will be released through appropriate channels, but Sherlock and I are very excited to be undertaking this new venture. Sherlock is, of course, consumed with her Work, but has informed me that there is no better position for a former Army doctor whose partner has a propensity for injury and a profound dislike of hospitals herself, though she rather does enjoy deducing the consultants. Her confidence can only bode well for the Work at the clinic.

January and February seemed to be rather slow for cases, if the amount of experiments here has been anything to go by, though we have had several private clients engage Sherlock’s deductive talents in the past few weeks. We spent a few nights dashing through London, several afternoons at a lovely library wherein MacPherson was a hit with the toddler set, and one morning trying to avoid falling into the Thames. There are worse ways to spend time, though we did have to deal with the pervasive scent of wet dog after MacPherson became enamored with the river. You can see a bit of his reactions in the video below. It’s well worth the watch, though I’ve been reliably informed that I’m soft on the dog. As he’s currently hogging the sofa, and using Sherlock as a pillow, I say: pot meet kettle.
A Watsonian Interlude

Chapter Notes

There will be more, but this ending is for those who would prefer to get off the train at this juncture.

Karen Matheson is one of my top five artists. It's why I linked her version.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cafe Cafe

Brussels, Belgium

Age: 27

Objective: Tea

John Watson lived a life of objectives. He had to always have an objective in the front of mind, in order to survive, in order to save his patient, in order to make it through the day. He sometimes felt adrift with the enormity of the weight on his shoulders, how one decision had led to another. He’d never expected to get in so deep, but he supposed that’s what happened when you signed your life over for Queen and Country.

John had been to this cafe only once before, but he’d kept it in his back pocket for moments like this one. It sometimes helped to have a place to go where he wasn’t working and this place was banal and nondescript enough to be overlooked on a busy street. The small space was easily scanned for safety, and the crowded occupancy meant anything anyone said was not likely to be overheard without equipment John would probably spot.

He tried to keep a very stark line between anything professional and what little he had left of himself that simply belonged to him as a man. The boy who’d left Chelmsford with big dreams and a place at King’s College was nothing like the man who sat unobtrusively at a cafe, unable to turn his brain off for one single second. He’d joined up because he’d never fit in once they’d moved for Mum’s work, and he’d thought he could belong in the Army, thought he could make a difference for people. That John had felt like he was powered by rocket fuel, and years later, he was tired of seeing and just wanted to let the engine idle once in a while.

Everywhere he looked, he saw people for who they were, could read in an instant their emotions, their perceptions, as though it was written clearly across their face. It felt like a bone-deep knowing he couldn’t shake or ignore, though he couldn’t always say why he knew something. Sometimes, he simply wanted to be able to see a person at face value, happily accept the masks they presented to the world. It was painful to know that he was the odd man out, never able to fit in quite as easily as the others, always having to be two steps ahead simply because he had been five steps ahead and taught himself to backtrack, to blend.

The Army had made fine use of that, John knew, fast tracking him and pushing him through his training in hospital, at Broomfield, UCHL, and Bart’s. He’d not broken, not even when they’d expected it, warned him that this sort of clandestine roles had decimated lesser people. He’d risen
above and excelled, ignored anyone who said they were expecting too much to ask him to be both soldier and doctor. Fuck them all. He’d proven himself, and he was going to do everything he knew he could do. People were counting on him.

He picked up the menu card, and his hand shook. John stilled his involuntary show of fatigue quickly. He hadn’t slept in something like three days, and now, on his one day ‘off’ he was trying in vain to keep a normal schedule so that tomorrow wouldn’t be so rough. It was going to be difficult. He simply had to compartmentalize and consider tomorrow another new start, and hope that he could land on his feet. He needed to stop thinking, just for five bloody seconds, and he’d hoped a cafe stuffed with people to observe would distract him.

It did little but remind him that he was an alien, little but remind him that he wasn’t here on holiday. Vaguely, John wondered how he’d ever feel fully qualified, knowing as he did that his training was only one part of his life. People called him doctor, but he felt like he was playing make-believe sometimes, when someone was gushing blood and he was the only thing standing between that soldier and death. He wished he were back in the tents sewing someone up. At least there he felt he was doing some good.

If it wasn’t the Army weighing on him, it was knowing that he had friends like Mike back home who were slowly establishing themselves in civilian careers as consultants. Mike’s wife was having their second baby, for fuck’s sake. John was career Army. He’d probably end up married to a fellow officer in his forties, though why the hell he was even thinking about marriage irritated him. The only functional marriage he’d ever seen was Nan and Gramps, and they were the exception to the rule, insofar as John could tell.

He was so fucking tired that his mind was jumping around, filling in the gaps between information he picked up about the people around him, from the lawyer on holiday who’d done cocaine last night, to the French waitress three months gone with pregnancy, though she was unaware, to the American tourists blathering on in loud and overbearing tones about ketchup on french fries. John wanted to go over there and tell them that normal people put mayonnaise or vinegar on chips, but he supposed his mild irritation with American exceptionalism ran slightly deeper than what people shoved all over their fried potatoes.

Then again, he was a member of the British Army, and his opinions only mattered insofar as they enabled him to do his job. So what if he was pissed at Fergus for fucking up that op because he’d been thinking with his dick instead of his brain? John should not blame the entire nation because it had produced one spectacular knobhead who wanted to be Sean fucking Connery with an Alabamian accent.

John watched as the waitress finally approached him. She had a shy look on her face and was already carrying a tray for another table, but made a point to stop here first. She was eyeing him speculatively, and John found that it had been a long time since he’d seen a woman who wasn’t either a patient or a fellow solider or doctor. John wasn’t interested in a good time with a student on gap year from Manchester, though she had a penchant for older men who were mysterious due to commitment issues. Hence, John concluded, the gap year, when she couldn’t take the plunge on going to her final year Uni. In the first place, he hardly had the time or inclination for a girlfriend, and in the second, he didn’t have the energy for a shag.

