A Pox on All Your Houses

by sgam76

Summary

John's hands are accidentally injured by one of Sherlock's neglected experiments, and he's invited to stay with the Holmeses in Surrey while he recuperates. It never occurs to him that it isn't just his hands that need healing.

Notes

Takes place a few weeks after the end of Scheherezade.

This is my first commission, based in the Scheherezade universe, for the lovely KathyG, who wanted John to have some of the Holmes parents' brand of TLC. It was originally going to be a one-shot, but has now insisted that it be 2-3 chapters instead.

Hope you like it, Kath!

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter One

It started on a Wednesday, of course. Bad Things always happened on Wednesdays, at least in John Watson’s experience. Harry coming out to their (violently) homophobic father? Wednesday night. John getting shot? Early Wednesday afternoon. Sherlock jumping off a roof? Wednesday morning. So, when the first intimations of calamity arose (Sherlock abruptly standing, wobbling, and letting out a tiny, woebegone “Oh” before thudding to the kitchen floor in an ungainly heap), after his initial panicked rush to the kitchen John’s first thought was, “Yup. Wednesday.”

His second thought was that he really wished he could’ve reached Sherlock before the detective cracked his head on the kitchen table on his way down.

John shouted for Mrs. Hudson while getting Sherlock sorted on his back, checking his pulse and breathing and putting a flannel over the bleeding gash in the detective’s forehead. The older woman hurried up the stairs just as Sherlock’s eyes popped open and he gazed dazedly around. “Are you going to be sick?” John asked quickly, in case he needed to flip the younger man on his side. Sherlock answered that with a gag, and John quickly grabbed a bowl off the kitchen counter and held Sherlock over it.

Mrs. H. stood wringing her hands in the doorway before taking the bowl from John when Sherlock finished heaving into it. “He’s been poorly the past couple of days, but nothing like this,” she said fretfully.

“Poorly, how?” John said absently, as he loosened Sherlock’s collar and cuffs, noted the heat coming off his flushed skin.

“Well, you know him, he’d never actually tell me he didn’t feel well. But he wouldn’t drink his tea the past two mornings, and he was very peaky. And he kept pinching his nose like he does when he has one of his headaches,” she said, while helping John lever six feet of feverish detective off the floor. Sherlock had become coherent enough to groan but not enough to actually protest such treatment.

John manhandled his friend down the hall to his bedroom while Mrs. Hudson trailed behind, carrying the rinsed bowl just in case. She pulled the covers back and John scooped Sherlock up and dropped him on the bed with a grunt of effort. For such a skinny bloke, Sherlock was surprisingly heavy.

“M’allright,” slurred Sherlock, his eyes already closing.

“Sure you are,” sighed John, while texting Mary to let her know what had happened. She was due in an hour or so anyway—they were still re-working the guest list and figured Sherlock would make an excellent tie-breaker for the ensuing arguments. Looked like that would be delayed another few days, under the circumstances.

While Mrs. Hudson twittered in the background, John fell into Doctor Watson mode, methodically stripping Sherlock down—socks and shoes first, then moving on to the too-tight shirt. He stopped short when he got a close look at the pale skin revealed—pale skin dotted throughout with inflamed spots.

Mrs. Hudson peered over his shoulder. “Oh, dear,” she breathed. “That looks like—“

“Chicken pox,” John finished with a sigh. Fucking Wednesday.
While Sherlock slept the sleep of the miserably ill, John made a deduction, followed by a couple of phone calls. The deduction: not quite two weeks ago, Sherlock and John had investigated a case of a missing nanny to two small children—two small children who, at the time, were recovering from chicken pox. The detective had insisted on speaking with the boys, and John had sat in to ensure that Sherlock didn’t either frighten them or overtire them. It never occurred to him to ask if Sherlock had had the infection, since most adults had endured it by the time they reached their teens. Sherlock certainly never expressed any hesitation. Clearly this was yet another time when Sherlock believed he was exempt from the failings of the rest of the human race.

The phone calls—his first was to Mary, to make sure she wasn’t at risk if she came over. The second was to Mycroft.

The older man sighed, and John suspected he could hear an eye-roll over the phone. “No, John, he was never exposed that I am aware. Because Sherlock was a premature infant, he was kept far away from any potential infection sources until he started school. And his school was always told to keep him strictly away from any quarantined students who came down with minor illnesses.” Mycroft hesitated, then continued. “Is it safe to assume that he has failed to remember his potential vulnerability to childhood diseases?”

“Got it in one,” John said tersely. “Nothing really worrisome as yet, but he fainted a little while ago. It’s a really good thing I was here.”

“As always, I thank you for your care, John,” Mycroft said, formal as ever. By this time, though, John could recognize when Mycroft was being sincere. “Do you require any kind of supplies? If you can text me a list I can have anything needed delivered shortly.” He gave a delicate pause. “Or I can bring him to my home if you prefer.”

John gave a rueful laugh; both he and Mycroft knew that, if anyone was going to take care of Sherlock, it would end up being John. Everyone else was just along for the ride.

And what a ride it was. The next four days were the among the more unpleasant ones John had experienced in the last several years (well, excluding the truly awful periods, of course). Sherlock, healthy, was often difficult and exasperating. Sherlock, truly ill, was a whinging, tantrum-throwing, unmanageable nightmare. The highest fever and vomiting, luckily, was fairly short-lived. But then the itching started. And the whole “don’t scratch it” mantra that had to be repeated at five minute intervals virtually around the clock, to the point where John made Sherlock wear his leather gloves all day. And the “shoving a six-foot toddler into a medicated bath”, twice a day for three days. And the long-lasting weakness, which meant that Sherlock wasn’t strong enough to leave his bed or the sofa, but resented that fact with the intensity of a thousand burning suns—and was intent on sharing that resentment with everyone around him. Repeatedly. At length. Mrs. H. or Mycroft(!) had taken
the night shifts (Medicated, Snoring Sherlock), which left the daytime (Mostly Awake, Stroppy Sherlock) for John and, sometimes, Mary.

By the dawning of the fifth day, when Sherlock woke, fever-free and asking for food, no one was happier than John. Well, except perhaps for Mary, Mrs. Hudson and Mycroft. After lunch, John left, after leaving instructions with Mrs. H., since he knew very well Sherlock would ignore them on his own. John was never so glad to see the inside of his surgery in his life.

Sherlock behaved himself much better than John would have expected; he didn’t return to cases for another three whole days, and even then he wasn’t yet doing anything terribly energetic. John joined him on the evening of the third day, wandering through a bank of flats where two teenagers had mysteriously disappeared. Most of Sherlock’s spots were healed, and he seemed fit enough, but John noticed he’d developed a cough. After the second coughing fit, John waved his hand at his friend. “What’s up with this? You catching a cold now?”

Sherlock blinked, pulled out of his head by the question, then realized what John was asking. “Oh. No. Allergies, I suspect. Started day before yesterday. I’ve taken allergy tablets at night, but it’s been hanging on.”

John nodded—Sherlock did have a tendency to suffer from that in early spring. “Well, let me know if you need another scrip for it. Sometimes changing to a different form works better.” Sherlock hummed in agreement and went back to picking through the waste bins.

John didn’t think much about it; Sherlock clearly didn’t feel ill, and was having no difficulties in his normal activities. That made him feel all the worse, two days later, to receive a call from Greg Lestrade, telling him that Sherlock was in Kings’ A&E with a collapsed lung.

By the time John managed to get half-way across London, almost two hours had passed and Sherlock had already been settled in a room. John made a stop at the nurses’ station and read through Sherlock’s chart (since John was still listed as Sherlock’s GP) before heading down the hall to the room.

John had a strong sense of déjà vu when he pushed open the door—there was Sherlock, eyes closed, hooked up to drips and oxygen, looking grey; Mycroft and Mrs. Hudson settled into chairs on each side of the bed (Mrs. H. looking sympathetic, Mycroft mildly annoyed), and Greg Lestrade sitting on the extra cot.

Given Sherlock’s lack of reaction, John assumed he was sedated. John raised his eyes at the other three and gestured out to the hallway, and all three obediently rose and came with him.

“So?” he said simply.

Mrs. H. started. “He had just come back home an hour or so before, and I had taken him up some tea
with lemon and honey for that dreadful cough. I came back downstairs to get some scones out of the
oven and I heard him start coughing again, very badly. And I got to the top of the stairs, and he
suddenly grabbed his chest and made this awful sound…and he couldn’t seem to breathe right. He
wouldn’t let me call an ambulance, John, I wanted to but he just…”

“So she called me,” Greg interjected. “And I headed over—wasn’t far away, thankfully. And it’s just
as she says, he was lying across the couch, clutching his chest and going a bit blue. So I hauled him
down the stairs and Mrs. H. came with.”

“And the hospital called me as his emergency contact,” Mycroft concluded. That part probably
wasn’t true, John knew—both he and Sherlock were sure that Mycroft’s people monitored
emergency services departments for their names automatically. But it wasn’t worth fighting about at
this juncture.

John held up the chart. “Well, it’s the same lung he damaged in the fertility clinic explosion,” he
began.* “Not that surprising—if a lung has collapsed once it’s more prone to happening again in the
right circumstances, and it probably wasn’t completely healed anyway given that it’s only been,
what, two months? The cough just exacerbated any damage that was already there. He’s also the
right profile for it—tall, thin, male, and a former smoker…” John trailed off as he suddenly caught
Mrs. Hudson’s guilty expression.

“Oh, Jesus,” he sighed. “He’s been smoking again.”