John smiled ruefully to himself, knowing she was about to ask what he wanted, thoughts of an assignation leaving her face. On the outside, he looked like every other young man in Brussels on holiday, but on the inside, he was old and wizened before his time. Harry was probably howling with laughter if she wasn’t deep inside a bottle right now. If only she could see him now, bloodshot eyes, gun in his trousers, and preemptively turning down a no-strings down decent lay via body
“I’ve got your order here, sir.” She set the tray down on the vacant table next to him and unloaded a plate of lemon biscuits and a huge pot of tea.

John started at her happy manner. They were fucking British. He was supposed to be nice to the waitress, who was doing him a favor, not the other way round. “I didn’t order—”

John paused, and realized that this order was something she was glad to be doing. He was glad, if suspicious, to have the scent of real tea filling his nostrils, cutting above the myriad of scents around him.

“Oh, someone stopped me, told me you’d want PG Tips and lemon biscuits.” She smiled, “It’s all taken care of, with their thanks for your service.”

John’s eyes narrowed. He was certain he hadn’t been followed. Before he could ask anything, the waitress was putting a folded note on the table and swaying off to deliver the glass of water and allergen list that remained on her tray.

Carefully, John unfolded the paper, wondering if he’d walked into someone’s op or had a hit out on him. It wouldn’t be the first time either of those things had happened to him, after all. He was completely in the dark right now, though, and wouldn’t have any contact until he blended into the people sliding onto military transport in the morning. He was John Watson, and he had very little protection beyond his own skills and will to be alive in the moment.

The paper held a jaunty Union Jack, and black ink that implored him: Be well, please.

John studied the handwriting. It was female, feminine, but not feminine in a way that spoke of a woman desperate to prove her gender performance to the world. The paper, though clearly high street, was thick enough to hold the weight of a fountain pen’s ink. It was as though she had found it, considered it nondescript, and decided it would do.

There was no number, no name, no directive, no warning, no code. John propped it up on the edge of the teapot and put to, figuring that if there was a bullet headed his way on his day off, he might as well enjoy his last meal. John stared at the note as he ate, wondering who would have sent it, who would have paid for his meal, and how they had pegged him for a soldier.

Running a hand over his face, John knew it was probably his eyes. Nan had always said he had an old soul’s eyes. She was a bit airy fairy about things, but she meant well and she always tried to give him space to talk about what he was going through across his life. There was nothing he could do about them. He knew he’d hardly seen war, and had only been working with oversight as a doctor, but he knew his choices in life had changed him. He would never lose the soldier’s glint in his eyes, not even when humbled by the random gift of a stranger, who expected nothing in return.

John couldn’t remember a time in recent memory that a person had done something just for him, not because he was Elspeth’s son, and he could hear people talking now, even years later. Poor Elspeth, divorced and a cancer diagnosis. Such a lovely woman, raising one dutiful son, old before his time that one was, and that tearaway of a daughter. She’d come to no good end, that saucy one. Did you hear she moved south to give the girl a new start? Johnny has a place at a good school, so there’s that. Chalk and cheese those two were, you’d never think they’d shared a womb.

John bit into a biscuit to avoid thinking of his piece of shit father, who had wasted no time in remarrying after the divorce and living a perfectly dull life somewhere, with no thought to the twins or his first wife, even as she was in the throes of fucking cancer. Last John had heard, Hamish
Watson was living rather comfortably. Mum was doing alright, she got by, but Hamish had never done right by her, and Mum refused to touch his pay.

This stranger had done this for him, and in a single instant, John felt slightly more understood and less alone in this vast universe. They would never know his story, his successes, or his failures, but he felt strangely accepted in the delivery of his favorite tea and biscuits. This person had no way of knowing any of these details, but that tiny twist of fate reminded John that he was a part of something bigger, something grander. He wasn’t a religious man, but he valued meaning, and he found personally valuable meaning in the kindness of that gesture that was merely enhanced by the details soothing some aching part of soul.

He didn’t know why, but he hadn’t been able to pick out the patron that had sent him this meal that reminded him of home. Everyone he’d glanced at hadn’t fit the profile, though there was an empty table just out of his line of sight that called to John. He’d not noticed who was sitting there, but he knew his benefactor had been in that seat before slipping into the crowds, unnoticed but not unappreciated. Though it should have put him on alert, it calmed something within him. Maybe, just maybe, he didn’t see everything. The reminder that he was not always as analytical as he had been trained to be reminded John that there was more to him than

Maybe there could be some comfort in the unknown, rather than just living in this vortex of needing to know everything just to survive. This musing didn’t mean that he was going let his guard down or make stupid choices, but it simply served as a reminder that there was a bigger world, a better world, out there beyond him somewhere.

John folded the paper and stuck it in his billfold. Maybe it was a map of sorts to that world, and maybe, one day, he’d find it, map in hand and eyes wide shut. John sighed. He was so fucking tired he was deluded. Jesus Christ, he probably had a concussion with the direction of his thoughts.

Physician, heal thyself.

Age: 28

Glasgow Airport

Glasgow, Scotland

Objective: Buy a Mars Bar

John was shipping out. He didn’t the send off, the military transport, the sense of unity in traveling with the pack, at least this first leg. No, he had a bit of a stop to make, and so allowances had been made, so long as he kept things close to the vest. He’d tried to slip away from Nan’s unnoticed, but Nan couldn’t bear the thought of him going alone, not with Mum so newly passed on, hardly cold in her grave in the family plot. Fucking cancer.

John tried not to blame himself. It was fucking futile. Maybe if he’d been home, he would have seen the warning signs, but maybe if Harry hadn’t been making friends with the bottle as was her usual modus operandi, Mum wouldn’t have ignored her recurrence for too long. Mum had always ignored her own needs, and Harry had never paid that tendency any mind, not when it meant there was more of Mum to take.

John did not want to think about his mother, cold in the ground. He did not want to think of there
being nothing left in Chelmsford save bad memories and the one bright spot that had been his education. He needed to get away. Afghanistan was as far as he could go from the hellhole that was his home life.

John gritted his teeth and tried to shake off his sister so he could go buy a fucking Mars bar, get on the goddamned plane, and go to fucking Afghanistan. “Harry, please don’t make a fuss of this. We knew this would be my life when I joined up, and I’m glad I did. The Army suits me.”