“Not much, John, I promise,” Mrs. H. babbled quickly. “It’s just…he’d been having nightmares
again for the past few days. And he said that it helped him calm down afterward, and it really did
seem to. I only gave him one each time, and he promised he didn’t have any others in the flat and I
really think that was true,” she said earnestly.

“Yes, but…oh, never mind, too late to worry about it now,” John said reluctantly. He and Sherlock
were going to have to talk about that at some point, but the damage was done now. “Mycroft—could
I speak to you privately, please?” John said, and Greg and Mrs. Hudson took that as their cue to go
back into Sherlock’s room.

John didn’t waste any time on pleasantries. “We need to get him away from London, from work,
from anything even remotely strenuous, for an extended period, or this is going to have a very bad
outcome. Are you going to back me in that?”

Mycroft blinked. “Of course, John. I always defer to your medical judgment. And from the reading I
was doing before you arrived, I completely concur. If we can persuade him to make a stay in Surrey,
will that meet your requirements?”

“If your Mum and Dad are in residence, absolutely. Ideal, in fact,” John said with relief.

Mycroft nodded. “Give me a few minutes to contact my parents and arrange things. Then I’ll come
back and help to…persuade my brother.” He lifted an ironic eyebrow and strode off with his phone
to his ear.
By the time Mycroft came back, Sherlock was awake, after a fashion, and not terribly happy about it: groggy, out of breath and irritable. When his eyes opened and he saw the group arrayed in his room, he grimaced. “Tell me,” he sighed in a whispery voice.

John picked up the file. “Your lung collapsed again. They were able to clear it with a needle aspiration this time, luckily, so you don’t have a chest tube. You do, however, have a raging upper respiratory infection that was creeping along towards pneumonia again. And to top it all off, you’ve been smoking again, you tosser.”

Sherlock shot a look of hurt betrayal at Mrs. Hudson. “I’m sorry, dearie,” she said sadly. “He needed to know.” Sherlock scowled but didn’t comment.

“So we need to talk about next steps,” John continued, as if Mrs. Hudson hadn’t spoken.

Sherlock coughed roughly and cringed in pain; John waited while Mrs. Hudson offered him water. “What steps?” he finally rasped. “I assume I will stay here long enough to allay everyone’s unreasonable fears and then go home.”

“Not quite,” Mycroft interjected coolly. “I have arranged for a car to take you to Surrey as soon as you are released, where you will stay until John releases you to return. Based on what John tells me, that will be a minimum of two weeks.”

Sherlock’s face congealed. “You have arranged?” he said, in high dudgeon. “Perhaps you should have asked me first. I have no intention—” he continued, only to begin coughing again. This time it lasted longer; when it was over he clutched his chest and fell back against the pillows, eyes shut.

“Let that be a lesson to you,” John said calmly. “This isn’t going to be over quickly. If you don’t do what you’re told, you stand a very real chance of ending up a respiratory cripple. And Sherlock, this isn’t one of those ‘stop smoking’ warnings, where we’re talking about something that may happen in 20 years or more. This is right now. Once a lung has collapsed, it is much more prone to repeat. And eventually, the required treatment will leave you with a portion of your lung that is essentially scarred closed. You might not be able to run; you may even struggle to climb stairs. I really can’t see you being happy with retiring in your 30s, but that’s what will happen, unless you can manage to solve everything from your chair.” Mrs. H. made a tiny distressed noise and took Sherlock’s hand; John noticed that the detective didn’t pull away, an indicator of his internal state.

“And you won’t be receiving any cases from me until John clears you regardless,” Greg Lestrade chimed in. “Christ, sunshine. Today scared me to death. Your lips were blue.”

There was a long, a very long pause, in which John mentally held his breath. Sherlock continued to lie back, eyes closed, holding Mrs. Hudson’s hand. Finally, though, he opened his eyes (distressed, pale, a little glassy) and spoke in that wrecked whisper. “If I do this. If I. Two weeks. Is that enough? Or will it…” he waved his free hand, his face working. He visibly wrestled for control, then finally managed to continue. “Is this just the way I’m going to be?” he finally wrenched out.

John’s heart clenched in his chest. “Oh, no, Sherlock, no—that’s not what I was saying.” He walked over to the bed and rested his hand on his friend’s shoulder, feeling the trembling that Sherlock couldn’t suppress. “This is temporary. You just need to heal. You need to be lazy, and eat, and sleep even more than I do,” John said, with a wry smile that Sherlock managed to respond to with a tiny quirk of his lip.

“Mummy will make every dish you’ve ever wanted and feed you like a fois gras goose,” Mycroft added drily. “You will be forced to improve in order to make your escape.”
Sherlock relaxed slightly under John’s hand, reassured despite himself. He surveyed his audience. “If I agree to this, will you all go away and let me sleep?” he asked, in stroppy tones that sounded only a little forced. John nodded, not quite trusting his voice at present.

“All right, then,” Sherlock sighed, pulling up his blankets and closing his eyes.

Sherlock stayed two more days in hospital, part of which was spent in respiratory therapy, usually followed by snarling, flouncing and general bloody-mindedness that made everyone involved eager to see him released. John placed the call to Mycroft after yet another muted shouting session between Sherlock and his doctor, in which John had finally intervened and suggested that Sherlock’s removal to the country might be in everyone’s best interests.

Late that afternoon, John, in the process of packing up Sherlock’s things while the detective showered, was surprised to look up and see Anthea standing in the doorway. “So you’re the sacrificial lamb?” he said sardonically.

Anthea quirked an eyebrow. “Someone has to do it,” she said with a wry smile. “And I’ve known him long enough that I’m not afraid to smack him with a rolled-up newspaper if he wees on the carpet.” She looked towards the en suite inquiringly. “How’s he doing?”

“Better,” John said thankfully. “Still weak, and he tires very easily, so he may well sleep part of the way—pillows and blanket would be a good idea. But the cough’s improving, and his pain level is down.” He held up a plastic bag full of medications. “This goes with you—all of the bottles are labeled, and he shouldn’t need anything en route, but you can call me if any problems arise.” Anthea took the bag and tucked it into her large handbag just as Sherlock came out of the loo, dressed and reasonably put together. He smirked when he saw Anthea.

“So, Brother Dear couldn’t be bothered? Or did he fear I’d finally drive him to fratricide en route?” he sniffed, dropping onto the cot with an inelegant thump.

“’Brother Dear’ is in Portugal, as I know very well he told you,” Anthea said firmly. “And he assumed you would prefer my company anyway, since you couldn’t give him a fair fight at the moment in your delicate condition.”

John snorted. It was clear Sherlock couldn’t decide whether to be offended or not, since he probably would prefer Anthea’s company. In the end the younger man just nodded philosophically. “Not entirely untrue, I suppose. Did you bring the cards?”

Anthea patted her voluminous bag. “Absolutely. But we’re not playing strip poker this time, just so you know.”

John gave a crack of laughter and wandered down the hall to find a wheelchair.
Things apparently went just fine on the trip (Anthea sent a video clip of Sherlock, head tucked into a pillow in the corner of the car, emitting tiny little whistling snores), and there were no upheavals thereafter beyond the occasional snippy text from his friend commenting on the elder Holmeses’ insistence on an every-evening “telly watching time”, or a picture of heaping plates of food that Sherlock was supposed to make every attempt to eat.

John was surprised, then, two days after Sherlock left, to find a message on his phone from Mrs. Hudson, asking him to stop by that evening after clinic. “It’s not urgent, exactly,” the message said, “but it’s starting to make noises.” And that was the end of it. John went, of course—Mary had just left for a two-week pediatrics certification course in Manchester, so he was on his own anyway. Mrs. Hudson would almost certainly have something baking, and dinner was a reasonable bet as well.

His former landlady greeted him, as always, with hugs, kisses and biscuits, then led the way upstairs. She waved her hands at the chemistry equipment colonizing the kitchen table. “I cleaned out the fridge already,” she said, “but he never wants me to touch those things and I thought it might be something that could keep, you know? But then I was up here dusting this morning and heard it giving these little noises every now and again. That’s new. It’s bubbling in the one big glass thingie as well, but I can’t tell if that’s where the noise is coming from or not. I know if I ask Sherlock about it he’ll have kittens, so…”

John nodded. “So you asked me. Not a problem—I’ll take care of it,” John said easily. He always got a certain sneaking satisfaction at clearing out one of Sherlock’s more noxious experiments, and he could twit the detective about it in a text later (when Sherlock felt better), which just added to the joy.

Mrs. H. beamed. “After dinner then, dear,” she said happily.

After a pleasant dinner of pork roast, conversation and walnut cake, John pushed back from the table with a groan and headed back upstairs to deal with the “experiment”. He briefly considered texting Sherlock to find out exactly what the contents of the flasks were, but ultimately decided not to. The stuff had to go, regardless, and sending Sherlock into an ongoing snit about it wasn’t going to play well with his current need for peace and quiet.

John started at the far end of the table, detaching each of the small glass tubes and flasks and rinsing them clean in the sink before setting them out to dry. Most were empty anyway, but he’d learned from past, painful experience that Sherlock’s experiments often left near-invisible traces that could nonetheless cause problems. (The nearly-transparent crystals he once dusted off the end of the table that turned his fingers dark blue for a week came to mind first).

He worked his way systematically through the large array without incident, noticing at one point that the largest flask was indeed quietly bubbling to itself, though he had yet to hear the “noise” Mrs. Hudson had mentioned. Periodically he emptied and refilled the left side of the sink with fresh soapy water, just to make sure no toxic residue lingered.
Finally, he reached the last pieces of glassware, including the large beaker with the bubbling contents. He left that piece for last, separating and washing all the other interconnected bits first. The beaker itself had a typical plug with an opening for the glass tubing in the center, and as John pulled loose that last piece of tubing he smelled an odd odor, rather like malt or strong beer but not at all unpleasant. The removal of the tubing also seemed to have excited the bubbling a bit, but again, not in an alarming kind of way.

When he was finally ready to clean out the large beaker, he started to pick it up by the neck, but reconsidered—didn’t want the shaking when it was moved to make the contents bubble up the top and over his fingers. So he carefully lifted it just enough to slide one hand, then the other, underneath—the beaker had a round bottom and was perhaps 6” in diameter, so he could comfortably cradle it in both palms, with his fingers splayed around the curved sides. It was surprisingly heavy, and the liquid inside immediately started to bubble more fervently as it was lifted.

He noticed odd irregularities in the bottom of the glass against his palms—perhaps the beaker had been used over high heat in the past and was etched? He had carefully crossed roughly half the distance to the sink when two things made that idle question moot: first, the surface of the now quickly-bubbling liquid appeared to flex violently, followed by an odd creaking sound—and second, just as John realized that the “creaking” was now a “cracking”, the beaker split abruptly along the lines he had felt on the bottom (lines that he now realized had been actual cracks in the glass), and the warm, slippery contents poured completely over his hands and wrists and splashed across the kitchen floor.

John swore as he hustled the remnants of the beaker into the empty side of the sink, then quickly rinsed the liquid off. He pulled a roll of paper towels (they bought them in bulk) from under the sink and swabbed up the mess in the floor, then wiped the surface down again with a wet towel. Then he rinsed of the glass fragments in the sink, wrapped them in paper towels and stuffed them in the bin, and gave both the sink and his hands another good wash-down.

The tingling started 10 minutes later. That was followed quickly by itching, then burning, then swelling. Within half an hour it felt like he’d dipped his hands in flame, and he was losing the ability to bend his fingers. Long before that, though, he had recognized the inevitability of yet another trip to A&E and had Mrs. Hudson call Greg Lestrade for another Baker Street “ambulance” run.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

John is made an offer he can't refuse, sort of.

Chapter Notes

Since KathyG was pouting about wanting the next chapter up sooooooon, here ya go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John had almost reached the top of the A&E triage list at Kings’ when Mycroft Holmes walked into the lobby (which confirmed Sherlock’s long-held belief that the entry of either of their names into any medical database sent a notification directly to Brother Dear). The Great Man nodded at Greg before speaking to John. “A toxic exposure, I presume,” he intoned, looking pointedly at John’s flaming-red, sausage-like fingers. “Do you know the substance? I would presume that would be essential for appropriate treatment.”

John shook his head, gritting his teeth against the agony in his hands. “Whatever horrible brew Sherlock left cooking in his chemistry set,” he bit out. “And yes, we need to know, but,” he nodded at his fingers, “I haven’t exactly been able to call and find out.”

Mycroft held up one finger, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and walked away briefly, while John considered sticking his hands under the cold water tap in the loo. But then, he’d have to have Greg go with him to open the door, and turn on the taps, and…

By the time he’d decided to go try, Mycroft was back, a mildly concerned look in his face. “The substance was an overgrowth of a toxic yeast variety, implicated in a case from a number of years ago. In all likelihood it would have been harmless had the growth not been allowed to continue an extra week due to my brother’s illness.” He looked closely at John’s hands. “It would also seem likely that you have sustained an allergic reaction, not uncommon with exposure to some yeast strains.” He held up his phone briefly. “I have forwarded the relevant information to your medical file, as well as a suggested treatment approach.” Then he lapsed into a suspicious silence, wearing a look which John recognized, with a sinking heart, as the Holmes Guilt Face.

John choked down his urge to shout. “What, exactly, are you not telling me, Mycroft?” he said, in a dangerously quiet voice.

“Sherlock is extremely penitent,” Mycroft began. “He has asked me to express his concern and—“

“Now, please,” John interrupted, not interested in dancing around the issue while someone was holding a flamethrower to his hands.

Mycroft looked studiously at his own hands before speaking. “It is very likely that the entire outer layer of skin on your hands will slough off,” he said, in what in anyone else would be termed a guilty manner. “While the effects will not be permanent, Sherlock estimates that you will not be able to use
your hands without pain for the next 10 to 14 days, depending on how effective the medications are for you. It varies among individuals.” He raised his eyes and gave John what passed for an earnest look. “The immediate pain should respond very quickly to the antihistamine treatment,” he offered. John was aware of Greg Lestrade quietly face-planting beside him.

When John came out of the treatment room an hour later, he was surprised to see that (1) Mycroft Holmes was still there, and (2) Greg Lestrade wasn’t. John, groggy on a combination of pain pills and antihistamines, wasn’t quite able to control his face in time, so Mycroft got the full brunt of his disappointment. Not surprisingly, though, the older man was able to bear up under it pretty well.

“Inspector Lestrade was called away for an urgent matter,” he said calmly. “I assured him I would see you got safely to your destination.” If John hadn’t been quite so drowsy he would have picked up on that choice of words immediately. After a few seconds of silence, however, the other shoe dropped. “Destination?” John asked cautiously.

“It is of course your choice,” Mycroft said smoothly. “But I know that Ms. Morstan is out of town, and I suspect you would be reluctant to accept…personal help from Mrs. Hudson.” John couldn’t suppress a sudden shudder at the idea of Mrs. H. having to help him take a piss. “Reluctant” didn’t begin to describe it.

“So I assume you have a suggestion?” John said warily. He was really much too medicated for this kind of conversation.

“Well, as it happens,” Mycroft began, in a deceptively ‘confiding’ sort of way, “I have been delegated to spend a day or two in Surrey to prevent my mother from smothering Sherlock with his pillow. He is not taking enforced inactivity well, as you can imagine.” And God, John certainly could. The painful memories of Sherlock and chicken pox were still burned into his soul.

“It occurred to me,” the older man continued, “that we might be able to serve two purposes. If you travel with me, you would have, shall we say, masculine help readily available for any personal chores you may need assistance with, for as long as you may need it. And Sherlock will have a, well, a ‘playmate’ after I depart.” He gave one of his not-smiles, obviously pleased with himself.

“And you can also leave sooner,” John observed, and Mycroft flashed that tiny lift of the corners of his mouth that he shared with Sherlock—a true Holmesian grin. “There is that,” Mycroft observed with a regal nod.

John would have liked to drag this out, just to give Mycroft a bit of his own back, but, well, medicated. He sighed and nodded. “It does make sense, if you’re sure your mum and dad won’t mind. We just need to go by my flat and…” He looked over at Mycroft, who was waiting expectantly for him to finish. “You’ve already packed a bag for me, haven’t you?” Mycroft’s expression was its own answer.
The ride to Surrey wasn’t quite as awkward as John feared, if only because the medication put John right to sleep once he was settled in the posh car, a soft blanket spread across his lap. He woke to Mycroft gingerly touching his shoulder. “John. We’re here. Prepare yourself; my mother tells me Sherlock is somewhat, mmm, anxious.”

That was all the warning John got; the side door was abruptly opened and Sherlock stuck his head in, dressing gown flying and hair waving in the stiff breeze. He was vibrating with tension.

“John!” he blurted. “John, I’m so sorry, I should have…how are your hands? Can I see? Did they give you any…Mycroft! He’s in pain, clearly. Why didn’t you give him some of his…I’m sure they gave him something but…John!” the detective finally ran out of air, clutching his side and panting while trying to simultaneously lift John out of the car by telekinesis, apparently.

“Sherlock,” John said soothingly. “I’m fine. It’s fine. Calm down.” Of course, he knew that last sentence was a mistake as soon as it left his lips.

Sherlock stood straight up and raised both his head and his upper lip. “I am perfectly calm,” he said stiffly, still clutching his side. “I was simply curious as to the extent of your injuries.” He turned and stalked back inside, his dignity impaired only slightly by his bare feet.

Mellie Holmes bustled up in his wake, inured to the waves of drama that invariably wafted around her youngest. “John,” she said warmly, “I’m so pleased you’re here. Sherlock has been beside himself since his brother called. I’m sure he’ll apologize properly once he’s settled down.” On that little bit of unwarranted optimism, she helped Mycroft ease John out of the car and up the drive to the house.

Siger appeared from the rear of the house as soon as they opened the door, his face wreathed in smiles. “John, how good of you to come. I’m just sorry it’s under these circumstances.” He took John’s bag from Mycroft and started up the stairs with it, while Mellie and Mycroft headed towards the kitchen. “We were hoping you could come while Sherlock was here anyway—we were planning to call you in a day or so. He’s been a trifle, um, fretful.” Yeah, John thought with a grin, let’s go with that. They had apparently been overheard—a door slammed violently up ahead. Siger gave John a rueful look over his shoulder and pushed open the doorway to the bedroom John had used on his last visit**(Mycroft’s room, actually, but the Great Man would be making his escape back to London, now that he had supplied his brother with an acceptable distraction), the door to the room across the hall, Sherlock’s room, stayed firmly closed.

John realized, suddenly, how late it was—nearly midnight, if not a little more. He was also struck by how very, very tired (and sore—don’t forget sore) he was. Something of this must have communicated itself to Siger. “Ready for bed, then?” he said kindly. “Or would you like some tea and a snack first?”
And all of a sudden, tea did sound better than bed, for the moment. “Tea sounds really good,” he said gratefully. “I have some medication I need to take anyway, so I might as well have something in my stomach.” Siger carefully placed John’s opened bag on the bed and fished out the plastic medicine bag before walking over to stand in the doorway. He raised a conspiratorial eyebrow at John. “Let’s go get that tea, then, John” he said, in a voice somewhat louder than was required, pointing his head towards Sherlock’s closed door. “I believe your landlady sent along a supply of those mince tarts you boys like so much.”