Harry was trying out sobriety once again, motivated by guilt and duty. She wouldn’t be able to stay sober, not that he blamed her. She hadn’t found her own reasons to dry out, and she and Mum had always been close. He’d never had that closeness with Mum, largely because he’d always felt he had to take care of her, and he’d never felt right going to her with problems when Harry did that enough for the both of them.

“I know. Mum was so proud, Johnny.” Harry said, her very tone of voice ripping through him like fucking glass. Harriet had never felt pressure to preform or conform. Her intelligence was her blessing and her curse, but empathy was not her suit. John couldn’t help but reach for the bag at his feet in an effort to hide the pain that crested over his face.

Harry was his twin. She knew. She knew. John didn’t really have the words. “John, I’m sorry.”

Harry had counted on him to make all the arrangements, him to bury their mother and comfort Nan and Gramps, who’d just buried their only child. She’d let him settle Mum’s affairs, him be the one to decide to pull the plug on his own fucking mother. The goddamned nurse had called him doctor when he’d done what was required, when he’d just wanted to scream at his sister that Elspeth had been his mother, too. He still wanted curl up in a ball because he’d watched his mother die. Harry had been allowed to cry. John had held a fucking stethoscope in his hands, because it was easier for Harry, because she counted on him, not some stranger.

She’d kept Mum’s things, and cried like a little girl needing comfort, never once asking her own goddamned brother what he felt as their mother was lowered into the ground. He’d learned Hamish’s words, screamed at the top of his voice, well. Watsons don’t cry, and they don’t ask why. Harry had never been there for him, not when it counted.

John wanted to scream that it was a little late for sorry. He did not offer his sister a hug, nor did she ask for one. He couldn’t reply. He couldn’t absolve her, because to absolve her would be to absolve himself. He wasn’t ready. John looked at her, a face that mirrored his in only the smallest and most significant ways.

Then, he shouldered the rucksack marked Watson, and headed for the security line. Once in the doorway, he swore he heard someone call out, “John…” in a broken, shocked, sort of voice that felt like a plea. Instantly, he turned around to look for Harry.

He turned around to wave, shocked to his core at such an honestly emotional expression of feeling from his sister, who had shouldered their traumas by internalizing emotions John had subverted into acts of caring. John’s eyebrows rose encouragingly as he sought out his sister, only to see that she was collecting her things from the chairs and hadn’t said a word in his direction. Still, she caught his wave and returned it hopefully.

That was something, right? The sound of that voice, however, stayed with John. He forgot its cadence, its intonation, but he did not forget the way the possibility of having someone there to miss him made him feel, even if it was only fantasy to make up for a lack of letters from anyone else but Nan and Gramps.
He’d been in the field for about three months and two days, six hours, and forty-seven minutes when a letter came. John stuffed it in his pocket and forgot about it until he was halfway through shoveling some cottage pie into his sunburnt face. Murray was chatting with Gupta about something or other, and so John felt comfortable opening the letter at the table.

Dear Johnny,

I haven’t written. I’ve tried. It’s hard to hold a fucking pencil when you’ve got the shakes, mate, and to look at paper when the lines make you want to chunder. No. It wasn’t the lines that made me want to vomit. It was my addiction.

Ninety days sober, John. Ninety. I don’t feel like I’m holding on by the skin of my teeth this time. It’s a choice, every moment, every second, but I finally feel free enough in my own mind to make that choice. I know what’s at stake. You. Clara. Nan. Gramps. Mum, even though she’s not with us, I know she’s here. How much of my life I’ve missed. There’s so much I regret. I’m weighed down by the realization that I checked out a decade ago and went through the motions for so long. What a hell of a fate for a certified god damned child prodigy, Harriet Jane Watson. At least there’s still a brilliant Watson twin out there, doing some good.

I’m going to be in-patient for a long time, John. I’m not ready to be out there, the doctor and the staff and I agree. There’s no shame in that, right? I feel guilty, being here at this place, when you’re there. The food here is scrummy, and they treat us like people, individuals. I’m not the smartest girl in the room all the time, and it’s nice. This place is a listed building, and the girl in the next room is so famous even you would know who she is, not that you pay attention to pretty women. I guess I do that enough for the both of us. I’m just…so thankful that even at my most drunk, I never betrayed Clara. She’s the light in my universe.

I don’t know if you will write, and I don’t blame you. I’ve talked about it in session. I’ve done a lot wrong, John. You and me, we used to be a team, and I fell down on the watch and left you to be the solid ground that held me up. If you write, I will reply. I didn’t know what it was to be sorry, before. I’m sorry now, and maybe one day soon I’ll be able to let go of the pain, but right now I need to learn how to feel pain and cope with it without drinking to avoid, escape, and numb myself. It’s hard as fucking hell, and you are the bravest man I know. I just wish I had had the strength to tell you it was okay to feel. Maybe one day we’ll figure out how, huh? Stick it to the old man, yeah?

I love you, John Hamish Watson. You are the Pugsley to my Wednesday, Eomer to my Eowyn.

XXOO,

Harry

P.S. I’ve included a bunch of info about where I am, though of course you know all about it. I’ve also included my contact information. Maybe when you have the time, you could call? They’re willing to work with the timezones.
John put the letter away, and finished his dinner, ignoring the good-natured inquires. His mates shut up when he told them it was his sister. They didn’t know she was struggling with alcoholism, but they did know that John loved his sister. He’d never said, but it was part of him.

John wondered how the hell Harry was paying for a place like this, one of the most cutting-edge rehab facilities in Europe, but he figured that Mum had seen sense and taken out a policy. Though there had been no help with her funeral costs, he was glad to see that Mum’s last gift to them both had been the chance to have each other once again.

Two weeks later, another box arrived for John. Like the first one that had arrived shortly after he’d gotten here, it was largely unmarked, save for his details, and seemed to have arrived through diplomatic channels. It came jumbled up with the mail, but it was clearly in better shape, and the stamps didn’t match international postage. It was clearly a governmental box.

He’d gotten a matching one before, but there was no lulling him into complacency. John, therefore, opened the thing only after assuring himself it had been scanned and sniffed a few times by the bomb dogs. He’d lived through enough to know one could never be too careful.