Ten minutes later, they were all settled around the kitchen table when Sherlock came sulkily, silently, into the room. He threw himself dramatically into an empty chair and reached for a mince tart while Mycroft rolled his eyes. John watched in fascination as Sherlock and Mellie Holmes had one of those silent conversations he had only previously observed between the younger man and his brother: lots of eyebrows lifts, significant throat clearing and postural shifts. In the end, it was clear who was the victor. Sherlock looked down at his hands, then looked furtively at John, then back to his hands. “I’m very sorry you were injured. It was entirely my fault,” he muttered, spots of pink high on his cheekbones. He then took another mince tart and ate it aggressively at his mother.

John managed to suppress the chuckle that tried to bubble up. “That’s alright, Sherlock,” he said finally. “Maybe next time you can label things so we know what to avoid if you’re ill or something.” They all knew that, if indeed that ever happened, it would be John, Mary or Mrs. Hudson badgering Sherlock until he told them what the substance was, and then labelling it themselves. But the idea was sound. Sherlock gave a noncommittal hum, probably the best result that could be hoped for.

John felt his head nodding a bit—the pain medication kicking in, then. He scooted his chair back (more difficult than expected, given that he couldn’t use his hands). “Well, I’m for bed, I think,” he said, then suddenly realized that someone was going to have to help him get ready. Siger had stood as well and was clearly planning to accompany him, when Sherlock shot to his feet and all but bared his teeth at his father. “I’ll help him,” he snapped, then stomped off towards the stairs. John gave Siger an apologetic look, but Siger waved him off with a smile. “Go, go. He needs something to work off the guilt.”

When John reached his room, Sherlock was nowhere around. John considered trying to undress on his own; his thumbs, thankfully, were largely untouched and free of the bandages encapsulating the rest of his hands, with just a few swollen, inflamed spots, so he could use them on a limited basis. One attempt at a shirt button, though, had him emitting a hiss of pain. He sat down on the bed, a little nonplussed as to how to proceed—was Sherlock coming back? Or should he just lie down in his clothes and be done with it?

The issue was solved by Sherlock stomping back in, his hands full of folded clothes which he dumped on the bed beside John. He gestured impatiently for John to stand back up, began efficiently unbuttoning John’s shirt, then, after a quick look to ask permission, popped the button on John’s trousers, unzipped, then slid them down to his ankles. He then pushed John (not especially gently) back down onto the bed and pulled the trousers over John’s feet, while John bemusedly let his shirt slide off his shoulders and over his hands. Sherlock snaked up a spidery arm, snagged the shirt and tossed both the shirt and the trousers in a heap to the corner of the room.
“Oi!” John protested. “I only wore those for two hours—I changed into them before we left. They’re hardly dirty enough to—“

“Mummy ordered me to bring her your laundry,” Sherlock sniffed. “I’ve brought alternate attire for the next few days anyway.” He gestured towards the pile on the bed. “These things will make you more…*autonomous*.” He reached over and pulled out a pair of trousers, track clothing actually, made of a soft jersey, which miraculously enough looked as if they might fit. He bundled the trousers down at John’s ankles, shoved his feet through, slid them up John’s legs and waved a hand for John to stand again, then pulled them up to John’s waist. “They have elastic, not a drawstring. So you can…” he waved his hand in a vague fashion, which John took to refer to being able to deal with his own visits to the loo.

“Thank you, Sherlock—that’s very helpful, actually,” John said, amused and, to be truthful, a little surprised that Sherlock had actually thought of that.

Sherlock reached over to the pile again and fished out a soft t-shirt, with short, loose sleeves and a neckline that had been roughly cut out. “Arms,” he said, and John obediently held his arms over his head while Sherlock first tugged John’s vest off, then dropped the shirt over. This, too, was something that John could probably manage to remove on his own using his workable thumbs. The shirt had a grey-and-white graphic of Albert Einstein, and a “Got Pi?” logo.

John grinned. “Where’d you get these?” he chuckled.

“They were mine when I was 16. I was only a little taller than you,” Sherlock said with a smirk.

“Rude. But probably true,” John sighed.

Sherlock busied himself by stacking the remaining outfits carefully in the wardrobe in the corner, then fished out the remaining things from John’s bag and shoving them in as well.

“I’ll leave the doors ajar so you can get at things. Come into the loo so we can brush your teeth,” Sherlock said, and strode off to the en suite.

Once they got there, John was pleased to find that he could turn the taps on and off by himself, though it hurt a bit. Managing the toothbrush was beyond him, though, so he submitted stoically to Sherlock’s ministrations, then followed the detective back to the bedroom to be (sarcastically, with a mocking air kiss near his forehead from Sherlock) tucked in for the night. The last thing he was aware of was Sherlock’s soft ”Goodnight, John” from the doorway.

Chapter End Notes

**See ""Interlude in December".
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Sherlock discovers he is Not Okay with John's injuries. And John discovers that, sometimes, "nothing in particular" is exactly what you need.

Chapter Notes

There will probably be one more longish chapter (with MAYBE a short epilogue. I'll see where the words take me). Fair warning--there will be no great sweeping events in this fic, nor great drama (though a soupcon or two of angst)--that's not what this is about. And I have realized that I am just as much a Sucker for Sweetness as I am an Admirer of Angst. Sorry, not sorry.

John awoke abruptly the next morning, with a soldier's awareness of a potential threat. He knew there was someone else in the room. Luckily, before he launched himself violently out of the bed into a defensive position, his memory kicked in. Hands; Surrey; Sherlock. The last of these proved, when John opened his eyes, to be crouched like a larger-than-average gargoyle on a chair pulled next to the bed, watching him with that unwavering Sherlockian stare.

“You woke up much later than usual,” Sherlock said, as if they had been speaking for some time.

“Good drugs,” John yawned. “Well, that and not getting to bed until almost 2.” He was pleased to note that his hands didn’t really throb anymore, but some exploratory finger twiddles reminded him that they were indeed still swollen and very stiff. A look at the bandages showed him that some areas of light yellow staining had appeared.

“We need to change those,” Sherlock observed, then hopped off the chair and wandered off towards the en suite without waiting for John.

After some grumbling, Sherlock agreed to wait outside while John took care of his morning necessities, though John was sure he was hovering just outside the door waiting for the sounds to stop. John waited, out of sheer bloody-mindedness, a solid five minutes after finishing, doing nothing in particular but not letting Sherlock know he was done. Finally, after a series of three progressively louder throat-clearings from the other side of the door, Sherlock broke and actually knocked. “Come in,” John snickered. The door opened to a scowling Sherlock, who swept in immediately and herded John over to sit on the toilet lid.

The pack of medical materials John had brought in his bag (well, that Mycroft had added to his bag, technically) had been shifted into the under-sink cupboard of the en suite the prior evening. Sherlock now pulled everything out, sorting it methodically and placing everything within easy reach before lifting the bandage scissors and looking at John expectantly. Sherlock felt like a new specimen the detective was looking forward to dissecting—that same anticipatory gleam of scientific interest was there in Sherlock’s eyes.
It didn’t last, though. Sherlock gently pulled John’s hands over to rest on the edge of the sink, then efficiently used the bandage scissors to slit through the layers of gauze across the back and palm of each hand. The fingers could be individually unwrapped once the portion on John’s palms was removed.

Sherlock was quite gentle as he began to peel away the bandages. As more was removed, John began to see red, inflamed skin surrounding huge, fluid-filled yellow blisters. John was looking mainly for any signs of infection or continued allergic response, and was fairly satisfied at what he saw. Sherlock continued to peel away gauze, occasionally encountering areas in which smaller blisters had broken and leaked plasma, causing the yellow staining John had noticed earlier.

It wasn’t until Sherlock started unwrapping individual fingers that John noticed something odd—Sherlock had made not a single sound throughout this process. No observations, no request for additional medical information, nothing. John looked up at his friend in surprise, and noticed that all color had leached from his face, and he was staring fixedly at the rows of overlapping blisters and small weeping wounds. John also realized, belatedly, that the bony fingers carefully unwrapping the gauze had begun to shake.

“Sherlock?” John said cautiously.

Sherlock didn’t look up; the fingers stopped unwrapping the gauze but continued to tremble.

“Should we maybe go get your dad?” John offered, very, very gently. There was a long pause before the bent dark head gave a jerky nod, and Sherlock silently unfolded himself and trotted out the door.

Three minutes later Siger strode in, his face carefully calm (in contrast to his son, who stood in the doorway exhibiting every one of what John had come to identify as his anxious “tells”). The older man sat easily on the edge of the sink and gently reached out for John’s half-wrapped hands.

“Well, what’s your medical opinion, John? Everything look pretty much as expected?” he said evenly, while continuing to unwrap John’s remaining fingers. John felt a flash of gratitude—Siger had just given him an opening to reassure Sherlock without trying to do so directly (since that approach would almost certainly be violently rejected).

“Better than I expected, actually,” John said, carefully turning his hands from side to side to get a better view. “This is all pretty superficial, even though it’s going to take a good bit of time to heal. One or two deeper spots, but overall not too bad.” He resisted the urge to look over at Sherlock.

“So, we just need to use this antiseptic wash, the cream, and then re-bandage, yes?” said Siger, reaching for the bottle of wash as he spoke, still softly, still calmly. Sherlock continued to fidget in the doorway, but he hadn’t fled, so John called that a victory.

Once the cleansing was finished and Siger had begun the re-wrapping, he spoke to Sherlock directly. “Can you go tell Mummy we’ll be down in five minutes or so, Sherlock? I know she was waiting to pull some things out of the warming drawer.” He didn’t look up to see if Sherlock obeyed, just kept wrapping. Sherlock left without a word.

Once he was sure Sherlock was out of earshot, John let out a gusty sigh. “God. You’re so good with him, Siger. Just the right touch when he’s on the edge.”

Siger gave a rueful chuckle as he finished up. “Well, I have had thirty years to practice, you know. And I have to confess, I wasn’t always so successful.” He started cleaning up the mess and putting away the extra materials. “We were never quite estranged, but there was a period in his late teens and early twenties when we came very close to losing him completely to the drugs. I didn’t find out until
well after the fact about some of it—Mycroft believed it was better to keep it from us, and we had a very unpleasant conversation or two with him about that issue. But I saw enough to realize that Sherlock needed something that we weren’t able to provide. It’s a hard thing for a parent to learn, John.” His face fell with remembered sadness.

“I can’t imagine,” John said sympathetically. “I’m really glad he has you now, though.”

Siger smiled and helped John up. “So are we, actually,” he said simply.

When they reached the kitchen, Mellie was bustling about spreading plates and silverware on the table, while Sherlock helped arrange the food in serving dishes. He spun on his heel when he heard John enter, though, and carefully lead John to his place at the table. “I, well, Mummy, we found something for you,” he said in rapid-fire fashion, shooting over to the counter and coming back to drop two items in front of John: a large, curiously-shaped silver spoon, and a sectioned plate with a high lip all the way around the edge. He waited expectantly while John examined it.

The spoon was elaborately decorated, and the handle curved back on itself to make a large irregular loop. John quickly realized why—this was designed for someone who couldn’t hold a utensil with their fingers normally. He reached for it, and was pleased to notice it fit easily over his thumb, and was re-curved enough that he could brace the bottom against the edge of his bandaged palm. He grinned and demonstrated for the assembled Holmeses, and Sherlock grinned back, shoving the special plate forward.

“They were made for Siger’s mother,” Mellie said. “She had suffered a stroke and lost much of the mobility in her hands. This let her feed herself; the plate lip and the segments allow you to push food against the sides to shove it onto the spoon. I had completely forgotten about them before Sherlock asked me last night after tea.”

Ah yes, tea, thought John. The tea he’d consumed by cradling a cup in his bandaged palms like a toddler, before eating a mince tart the same way. Crumbs everywhere.

“Thank you both,” John said gratefully. He was already beginning to find his forced dependency gallling; this was at least one area in which he could get a little bit of his independence back. Well, after someone cut his food up for him and put it on the plate, he thought sardonically.

Sherlock had apparently been reading his mind again. “One step at a time, John,” he said absentely, while tucking into his eggs.

After breakfast, Sherlock helped John shower (blue plastic bags over his hands), dress and get ready for the day before heading off to his own room. John wandered back downstairs and made idle conversation with Siger for a few minutes; the older man had a few really interesting carved pipes in
his collection that he brought out and showed John.

Mellie finished up in the kitchen just as Sherlock came downstairs, dressed in a pair of jeans that John suspected dated back to his uni days and a hoodie that had been washed so many times it was hard to guess what the original color had been. He looked, well, very unlike himself, but very comfortable.

“We’re heading out for our morning walk,” Mellie announced. “Trying to go a little farther each day before Sherlock runs out of steam. You’re welcome to join us if you’d like, John,” she said amiably. John started to agree—it looked to be a pleasant morning out, and he could do with a little fresh air—but he happened to catch Siger’s eye, and noticed a tiny negative shake of his head.

“I think I’ll take a rain check,” John said, pleased to note that neither Mellie nor Sherlock seemed unhappy with that answer. “Siger promised to show me his latest project in the shop.”

Once mother and son had moved off across the back garden, John raised his eyebrows inquiringly at Siger. “Any special reason for that?” he asked.

Siger sighed. “Those two still have a bit of fence-mending to do between them. They’re fine, now, but they used to be much closer. Just alike, you know—they both say horrible things they don’t mean when they’re upset. And because they’re so brilliant, they always manage to say the absolute worst thing possible. Back in the bad days, they did it to each other.” He shook his head in remembered pain. “They’ve made a lot of headway this past six months, but I want to make sure it ‘sticks’, you see?”

And John did know. He’d done some of the same with Harry in the past year—nothing dramatic, but definitely a start.

“I’ve often noted that children usually take after one parent or the other, and in our case Sherlock was always Mellie’s,” Siger continued. “Myc was much more like me, superficially at least. We’re the calm ones. I think Myc takes that entirely too far these days, and sometimes for the wrong reasons, but it did start with me, I guess.” He looked inquiringly at John. “Which parent did you take after?”

“God, neither, I hope,” John blurted, before he could think about it.

Siger, that wise man, managed to stop himself from voicing the automatic “Why?” that John was aware would come to anyone’s mind, in the face of John’s statement. But that very restraint made John feel, oddly, that he owed him an answer anyway.

“It’s not a secret. Well, not anymore,” John said with a sigh. “I’ve long since made peace with it. But my parents—well, they really shouldn’t have had kids, you know?”

Siger nodded. “Sherlock sometimes points out that it is much easier to have children than dogs, legally speaking, and that’s not wise.”

“Trust your son to put a finger on the issue,” John snorted. “My dad was an alcoholic. Secret, for a lot of years; less so, towards the end. And he was a mean drunk—lots of shouting, most of it ugly. Never actually hit me or my twin sister—well, not often anyway, but he was big on dragging us around by our arms, that kind of thing. Pulled my sister across the kitchen by her hair when we were 13. I tried to stop him—that’s one of the only times he actually hit me. Things got worse when my sister announced she was a lesbian—Dad threw her and all of her things out of the house, not gently.”
“And your mother?” Siger said quietly.

“She was…not there, for the most part. Physically, yeah, but not mentally. When Dad started raging, most of the time she got up, went to the basement and closed the door. Sometimes for days at a time. But when I was a kid, I preferred that to the alternative—when the two of them would have screaming fights that ended with the neighbors calling 999.” John frowned, remembering. “If we got home from school before Dad got there, I’d make sure dinner got started, the laundry was done, things picked up—that sometimes helped avert an explosion. And if it started while we were already there, Harry and I would just head outside and hide in the garden shed until it was over, usually.”

Siger let a long silence fall before speaking. “Where are they now?” he asked gently.

“Gone,” John said simply. “Dad drove them into a bridge support one evening while I was on my first tour in Afghanistan. I came home for the funeral, made sure Harry was doing OK for the most part, then went back. Gave Harry the proceeds from the house—God knows I didn’t want it.”

“I’m very sorry, John,” Siger said gravely. “No child should have to go through something like that. I think the authorities are too inclined to believe that bad parents are better than no parents at all, and that’s just not true.”

“No, it’s really not,” said John, just a little shakily. He looked up, though, and gave Siger a wry grin. “In a weird way, though, it had a lot to do with where I ended up. I decided to be a doctor, initially, because my dad told me I’d never make it, and it was my ambition in life to prove him wrong.”

Siger nodded, with a smile. “Success is the best revenge, in my experience. You have a great deal to be proud of, John.” And on that companionable note, they wandered off to Siger’s wood shop behind the garage.

Over the next few days, things fell into a sort of routine—a quiet, pleasant routine, actually. Siger did most of the “nurse” duties by default; John made a point of not asking Sherlock to do it, and the detective didn’t argue. John’s hands were healing relatively well, but remained too painful to use aside from his thumbs. In the middle of the week John phoned one of his therapist friends and asked if light, easy exercise was a good idea, and got a resounding “no”, which left John in a bit of a sulk for the remainder of the afternoon.

Most mornings, all four of them would go on what Mummy laughingly called their “morning surveillance”—Sherlock had established the locations of numerous animal dens and birds’ nests that he insisted on checking every day, making notes in the text function on his phone. At least one day in three, though, Siger would make an excuse for John and himself to stay back and allow Sherlock and his mum to spend the time alone.

John could see the positive effects this stay was having on Sherlock, certainly. He had visibly gained weight, always a struggle under normal circumstances. His skin was starting to lose the slightly grayish pallor that it had worn for most of the winter and early spring—John was only now realizing how accustomed he had become to seeing that. Best of all, Sherlock was almost calm—he could, and did, sit quietly for long minutes in the garden watching the bees, or playing complicated, reflective
pieces on his violin without the agitated screeching that characterized his bad periods. His strength was not yet 100%--the lung damage wouldn’t heal overnight, and exhaustion still snuck up on the detective often (leading to sudden naps, head back and mouth open, on the sofa while the telly droned on, at least two of which Mellie had surreptitiously taken photos of). But John believed the tide was turning on Sherlock’s health.

John was surprised to realize, one bright sunny morning, how much he, too, was gaining from this enforced visit. He was…he was different. Oh, not physically—his hands were still largely useless, he was still graying more than he wanted to be, he was somewhat short and no longer precisely young. But what he was, was calm, a calm he hadn’t been, he now realized, in a very long time. Maybe never.

And of course, the universe being what it was, the morning he noticed, the morning he embraced that calm, was the same morning Harry called.