John lifted it, wondering how the hell Nan had managed something like this, because her church group had only just sent them a package with a few board games and hard candy. He had no idea who would send him something, and wondered if was supplies he’d requested upon multiple occasions. Seeing as how they had trouble even getting shampoo, John wasn’t so hopeful. John carted the box to his desk, and sliced it open with a pair of shears there amid paperwork.

Inside the box were a myriad of practical items, unscented nappy wipes, foot warmer snaps, and various and sundry items that somebody had probably asked around and determined soldiers needed. John checked again to make sure it was addressed to him when he spied tins in the bottom of the box, nestled amongst paperback books that could be shared. Between the two metal tins, there was a entire carton of candies to pass out to the kids, and so whoever had packed this was a pretty thoughtful person.

“Hey!” Murray declared, coming over to see what John was up to, privacy being a nonentity in their circumstances, “A package?”

John simply nodded, and handed Murray some water-flavoring powder packets. Jaffa cakes were nestled in one corner, along with some hobnobs. Murray, however, peered into the box and grabbed a tin. Inside, John noted, were homemade biscuits, nestled properly in food grade paper. This tin was oatmeal, proper oatmeal biscuits, clearly having been made with real butter and oats.

Murray was already biting into one. Being the best trauma nurse around got him a free pass, John supposed, “Jesus Christ, Watson. Who wants to have your babies?”

John nearly dropped the paperback book he was holding, books that had almost instantly grabbed his attention. These few books were clearly well loved books covering several genres, science fiction, technology, classic literature. John was dying for some escapist literature. These had clearly been taken care of, though there were no names inscribed in the front, much to John’s disappointment.

“What?”

“Mate,” Murray was already biting into his third biscuit. John resisted the urge to wrestle the tin away, “A bird put that package together, and nothing says ‘I want to be Mrs. Dr. Watson’ like managing to get fresh biscuits to Helmand province.”

John’s eyebrows met his hairline, “Gina’s mum manages it.”
Murray took a glance into the box, and waggled his own bushy eyebrows in a way that was supposed to be sexual but simply came across as absurdly comical. “I don’t think Gina’s mum also manages proper chocolates, now does she?”

John grabbed the chocolates. He wasn’t sharing those. He just wasn’t. How the hell had his mystery benefactor managed to stuff so much in one ordinary box? Were they experts at physics or something? They simply had to have fantastic spacial reasoning skills, for not a centimeter of space was wasted. “Don’t you have some paperwork to do?”

“I know a ‘go away so I can read my letters in peace’ when I hear one, Captain.” Murray chortled, tipping his hand jauntily, “Do give my regards to the missus, and if she’s so obliged, tell her I’m cool with polyamory.”

“She’s not.” John blurted, totally uncomfortable with the idea that someone who would read Dawkins and Heyer and made biscuits would ever be a passing fancy for Murray. John quickly amended that statement, before Murray could spread such news about, “There is no woman, and I’m certainly not married.”

“Sure.” Murray agreed, “You shouldn’t look so horrified about the idea. They don’t call you Three Continents Watson because you fuck everything that moves, John. You’re the marrying type, you just don’t know it.”

John scoffed. He had plenty of encounters, just none that mixed work and sex. He was in a position of leadership, and he needed to set an example. Actually, it had been a long while. At least two years. Jesus fucking hell. “No, I got that stupid nickname because—”

“Three continents in one day in some kind of life saving surgical record…” Murray omitted the details purposefully to try and rile John, stole a crossword book, and wandered jauntily towards the doorway that led into the surgery space, “Still think you shouldn’t have told me the truth. I liked you better when I thought you were a whore.”

“Murray, if you’re going to be ridiculous, at least let’s agree not to slut shame. I’ve also had sex on those continents, as well. I just don’t run my mouth about it.” John gave into temptation and tore into one of the chocolates as Murray laughed, knowing full well there was no real censure in John’s tone or Murray’s teasing.

Once he was alone, John looked around at the stuff on his desk, and declared, low, under his breath, “It’s like Christmas…”

Despite John’s best efforts and considerable resources, he was never able to find solve the puzzle of his mystery benefactor. He traced every chain of thought he could, but hit dead ends over and over and over. He even attempted to pull a ‘return to sender’ but the box merely appeared on his desk, this time with a note on top that read, For Dr. Watson in flourishing, masculine script that was very ornate and seemed quite like a warning.

Every once and a while, a new package would arrive. John got something of a reputation for his packages, and this one was slightly more accurate. People came to him for a bit of home, and John was pleased to offer what he might, knowing that it was a critical component of medical care. He did his best to thank his benefactor in various ways, but countless pleas for information and letters of introduction were never delivered, or answered.

John got several database warnings for digging, and figured that if fate was kind, he’d meet his benefactor face to face. He’d long ago figured out that she was female, of roughly the same age as John, liked historical and classic literature, and likely was educated in science and the classics.
She was one to care for her books, and when envelopes came for their return, John began exchanging them with her in some sort of a lending library. How she sent them without noting an address or even a name through diplomatic channels was unfathomable to John, but she did, even though boxes were irregular and grew even more so towards the second Christmas of his deployment.

He worried about her, thought about her when things got quiet or he got tired. He was worried he was falling for a figment of his imagination. He’d combed the books for some indicator, some name or number scribbled in the margins, but there was nothing save the occasional critical remark written in a legible code along the edge of the occasional page, as though she could not help herself. It had taken John six weeks to crack the code she used, and each time, he hoped it would lead to her name.

There was never any name, never any personal interaction, though she seemed more open over time. However, John could not help but feel he was being given glimpses into this woman’s soul. He had to remind himself on several occasions that she was likely married, working in a governmental office, prone to indulging in sweets, and was also possibly gay. Still, it was good to have a friend. Being half in love with someone he’d never met was his own damn problem and he wasn’t going to let his weirdness cloud something good.

Murray still called her Mrs. Watson. John still denied him chocolate at in retaliation. Still, with every interaction, John began to wonder if being able to see all of the things he saw in people, in the margins of pages, in the way she packed a box, was actually a gift. For the first time, in a long time, his ability to see as he did filled him with wonder and joy rather than reminding him of obligation, expectation, and duty.