It was Wednesday.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Harry is in way over her head, John loses his, and the Holmeses manage to save the day despite everything. Feelings are hurt, secrets disclosed, and advice is gratefully accepted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John, Sherlock and Siger were all still sitting at breakfast when the phone rang; Mellie was roaming in and out, picking up dishes as they were finished while simultaneously popping out to the garden to gather flowers for the house. Sherlock, in a surprising stroke of empathy, picked up the phone quickly and carried it into the parlour for John to have his conversation in private. Of course he neglected to close the door as he left, but it was a start.

“Johnny?” Harry said, in a quavering voice.

“What’s wrong, Harry?” John asked, trying to listen closely enough to pick up whether Harry was drunk or not.

“I’m, I’ve done… I’m in trouble, Johnny,” Harry sobbed.

“In trouble, how? What kind of trouble?” John asked, feeling both concerned and very, very tired at the same time.

“I need money. A lot of money. Or I’m going to lose the business, and the house, and the car, and…” she trailed off into sobs again.

“Jesus. How much money? And what happened to it? I thought the shop was doing well, isn’t it?” John asked. Harry had used the proceeds from the sale of their parents’ house to open a small boutique jewelry store, selling primarily her own designs. It had been a good choice—brought in a consistent high-end clientele and didn’t especially suffer when Harry’s alcoholism lead to sudden unannounced closures for a day or two.

“Well, I wanted to expand into using precious stones,” Harry began. “You know I’ve always used semi-precious, but the returns on the precious stone pieces are much higher.” She stopped, apparently waiting for a response.

“Yeah?” John finally said, not sure what else she was looking for.

“But the problem was, I didn’t have the cash I needed to buy the raw stones. I didn't want to borrow against the shop since I already had a mortgage—not a big one,” she added hurriedly, since John knew the inheritance had enabled her to purchase the shop originally without taking on any debt. “I had taken it out to buy some equipment, and it still has five years to run. Anyway, it would take me at least a year to save the money in cash to buy the stones. So I was talking to a friend of mine from uni, and he told me about it. He knew I was always lucky. And you know that, John—I’ve always been lucky,” she said earnestly, clearly wanting John to agree with her.

It was true, up to a point. Harry was always winning small raffles, finding tenners on the street,
turning up things other people thought they’d lost. The flip side, though, was that when it came to big things, she was spectacularly unlucky—she’s been in four car accidents in five years, none of them her fault. She’d had her phone stolen twice, and been mugged once in the process. And she’d lost her wife—though that wasn’t really down to luck.

“How is that relevant?” John asked, somewhat impatiently. He didn’t like the way this was going.

“Well, he knew about this ongoing poker game. Not penny stuff—real, serious money involved, and he needed a partner because he didn’t have the entry fees. It sounds like a lot—5000 quid for the two of us—but each pot was more than twice that much,” she added quickly, probably suspecting John’s reaction to this revelation.

John’s silence seemed to be unnerving Harry, so she rushed her words to fill the void. “So the first night, we won £7,800. I was so excited, and so was Simon. We split it, but it was less than a quarter of what I needed, so we decided to go back, go to the next meet. And it didn’t, we had…we lost part of it. Not a lot. But we knew we needed to make it up. And it just—we kept going back, and it got worse and worse, and we borrowed some so we had money to wager, and it…” she stopped and dissolved into tears again.


“Seventy-five thousand pounds,” Harry gasped, so quickly it was hard to distinguish the words.

John made a noise like he’d been kicked in the chest, which was appropriate, given that that was exactly how he felt. Well, that, and horrified, and angry, and very, very tired.

“Harry,” he gasped. That was all he could get out, but it seemed to get the message across anyway, as Harry wailed louder.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I knew it was stupid to keep going, but I just thought…I hoped…I’m so sorry.”

“Calm down,” John said finally. “Let’s think about this. Have you talked to the bank about another loan? The shop is worth a lot more than that, isn’t it?”

“I tried, John,” Harry snapped. “Don’t you think I’d try? But they would only loan more money against the shop if it was for a ‘legitimate purpose to enhance the business’, and I couldn’t very well tell them it was to pay off a fucking gambling debt, now could I?”

“Maybe you should think about selling the house,” John offered, reluctantly. He knew what Harry’s reaction would be. Well, he thought he did, anyway.

He was surprised, as it happened. “I did,” Harry said simply (an admission that was far more mature than he would have expected). “But I need the money now, and the estate agent said it could take three months to sell and clear the proceeds.”

The hair rose on the back of John’s neck. “What does ‘now’ mean, exactly, Harry?”

“A week,” Harry said, in a tiny voice. “It was longer, but I used up time trying to find the money another way.”

“Another way? You mean…Harry, I can’t give you the money. I don’t have anywhere near that much. I only have about ten percent of that, and it’s tied up in a fund Sherlock’s brother told me about. It would take me longer than a week to get it out, even if it were enough to help you,” John
“But you can get it,” Harry insisted. “Sherlock’s family is rich, you told me that. So you can borrow it from him. I can pay it back, John—the shop makes almost twice that in a year, so it wouldn’t even take six months if I don’t bank any of the profits and lay off my extra help.”

“I’m not going to ask Sherlock for money,” John said, appalled at the idea. “I don’t think he even has money of his own. If he does I’ve never heard of it.”

“You have to,” Harry said. “They said they’ll hurt me, Johnny. They’ll break up the shop, they’ll burn down the house. You have to,” she sobbed.

“Christ, Harry,” John said, his stomach churning. “Go to the police. It’s an illegal game. Get the sods arrested.”

“John, Simon tried, well, he threatened to. And they broke his arms,” she said, her voice shaking. “You have to find the money, or they’ll just do whatever they want to.”

John gave a weary sigh. “All right, Harry. Just give me a day or so to think. I don’t know if I can get it, but I’ll try. Maybe I can borrow somehow. In the meantime you see how much you can put together. Sell the damn car.” He had no idea what he could use as collateral; in reality there was no way he could come up with the money. But he had to try.

Harry hung up, finally. John had limited patience for listening to despairing sobs at this point. He couldn’t blame Harry too much for the gambling—he, too, had had a flirtation with illegal gambling once upon a time, and ultimately it took a near-court martial and the timely intervention of James Sholto to get him back on the right path. But he’d never come anywhere near this level of pure disaster.

When John came out of the parlour he nearly stumbled over Sherlock, who was hovering suspiciously near the doorway. “What’s wrong? Why are you angry?” Sherlock asked, with his typical lack of filters.

“Nothing, Sherlock. Just something with Harry,” John said curtly. He found himself suddenly angry, not just at Harry but at the world in general. He was particularly angry at his fucking useless hands, which seemed to translate rapidly into being angry with Sherlock as well.

“It’s clearly not ‘nothing’,” Sherlock persisted, stepping insistently in front of John. “What does she want? Why are you so upset?”

“I’m not upset,” John lied, using his shoulder to firmly push Sherlock out of the way. “And it’s none of your business,” he snapped back over his shoulder. He saw a look of hurt flash briefly across Sherlock’s face but kept going, charging out the open back door and striding roughly across the garden, heading for the woods and some peace and quiet.
John stomped around the garden and the adjoining woods for more than forty minutes before his
conscience finally beat down the anger, and he was left with the queasy realization that he had once
again taken out his frustration on an innocent (well, mostly) party.

He was still angry—it simmered below the surface, in an unsettling way. But now he was also
ashamed of himself, which made him feel worse.

He wandered reluctantly back to the house, glad to find the back door still standing open (since it
didn’t dawn on him until after he was almost a mile away from the house that he couldn’t reopen it
on his own). He stepped gingerly into the kitchen, thankful to find it empty. When he walked back
into the parlour, though, Sherlock was there with Siger and, to John’s dismay, Mycroft was standing
by the fireplace—John had completely forgotten that Mellie had mentioned her older son was driving
down for dinner today.

Time to grab the bull by the horns, then. “I’m sorry I was so rude,” he said, looking at Sherlock.
“Harry’s done something very stupid, and I was upset.” Sherlock gave him a slightly stiff nod;
Mycroft just looked bored, as usual.

Siger gave a slight cough. “Is it something we could help with, John?” he said hesitantly. Mellie
bustled in and sat next to Siger on the couch, joining him in an inquiring look.

And just like that, John realized that he didn’t want to keep Harry’s secret anymore. He was just so
tired of it all—tired of a lifetime’s worth of hiding, and lying, and covering up the Watsons’ dirty
laundry.

“She’s lost a great deal of money. £75,000. Illegal gambling den in Camden. And it’s…neither of us
have it, or can get it, and the people who run the games are making ugly threats,” John said simply.
“I’m trying to figure out what I can do.” Mellie and Siger continued to look concerned, but Sherlock
looked impatient.

“But of course you have the money, John,” the younger man said. “There’s more than enough in the
account.”

John’s eyebrows rose with his temper. “Sherlock, I’ve never had that kind of money in my life, and
you know it. What the hell are you talking about?”

“The income from my trust, of course,” Sherlock said, in his “God, you’re an idiot” tone. “Mycroft
mentioned that you hadn’t spent any of it, so there should be roughly £150,000 in there still,
considering accrued interest and 28 months’ payments.”

The breath whistled out of John’s chest again. He looked to Mycroft and saw the imperious lift of an
eyebrow. John suddenly remembered, from those first awful days after Sherlock’s fall, how Mycroft
had shown up several times with a briefcase full of papers and attempted to engage John in a
discussion of Sherlock’s “will”. John refused to speak to him multiple times, with increasing degrees
of rudeness. Mycroft had finally resorted to leaving a large manila envelope with Mrs. Hudson; John
snatched it from her hands and shoved it, unopened, into the fireplace.