Age: 30

United Nations Headquarters

Turtle Bay, New York, NY

Objective: Get to Bag End

John still felt like he had sand in his socks, even in dress shoes and not his thick boots. He felt strange in New York. It was weird to be in America, where the war was almost a non-entity in that people went along with their daily lives without fear of bombs and sunburn. He didn’t have to worry so much about watching his cover, but John would have preferred to be in a sandstorm that at the UN HQ. He was never one for much of playing nice, though of course he knew how to do it. He’d been raised with Harriet Watson, after all, and spent his life smoothing over her indiscretions.

There were whisperings of a promotion. John wasn’t sure how he felt about it, but he knew he was in a good place for his career. He was balancing his more clandestine work with boots on the ground efforts in Afghanistan. He knew he was doing good there, and it was there that he hoped to stay. If they were still in Afghanistan when he had the choice, he would elect to remain there.

John arrived and was met by a Miss April Birch, the assistant that would be escorting him to where he was meant to give the speech.

John was not particularly enthused by his obligation to address this council, but he had the real chance to explain to them what the medical and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan looked like
from an Army’s doctor’s perspective. It was not a gift he would squander, not with the knowledge of his patients in his mind. It was intensely driven by both his understanding of facts, but also the implications of those facts.

He’d written his speech, but knew he would end up delivering something extemporaneously. With his memory, he hardly needed notes or preparation, though he had made some out of respect for the august body he was addressing. It never was a good idea to tell people just how intelligent he was, not when it was often it was something he often needed to get out of sticky situations.

April led him through security and through the winding corridors. She attempted to make small talk, not knowing that the silence suited John just as well. “Captain, we certainly welcome you to New York…”

John was too polite to do anything but reply properly, “I’ve not been here in years. It’s changed a great deal.”

April led him to the lifts, and began to talk animatedly about her various haunts that she recommended to visitors. John listened in good humor, wondering if the other occupants were quite as bemused at the idea that he would have time to sightsee. John had a book in his pack, and the only thing he planned to do this evening was check in with his contact and go back to reading The Hobbit.

He found his friend’s commentary adroit and more verbose in this book than any of the others she’d sent. John had the feeling that she had, over the past few months, been opening up in small ways after recoiling for a time. He’d been sent novels in French and German, and he himself had grown bolder, sticking notes and mini-book reviews in between the pages. He’d wondered if her packages were screened for letters, and gotten a bit creative in response to that supposition.

John’s mind was focused when he was introduced, gave his speech, and answered various questions. As he’d expected, he neither needed nor stuck to his notes, though he did make a bit of a show of drawing attention to the fact that he had them. It was good to be a little underestimated, after all. John spoke of various patients, the medical crisis, and provided several talking points for assistance he felt were both achievable and meaningful.

Feeling like a wrung out flannel but somehow invigorated when he was finished, John was expected to hang around for any further remarks. He noted April lingering in the back of the room, though she seemed to be telling him to stay put. John obeyed this directive, though it was not hard to do with many people wanting to speak to him about points of his speech.

John placed some of them easily as notable figures in peace and politics, and they had asked meaningful and careful questions of him. John was rather shocked when Chancellor Merkel privately noted after commenting on several points of his speech, “Captain Watson, you will forgive me for the change in subject, but I am very happy to meet you on a more personal level. I understand we have a mutual acquaintance.”

John was a bit shocked, and didn’t know how to respond. He was not a well-known figure, preferring to keep his reputation confined to the work he did within his service to his country. He was certain he’d never muddied the waters in Germany, but then again, she was the de facto leader of Europe and he’d had a scrape or two in his time.

John was certain she would mention nothing of that, not here, anyway. He simply hid any confusion, and replied, “I see?”

“Yes…” She encouraged, a sparkle in her eyes, “Wilhelmina?”
John could not place a Wilhelmina. She pronounced it in the German fashion, and nothing about the name jogged anything in John’s mind. He thought fleetingly of his friend who sent him books, but although this woman was fluent in German, it was not her native language. He rejected that possibility, knowing that his mind was focused thereon because he just wanted to go read her notes in the margins of *The Hobbit*.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I can’t place her.” John replied, hoping very much that he hadn’t shagged her a few years ago. Of course, that was patently absurd. The fucking chancellor of Germany was unlikely to know any women John would ever be interested in dating, much less talk about him with a woman who wanted to or had been his bed partner.

“Oh.” Her eyes sparkled anew, and John had the feeling that something had clicked for her when she bit down on a grin.

He wisely did not press her on the subject of Wilhelmina. It seemed rather risky, and John was not willing to make a fool of himself by exposing the fact that he did not know someone she felt he ought to know. It did not do to look under-informed, not in his line of work. John made a note of the name, and thought again of his mystery benefactress. Somehow, the name just didn’t fit his understanding of her.

Her face cleared, and she quickly smoothed the whole thing over, mentioning a few people that John did indeed know well enough to claim as connections and even friends. The conversations and conclusion of his duty here moved along and John was led through security by Miss Birch. Soon John was moving through New York back to his accommodations.

His interactions with people today had thrown him through a bit of a loop. He wasn’t sure how he fared, interpersonally. He didn’t know any of these people personally, and he wondered what they would think if he’d told them that his main objective had been to give his speech on behalf of his patients, answered their questions with as much honesty and frankness as he could provide, and hastened away, not to continue on with his clandestine work, but to go back to his tiny room and escape to Bag End.

*Age: 31*

*Landstuhl Regional Medical Center*

*Landstuhl, Germany*

*Objective: Sleep*

“John,” The voice somewhere above him demanded gently, “Squeeze my hand if you can hear me.”

John felt a cool hand within his own, but it was not the correct hand. He knew this instinctively. Whoever was holding his hand was a stranger to him, and for a split second he thought he felt someone tapping morse code along his palm. The sensation faded as pain bloomed.

John was so tired. He just wanted to sleep but his head was pounding and he…something was wrong. Something was not right. John sucked in air, and the voice was again demanding, “Open your eyes, Captain. You’re in the hospital, you’re safe.”

John struggled to internalize her words. He cracked an eyelid, and saw double. John forced himself
to breathe, to take stock of things around him. “‘afe?”