He was, suddenly, quite furious, for no clear reason. “You paid me while you were gone?” he said,
in an awful voice. “You gave me money to bide my time while you were away? You presumed,
since that was likely the only way you’d ever kept a friend in the past, that I required *compensation* to…you tried to *bribe me* to stay, even when I thought you were *dead?*” he continued, his voice shaking with rage.

All the air was sucked out of the room, and the inhabitants had gone completely still. And it was only now, when the bile had flowed out of his mouth, when he had spoken those ugly words, unfiltered and hateful, to his friend, that he saw Sherlock’s face—bleached white, and wearing that blank mask that always, always hid pain. The younger man stood abruptly, spun on his heels and tore out of the room, heading towards the back door, to the garden and the woods. After an appalled pause, Siger also stood and went after him, casting a reproachful glance back at John as he left.

Mycroft moved slightly from his stance by the fireplace, so that he could be assured of John’s full attention. “My brother was concerned that you would be unable to meet the full expenses of Baker Street in his absence,” he said, in an arid tone that didn’t attempt to mask the contempt underlying it. “He wished to ensure that his departure, his potentially *permanent* departure, didn’t impact your security in your home or life.” He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room.

John suddenly found all the strength had fled from his legs. He landed on the sofa with a thump, half-dazed at what had just happened. Then he looked around and realized he was sharing the room with Mellie Holmes—but not quite the Mellie Holmes he was used to seeing.

“I have grown quite fond of you, John, but I confess I am feeling less so at the moment, since you decided to vent your own frustrations on my son, who is not emotionally equipped to respond in kind, at least not to you,” she said, in a voice like a steel blade. “Sherlock has never been noted for his social acumen, certainly, but I assure you he has never in his life tried to *buy* a friend.” She paused a moment, then continued, a little tremor present in her voice. “And he has, for some time, assured us that you are indeed his friend. But this demonstration gives me considerable room for doubt.”

John still felt stunned (at least, in the parts of his mind that weren’t reeling in horror). “Oh, God,” he moaned. “My God. I am so sorry. I just…I have no idea where that came from. I don’t believe any of that rot, I swear. I would never…” he started to rise. “I have to find Sherlock,” he began, only to have Mellie reach out and take possession of his arm.

“Wait a bit,” she said, her tone somewhat softer than before. “Let Siger see to him first. Before you came along, Siger was usually in charge of explaining emotional things to Sherlock, and he’s quite good at it. Much better than I am, actually,” she continued, with a rueful smile.

John was still lost. “I wish to Christ he could explain it to me as well, then,” he confessed. “I’m just…flattened. Horrified. Sick,” he said, indeed feeling ill.

Mellie’s expression had eased as she viewed John’s reactions. “That’s appropriate,” she said wryly. “And I’m glad that you wish to make amends; I’m sure Sherlock will give you the opportunity, once he’s calmed down a bit.” She tugged at John’s arm gently. “But I think first we should perhaps try to understand why that just happened, don’t you?”
Five minutes later, they were settled at the kitchen table over tea. Neither Siger nor Sherlock had returned. Mellie, in that way peculiar to Holmeses, had read his mind. “They won’t be back for some time, I imagine. Sherlock needs more time to process such things than, well, most people. Don’t worry; Siger will stay with him.”

“Now,” Mellie continued, in a businesslike tone, “let’s talk. You indicated you didn’t believe any of what you said. Is that true, or was that simply for my benefit?” There was no anger in her tone, but she retained a certain coolness that John hated to hear.

“No, God no, of course I didn’t mean it,” John said instantly. “I just…I was angry with Harry, and angry with myself, and…just so tired,” he sighed.

Mellie raised her eyebrows, in a way identical to her youngest. “Tired of what? Tired of being here?”

John cringed. “No, not that. It’s been…I love it here, truly,” he said, trying to put every ounce of conviction he could into his voice. “This whole thing with my hands could have been just horrible, and you’ve made it—not enjoyable, certainly, but just mildly frustrating as opposed to an ordeal. And I can’t thank you enough.”

Mellie nodded, somewhat mollified. “Then we’re back to our original point. What are you tired of, John?”

And just like that, John knew. “Lying. Hiding. Cleaning up the mess, over and over again.” He felt guilty, briefly—a learned response, over years of being the “fixer”, the one who was supposed to make it all better. But some part of him felt suddenly free.

“And why did you lie initially? Why did you think it necessary to hide anything?” Mellie asked.

“Now? Absolutely no idea,” John said simply. “It’s what we did, you know. ‘Don’t let the neighbors know’,” he added, with a slightly damp chuckle. “And it never occurred to me to stop, even after it no longer mattered a damn.” He looked Mellie in the eye. “I learned, very young, that the best way to divert people from what was going on was to attack something, or someone, else. My dad was a master at that.”

“A lesson you apparently learned very well,” Mellie said dryly. “Though, to be fair, that’s a tactic Sherlock has also often employed, for slightly different reasons.” She gave John a tiny smile.

Mellie hesitated before she continued. “Now I have another question for you, but you needn’t feel you have to answer this one if you’re uncomfortable.”

John nodded, a silent assent.

“And why are you still cleaning up after your sister?” she asked, in an entirely neutral tone. Seeing his face start to cloud over, she continued hurriedly. “Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not asking if you should do it or not; I’m asking why you do. Because I think perhaps understanding your reasons might have something to do with your feeling so overwhelmed by it.”

John started to answer, then stopped and thought, really thought, about the answer. Before he could come to a conclusion, Mellie spoke again.

“I have a reason for asking,” she said. “Mycroft, Siger and I have spent considerable time over the years cleaning up after Sherlock’s problems, as I’m sure you know. And it’s often exhausting, and discouraging, and sometimes, frankly, quite terrifying. But we willingly do so because we love him, and we know it is rarely intentional on his part, and because we are aware that, if the circumstances were reversed, he would do the same for any of us, however much he would grumble about doing
so.” She lowered her gaze to her hands, giving John some emotional distance before continuing. “I have to wonder, though, how we would feel if we didn’t realize that—if we only did so out of a sense of obligation. I’m sure we would continue to do what needed to be done. But I’m also sure that we would resent it, and ultimately resent him.”

John was suddenly knocked completely off-kilter; it was as if he had been viewing the world through a specific filter, and that filter had suddenly been removed. He knew, had admitted to himself long since, that he resented Harry’s recklessness, her drinking, her willingness to lean on him (or anyone else available) while giving very little back. But he realized now that, in that recognition, he had lost sight of something else very important, something vital: he loved his sister, and his sister loved him, however much they fought and clawed at one another. And when they were young children, they had been everything to each other.

John opened his mouth, started to reply, then closed it again. Finally, “You’re absolutely right,” he said.

Mellie gave him a smile very like the one Sherlock used when John worked through something on his own. “It changes things, doesn’t it?” she said, in a pleased tone. John nodded. “We were...we went through counseling, you know, when Sherlock was at his worst,” she went on. “It was very difficult, because he refused to engage at all. But we were very lucky in finding a therapist for the rest of us who asked us that very question. And I like to believe it’s made all the difference.”

John suddenly felt his eyes grow a bit misty. “God, I’m glad I came here,” he said, reaching out gingerly for Mellie’s hand with his bandaged fingers. Mellie beamed in return. “And I’m very glad you did as well,” she said firmly.

After another few companionable minutes, John wandered back to the garden to wait for Sherlock. Siger came first, and sat in the glider swing under the arbor. He patted the seat beside him. “Come join me,” he said, not quite smiling but no longer actively upset, thank God.

“I was going to go after Sherlock,” John said weakly. He wasn’t looking forward to another abject apology, no matter how warranted.

“He’ll be along,” Siger said easily. “He’s checking his nests and warrens first. But in the meantime, I think you and I need to chat a bit.”

John sighed and sat down. “I’m so sorry,” he said miserably. “Please believe that I didn’t mean any of that.”

“Well, you’ll need to tell Sherlock that, of course, but I knew you didn’t as soon as you said it,” Siger said. “But I thought you and I could talk about a couple of things nonetheless.” He paused, then continued, looking earnestly at John. “You know that Sherlock has had a long history with addiction, yes?”

John blinked. Not at all the way he expected this conversation to go. “Yes?” he said uncertainly.

“And Sherlock has shared with me that your sister has had similar issues with alcohol. I hope you
don’t mind him having done so?” Siger asked.

John shook his head. “Done with hiding, thanks. Your wife is a very wise woman,” he added with a smile.

“Yes, she is,” Siger agreed. “We neither of us were very wise initially during all of that… addressing Sherlock’s issues. We kept thinking that if we worked hard enough at it, found enough information for him, found the right treatments, we could fix him, solve the addiction. And we finally had to realize that ‘fixing’ it wasn’t possible without his agreement, and that continuing to throw ‘solutions’ at him really wasn’t our job, for lack of a better term. I would hope…I’d like to see you not go down the same path any longer, John. It just makes everyone even more unhappy than they already are.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” asked John, a little bitterly. “Let her continue to ruin her life, without trying to help?”

“Support her, as you can—let her know she can come to you for help, where it’s reasonable to do so. Don’t feel guilty for the things you can’t help with. Love her. But most of all, remember that it’s her life, not yours,” Siger said simply.

“I’m…I suppose I would say I’m willing to work on that. But that doesn’t help right now—these are very bad people she’s involved in, Siger, and I can’t ignore that,” John said helplessly.

“Well, as to that,” Siger began, somewhat hesitantly, “Myc has taken it in hand. Unless something very unlikely happens, I believe your sister will be fine.”