“You’re safe, John.” John saw the nurse leaning over him. She was…American. From…New Jersey. Fuck, his brain didn’t work. He couldn’t even place a fucking American accent with more accuracy than the fucking state. His fucking head was stuffed with goddamned fucking cotton wool. His mouth was dry, and he was pretty sure his face was nearly swollen shut.

Fuck.

John tried to shake his head. He wasn’t asking about himself. His concern was not for himself. He was concerned about Murray, and Escobar, and Pratt, and Jones. McGee, Chambal, Westlake, and Browne. The children. His patients. He wanted to know that the people he was responsible for were okay, that they hadn’t died or been injured because he had somehow failed.

John must have made some sound that clarified his thoughts, because she was rushing to tell him that he had been shot, that according to what she had been told, his actions had saved lives. John didn’t know if he believed her. People always said that, and so he tried to breathe through panic.

The blackness consumed him, yet again. This time, he did not dream.

John woke of his own volition, his waking mind floating the forefront of his awareness. Sunlight slanted into a window to his left. Beeping filled his ears. Post-surgical ward. Where was he? John opened his eyes, and saw a nurse by his bedside, checking his status and vitals.

“There you are!” She smiled, her voice sounding faintly of…somewhere else. Damn, he was down for the count, “Remember, you’re in the hospital, Dr. Watson. They’ve stabilized a few of your fractures, and we’ll have you shipped off to the UK in a snap.”

John took stock of himself, and found that he could not move, nor do anything to sit up. He felt like he was going to vomit, and made that plain in the only way he knew how. “Basin—” he dry heaved, trying to keep everything that was welling up inside of him from coming forth until there was a basin underneath him.

Quickly, the nurse got about her business, helped him to raise the head of the bed enough to hand him a basin. John had nothing in his stomach, but the bile that arose from the pit of his system was disgusting. John knew he had been heavily medicated, simply from the scent of the bile, not that it took and MD and a PhD to figure out that the banged up guy in the hospital bed was on some shit.

Blessedly, the nurse was quiet until he’d finished for now. She took the base and returned in seconds with a bit of supplies, “I can’t give you water yet, but I can at least give you a lemon swab.”

John hadn’t used the lemon flavor since Mum was dying of cancer. He shoved away those thoughts, and used his free arm to raise the head of the bed a bit more, ignoring the rush of pain from the bruising and the broken leg. John had no memory of anything that had happened, but he was a trauma surgeon, and he could extrapolate from his own injuries very quickly.

Shot in the shoulder. Shattered. Broken leg, in two places, compound fracture. He had significant soft tissue, probably some bruised organs. He was relatively confident he no longer had a spleen. He was superficially banged up. John refused to let himself consider anything but the facts of his situation. He was not going to make guesses about his prognosis, not even when they were educated. Based on his awareness, he would venture to guess that he needed at least two more surgeries.

John let his spinning head loll back against the bed. The nurse came back in a minute to collect his refuse and asked him, “How’s your pain level, Captain?”
John had to grit his teeth to get the word out, “Fine.”

She sighed, “I’d saw my own leg off for some relief ‘fine’ or I could probably sleep alright ‘fine?’”

“The former.” John admitted, knowing that he had just requested and would receive a bit more pain medication. In truth, he would probably use a scalpel to remove his whole arm for how bad it hurt. “Thanks.”

“Soldiers really do make the worst patients, as do doctors. Lucky you’re not a farmer or you’d be three for three on the challenging patient lottery.” She replied, and John read her name tag and saw that her name was Jessica. Jessica from New Jersey, John thought blearily. “Try to get some rest. We’ll have your transport orders as soon as you’re stable enough, and we’ll have you home to your wife.”

John chuckled, as she cleaned up after herself and prepared to leave him to rest. “I haven’t got a wife.”

Jessica paused, binning the supplies she’d used to push opioids into his IV line. She looked up at John, and though he was operating at one-quarter functionality, mentally, he saw confusion and genuine concern on her olive-toned face, “Yes, you do.” She insisted this gently, “She was here yesterday, the charge nurse escorted her to you.”

“I’m telling you—” John broke off, not wanting to get annoyed with her damned insistence. “You have me mixed up with another guy.”

She simply nodded, and strode off. As John predicted, she returned with someone who could only be the charge nurse. She had that look of competency and control about her. “Carol,” Jessica began, obviously rehashing their discussion to make it seem like they hadn’t discussed him privately, “Captain Watson doesn’t remember his wife.”

“Because he hasn’t got one.” John inserted, feeling very much like he had woken up in an alternate reality wherein he was some kind of captain with seven children. There was, indeed, something very fearsome about that, in that John knew in the pit of his soul that he was as alone as alone could be.

“None of that sass, sir.” Charge nurse declared, pausing to see the bald honesty in his face, “You really don’t remember Sarah?”

John’s breath froze in his aching lungs. He searched his memory. There was nothing. Nothing. He didn’t believe any of this, but he knew he was in way over his head. He needed information. “Tell me about her, please.”

Carol clearly considered this important. She sat down on the visitors’ chair in his room, and began to explain, “She introduced herself as Sarah Watson. She’s very pretty, in a striking sort of way.” Carol thought better of discussing her looks, likely assuming that like most people, John had a photograph of the person he was supposedly married to somewhere, “She’s got a voice like an angel. Sang to you, sat by your bedside, recited poetry in a very soft voice, but I can see why she captivated you. Mostly, she was just quiet. We gave her as much privacy as we could, but the ward had to be closed.”

John thought this whole thing sounded like someone either come to finish him off, or some kind of fairy story. “Oh?”

“She was British, as well.” Carol added, “She really didn’t talk much to me.”

Somehow John knew the accent had been genuine. His gut knew that, somehow. She was British,
and she hadn’t tried to hide an accent, which meant she hadn’t cared who connected them, who remembered her. She hadn’t thought to put together any sort of cover. It rankled John that as a spy he wasn’t even worth a clean kill.

John thought as quickly as he could, though it took him a moment to get out the slurred words. “Was there anyone she did talk to that's here?”

If there was somebody out to kill him, he needed to work fast. He wasn't sure if the panic was coming from thoughts of his death or the fact that he hadn't died.

Carol thought for a long second, “Well, she slipped away at shift change, but I do think the Chaplain might know something.” She paused for a long second, “I think neurology will want to swing by before you leave, just to make sure your CTs didn’t miss anything.”

John did not reveal that he was generally agnostic. Instead, he claimed his mother’s faith as his own, though it gave it no comfort. Presently, the chaplain came round, a man in his mid-thirties, young and thin, and a soldier. He had puppyish face undergirded by resolve that John had once claimed as his own.

Chaplain Parker did reveal something of note to John, something that stayed in his brain despite the drugs, pain, and exhaustion. “I came back to check on her, but when I heard her speaking so softly to you…I didn’t want to intrude.”

He looked rather sheepish, “I sat down to work on some paperwork and realized that I’d written down what I’d heard. I meant to toss it, but perhaps there is a providential reason I forgot.” He extended a folded piece of paper, “Maybe it will jog your memory.”

John took the paper, and unfolded it. It was a list.

He glanced at Chaplain Parker, who looked faintly embarrassed. “I make lists of whatever’s on my mind before I pray. It's almost meditative.”

Indeed, in John’s tremulous hand, he held a list. The handwriting was irrelevant, but the content revealed much, though John was too drugged and damaged to decode the simple groupings of words.

**Fragment 31**

**A Red, Red Rose**

**To a Stranger**

“The middle one,” John admitted, “I remember.” He didn’t admit that he remembered it from the lips of a lover, let alone a wife, because he didn’t. His Nan liked poetry, and she’d had a thing for Burns. What old Scottish granny didn’t like Burns? Nan would sooner disavow Mills and Boon before Robbie Burns.

“Fragment 31 was recited in the original Greek.” The other man shared, something like hope and thankfulness on his face, “There was more, but I left. I didn’t want to eavesdrop. Somebody really loves you.”

John’s head swam with the image in his mind of someone who knew enough classical Greek to recite poetry from memory. He couldn’t put any of this together, and he was fighting to keep his eyes open as Chaplain Parker left the room. Soon he was out cold on another medicated sleep, list clutched in his hand, his palm itching like the morse code was still being tapped out there.
When he woke up, John found that he had been cleared for transfer and that the second set of scans had revealed no obvious brain damage. He accepted their 'wait and see' for memories that didn't exist and wouldn't resurface. The doctors had spoken to him, but he chose not to dwell on their words. He had a mystery to solve, and that mystery was the only thing keeping him from falling into a pit of pain, despair, and self-loathing.

When he had a chance, he borrowed a laptop, ostensibly to email Harry that he was alright. Just before they loaded him on a plane, confined to a bed with others heading to the US in similar circumstances, John googled what little information he had on the list, barely able to concentrate on the borrowed screen.

Whitman’s words burned into John’s memory, though they were faint by the time he was settled at Queen Elizabeth in Birmingham. I am to wait—I do not doubt I am to meet you again, I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

And there, he found the message that allowed him to settle and face his injuries. Whoever it was, well, she would be back, to end him or save him, he knew not. In the end, perhaps a death from an assassin with a penchant for romance and devotion would be the best thing coming his way.

He refused to admit it to himself, but he liked to think that if there had been a mass hallucination in the ICU at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, that it had been she of the care packages. Of course, that was utter insanity. John chose to believe that whatever was coming his way, that he would know it when he saw it. Whether or not he’d be able to face it was another question entirely.

In time, John forgot but the themes of every interaction he’d had at Landstuhl. He remembered that they told him he had a wife, but didn’t remember exacting details. It was common in trauma patients, he knew, to forget the first few days after a major trauma.

Though everyone at QEHB wanted him to remember anything he could, John welcomed the blackness in his mind and the gaps in his mind, knowing it spared him pain.

Age: 32

Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham

Birmingham, England

Objective: Survive
John was being released today, though he knew the correct term was discharged.

He just didn't like that word right now, for obvious reasons.

He’d spent months on the ward at QEHB and now he was leaving. The late spring sun was high in the sky when Harriet Watson came to collect her brother. She was currently four years sober, and settled into a job as an addictions counselor, finally making use of those degrees she’d earned while deep in the bottle. How she’d managed some of the best schools and hardest courses on offer more than half-drunk was a nod to the intelligence she shared with her brother.

John hefted his own rucksack. It had seen him to war and back and he could carry his own things. “I’m ready, Harry.”

She looked dubious as he navigated the electric doors with caution, so that the cane didn’t slide out from under him on the varying floor textures, “I still think you should come and live with Clara and me for a little while.”

John shook his head as they walked outside, having already done all the paperwork and said goodbye to everyone that had mattered, even some of the dicks in the administration who had treated him like a leper over the last few months, “You know I can’t go back to Chelmsford, Harry.”

She accepted the truth in his words as John hobbled out to the parked car, refusing to allow her to pull up to the door like he was some kind of poor sod who couldn’t even leave this place under his own power. “I know it’s not about me, but I’m uncomfortable with the idea of you being so alone in London.”

John stowed his cane in the back and hop-stepped into the front of her sedan. John waited until Harry pulled out of the spot they’d be using before replying, “I had mates, there, once upon a time.”

“Nan’s lonely.” Harry admitted. Gramps had died while he was in Afghanistan, a sudden stroke no one could have predicted or prevented. He’d wanted to die like that, and John was glad he’d never once suffered in dying as he had watched his daughter suffer, “She’d love to see you going home to the farm.”

John wanted to go home to the farm, but he wasn’t ready. He wasn’t mature enough. He didn’t yet know who he was, nor had he yet cured the restlessness that consumed his soul. “My future’s in London, for now.”

Harry accepted his final words on the matter. She’d matured. She was still a tearaway goofball who got loud and mouthy, but now she did it as an advocate and a champion for those who struggled with her disease. John was incredibly proud of her. “Thanks, Harry.”

“You pulled me out of a lot of gutters and wiped a lot of vomit off of my face, John.” Harry acknowledged, “Thank you for letting me be here with you.”

John knew what she meant. There didn’t need to be words, not really, but he said them anyway. “You’ve only got one twin. Luckily, he’s the pretty one.”

Harry retorted, “Fuck off.”

John felt warmth and closeness suffuse him. For a single second, true hope bloomed with him, and he knew that he’d worked hard to find that feeling again. “I’m thinking about leading a support group when I get settled. Got any advice?”

Harry ventured, as they drove along, “Well, I don’t know. People mostly come for the food. They
stay for other reasons, but they come for the nibbles.”

John reached into his rucksack, and tore open a package he’d put in there this morning after a pitstop at the tuck shop. He wasn’t particularly hungry, but he knew most people would have been, and figured Harry could do with something. His depression manifested as a lack of interest in food, but that didn’t mean Harry had to notice it.

“You daft fucker,” Harry declared, driving one handed to reach over and slap at him ineffectually, “You hid the fucking Tunnock’s!”

John grinned. John doled one out, even removing the foil before passing it over to her, and bit into one himself. “Consider yourself lucky I didn’t eat you in the womb and shut it.”

John remembered this tidbit of personal experience when he was able to begin to lead a peer group focusing on veterans issues. He’d not served with any of the men and women in the group, but they quickly bonded. It was nice to have a space to give back, to feel useful and wanted and vital. He’d remembered Harry’s words of wisdom and brought a treat each week, until someone else had taken up the idea. They now had a refreshment rota.

He’d done his Army training at Bart’s, and they were glad to have him as volunteer, even though they couldn’t offer him a job on staff as a consultant. He was considering locum work, but the idea filled John with apathy. He was trying very hard to listen to his feelings.

He needed a job, and he could no longer pretend to be making it on his pension, not when Harry had stopped by and cried because there was no food in his bedsit. He’d tried to make her see it wasn’t a money thing so much as it was a waste of food, but she was vigilant now. Clara brought food round three times a week with enough portions to feed a platoon, and if John never saw another courgette, he would die a happy man.

Getting involved with the peer support program was tough emotionally, sometimes, but that didn’t mean he hid from it. One evening as he was packing up and returning the meeting room to rights, there came a knock on the closed door. John called out, “It’s open!”

He held two chairs in his hands, and was continuing to stack them when the door opened and a wiry man stepped inside, “John, I’d heard you were back in London.”

John looked to the man, and realized that he remembered him from about six years ago, perhaps a little less. They’d been roommates at Sandhurst for a little while. “James! How are you?”

The bespectacled man came forward to shake John’s hand warmly, “I’m well, John, very well. I heard you were home from Afghanistan and I just had to stop by and say hello. I didn’t think to get your number and give you a ring. How are you?”

John absolved him, “It’s nice to see you.” He didn’t know exactly how to express how he was doing, so he simply said, “I’m okay, Vernet. Every day’s an adventure, or so they say. Nothing much happens to me.”

Vernet’s close cropped hair had thinned a little in the last few years, but he was still effortlessly correct and a total ball of empathy to those who knew him well enough to get past the staid exterior. “I think you might find that will change soon.”

“I don’t share your conclusion, but the optimism is appreciated, James.” John replied, “It’s something I’m learning how to do again.”
“Hope is a thing with feathers.” James returned, “Bit of a daft thing to say, I know, but it comes in its own time. It’s not something to rush.”

They made short work of setting the room to rights, finishing with his work twice as quickly because James had insisted on helping him. When they finished his tasks, they headed out to the lobby together. John tried not to notice how thoughtfully James shortened his stride to compensate for his old buddy with the limp.

They decided to go for a pint, and James’s phone began to blow up about halfway through their first round. He simply chuckled, apologized to John for attending to his phone, and fired off a quick message before setting his phone face down on the polished wooden table. “I apologize. My sister is a bit possessive of what she loves, and consequently considers them off limits to anyone else.”

“Say no more.” John had a sister, after all. “My sister and I are twins. I get it. Harry and I used to quibble that everything we had had to be different, down to the meals we ate and the plates we used. Of course, we were five at the time.”

John lifted his beer, and took a healthy sip. They enjoyed another round, and chatted about everything and nothing. It was good to see a friend again, one who knew him as more than just a solider. He didn’t feel quite so self-conscious around James, not when most of their time at the bar was taken up with his sister’s antics. James was just one of those genuinely nice people that everyone loved, if they were let in past his thick walls.

Jim’s phone buzzed rapidly as the door jingled. John sipped his beer as a shorter man of indeterminate age entered the bar and tried to discreetly approach James. “Sir, my apologies, but your sister has threatened to set fire to—”

John laughed outright, liking the idea that staid James, unflappable James, had a sister devoted to pyrotechnics. “What did you do, mate, use her toaster and leave it on the wrong setting?”

James chuckled, “She fails to understand that as her brother, I have my duties. It’s not my fault some are more pleasant than others.”

John easily surmised that James had, out of concern, stuck his nose in her personal affairs. When James’s assistant headed out of the bar, John took the final gulp of his beer, “I’ve warned off a girl or two from Harry in my time.”

“She’d take of that herself, of that I have no doubt.” James smiled, “But if I have any hope of saving myself a great deal of trouble, I really must go and assure her our brother is a bag of hot air who loves her devotedly and that she has made an admirable choice in a partner.”

Glancing at his watch, John knew that he had to get home, too, if he was to be seated on his lumpy, bumpy, secondhand sofa in time for the phone to ring with Nan on the line. John reached for his cane and came to his feet before they settled their tab and headed out onto the pavement. James offered him a ride, but John didn’t really want anyone seeing his drab bedsit building.

He refused, adding, “Good luck with your sister, James.”

“I’d say good luck to you too, John, but I’ve a feeling you won’t need a bit of it.” James got into the passenger seat of his car, his assistant behind the wheel. “I’m sure we’ll see each other soon.”

And just like that, James Vernet disappeared into London traffic as quickly as he had appeared.

John glanced upwards, noting that one of the CCTV cameras was on the fritz. Oh, well, if he had some kind of tail, at least that would make life more interesting. Who knew? Maybe James was right,
and adventure was right around the corner.

When he saw the package on the doorstep, he knew.

Chapter End Notes

Continue onward if you like domestic, AU, fluff, cases, etc. etc. etc. There will be a sequel. Probably like, tomorrow, or the next day. I'll link it HERE when I name it.

Thanks for reading. I like reviews, and love talking to people about anything fanfic.

End Notes

She knows ALL.

Do you think there is any universe in which Sherlock Holmes would allow herself to be manipulated by her family?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!