John, once again, was taken off at the knees. For Mycroft to have done that, knowing how he felt about John’s recent actions…

“Sherlock asked him to,” Siger continued. “Not that Myc minds, certainly—illegal gambling operations are something he can easily hand off to the Met. He just made sure it was handled, well, expeditiously, shall we say.”

John blinked. This extraordinary family. He knew exactly how reluctant Sherlock was to ask his brother for anything—just one more thing to reproach himself for. Speaking of—he looked up to see Sherlock passing through the gate from the woods to the garden. Siger looked as well and stood, waving at his son.

He turned back to John. “Stay a bit, won’t you?” he asked softly. “I know you and Sherlock need to talk, and it’ll be easier out here.” He then wandered back towards the house, humming a bit as he went.

Sherlock spotted John on the bench and paused, a frown on his face. Then he came forward like a spooked housecat, wary and silent. John noticed with a wince that he was very pale and holding his arm tightly against his chest. Much more exercise this morning than he needed as yet, clearly.

John stood and hurried over, herding an unresisting Sherlock to the bench. “Come over here,” he said gently. “You look exhausted, and I need you sitting down so I can grovel appropriately.”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said impatiently, but John noticed that he sat with a tiny audible sigh of relief. Then he looked briefly at John through his lashes before looking back down at his feet.

“I was a dick,” John said bluntly. That, at least, got Sherlock’s head back up. The younger man gave him a searching look, apparently looking for sarcasm or some other impenetrable social convention that Sherlock didn’t understand, before relaxing slightly when he realized John’s sincerity.
“I didn’t realize you didn’t know about the money,” Sherlock offered hesitantly. “I thought you had just decided to save it. People do.” Well, people other than Sherlock, anyway. John knew very well that Sherlock had no idea what his own bank account looked like, nor did he care, so long as he had food (a bit), clothing (a lot) and shelter (preferably Baker Street). Well, that and cab fare.

“I know,” John said repentantly. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Sherlock. I was upset about Harry, and I took it out on you. That was very wrong of me. And what I said…I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean any of it, I hope you know that.”

“That’s what Dad said,” Sherlock said softly. “But you had never spoken to me like that before,” he continued, obviously troubled. “You’ve been angry with me many times, and I usually knew why. I usually deserved it. But…did the money…was it a bribe? I didn’t think so, as such things are usually described. But I can’t deny that I wanted to make sure that you could stay at Baker Street. It was…I liked to think of you there, while I was away.” He lapsed into silence, once again staring at his feet.

“It wasn’t a bribe,” John said firmly. “I was doing one of your old tricks—finding the worst thing I could possibly say, because I was angry at Harry and you were a ready target.” He crouched down in front of Sherlock, reaching out carefully with bandaged fingers to gently push that long chin up. “I am your friend. I am proud to be your friend, and I know it would never enter your head to try to ‘buy’ me. I hurt your feelings,” and at that Sherlock shook his head slightly, but John didn’t let go, “and I’m very, very sorry for that. Can you accept my apology? Please?”

“Of course, John,” Sherlock said, a little gruffly. “Now get up—Mummy is watching from the window, and she’ll be out here to meddle otherwise. The woman is impossible,” he continued, with a small flicker of a grin.

“And thank God for it,” John laughed, relieved. “For both of them.” He stood and held out his arm to help the younger man up (managing, at the last second, to remember not to offer a damaged hand). “Come on. We’re well into morning Telly Time, and you need a kip anyway. If you hurry I’ll let you have my extra cushion for your side.” Sherlock huffed and complied, and they walked companionably back inside.

Chapter End Notes

A brief note on children of alcoholics--I'm not one, but I had a friend growing up who was. Her experience fit in very well with the literature I've read (and with John, in this story)--children tend to fall into defined roles in the family, and one is often the Caretaker. That child grows up trying to "fix" things where possible, and to hide things that aren't fixable; that dynamic (and the coping strategies they see as children, within such a family) often follow them into adulthood. I can see John being that kid.

Just an Epilogue to follow, now.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Our voyagers finally head home.

Chapter Notes

Well, that's the whole of it, my dears. Kath, I hope this had at least some of what you hoped for!

Just as a reminder for my "regulars", I'm going to now be turning fairly soon to my next epic, "Redemption". It's a slight AU--compliant up until the tarmac--and my "keywords" for it are: fencing, plague, and espionage. Be there or be square!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A week later, John and Sherlock were both ready to go home, John because Mary was increasingly anxious for his return, and Sherlock because, as his health improved, his threshold for boredom lowered. After Sherlock and Mellie had a flaming row about whose turn it was to dry the dishes, all parties involved conceded that it was time. Mycroft would be sending a car on Wednesday morning.

Before that, though, there was time for a few more rounds of Telly Time, and the highly entertaining process of watching Mellie and Siger beat Sherlock at Trivial Pursuit. The Holmeses had an older set tucked away in a cabinet, and John had mentioned the “barter system” of play to Mellie one afternoon over tea. That evening, game play replaced the telly. Sherlock won one game and lost two, and pouted for the remainder of the night, while Mellie and Siger wore exceptionally pleased grins.

The afternoon before their departure, John and Mellie spent a pleasant time in the kitchen baking shortbread (John’s role being much more “supervisory” than not—he still wasn’t comfortably able to handle small utensils, and Mellie really only needed a conversational partner anyway). It was a lovely spring day, and they could look out into the garden through the open window and see Sherlock, Siger and Nicky Hardy***, the daughter of Mycroft’s oldest friend, playing a cutthroat game of Snap at the picnic table. The wispy girl, clad in typical uni-student black-on-black, abruptly stood, pointed her finger at Sherlock, and raced into the kitchen (while Mellie beamed) to grab a bowl of grapes off the counter. She then dashed back outside to pelt Sherlock with them while Siger chuckled and Sherlock, face pink with laughter, held both hands up to defend himself.

John found himself laughing along with them. Mellie looked over at him. "He taught her all of those childrens' card games when she was 4," she said. “He cheats,” she added with a grin, before turning back to the shortbread. John shook his head in wonder at the scene. “Mellie, the two of you, this place, are so good for him.”

Mellie looked up in mild surprise. “Well, it is his home, John. I would hope it would always be comfortable for him, even though he finds it too calm to stay for any length of time when he’s healthy.”
John chuckled. "Well, that’s true—but that’s not entirely what I meant. The house is lovely, of course. But the two of you just…” he wasn’t sure how to finish that, and found himself awkwardly trailing off.

Mellie, that practical woman, didn’t pretend she didn’t know what he meant. “We understand him, you mean? Not as completely as we’d like to, sometimes, but it is rather in our job description, after all.” She paused, as if considering, before continuing in a gentler tone. “Siger shared what you told him about your parents. I hope you don’t mind?”

John shook his head. “Course not. It’s as I told him—I’m done with secrets, at least Watson ones.”

Mellie nodded. “So I can tell you that I agree with Siger—no child should ever have to go through something like that. I’m so sorry you did. None of us are perfect parents—God knows, we made our mistakes with our children, even though I like to think we’re wiser now. But those mistakes never included making our children feel unsafe or unwanted.”

She hesitated a moment before continuing, in a firmer voice. “I’m sure Sherlock has told you—or maybe you’ve observed it yourself—I am a meddlesome woman. Given what you are to our son, and given that we are extremely fond of you, you should know that I now have fair rein to be meddlesome with you as well, John Watson. I’m not your mother, I know, but I don’t believe your own was very good at the job, so…just consider yourself warned,” she continued, with a faint blush and a bob of the head that was reminiscent of her son when he expressed what he considered “sentiment”.

“Duly noted,” John said, a bit hoarsely. “And appreciated.” Mellie gave him a brisk hug and turned back to her shortbread, while Sherlock’s deep laughter rang from the back garden.

The next morning, they all gathered in the forecourt to load the car and say their goodbyes (while Sherlock huffed and pouted and generally made a nuisance of himself. John was mildly ashamed to realize that he was enjoying the spectacle). They finally managed to get away, climbing into the back seat around bags full of shortbread, baked ham sandwiches and jugs of cider (“in case you decide to stop on the way, John”—Mellie knew better than to offer it to Sherlock).

“The trip only takes an hour, Mummy,” Sherlock sniped. “Even Mycroft’s driver can’t make it last long enough for us to need provisions.”

The car went to Baker Street first, and John helped Sherlock and Mrs. H. carry Sherlock’s things inside (well, John only carried the food, as Sherlock was quick to point out when Mrs. H. chided Sherlock for carrying nothing, initially. John held up his still lightly-bandaged hands and waved them sardonically at his friend, who scowled and stomped upstairs with the remaining luggage).

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John felt tremendous relief to be back in the car and finally headed home (after a fond farewell from Mrs. Hudson, and an awkward goodbye from Sherlock). That relief lasted only until the car turned the last corner, and he saw Mary standing disconsolately on the kerb, while workmen dashed in and out of the flat’s open door. Mary hustled over for a distracted hug, then answered his upraised eyebrows. “Burst pipe,” she said mournfully.
It was Wednesday, after all.

Chapter End Notes

***See Scheherezade. Nicky appears in the same story referenced earlier, about the fertility clinic. Sherlock child-minded her from the time he was 14.

End Notes

*See Chapter 18 of Scheherezade (though you might want to back up a few chapters to get the beginning of the case).

Some medical notes: Chicken pox can be very dangerous for adults. Pneumonia is one of the known possible secondary infections, and the info about the at-risk populations for collapsed lungs is accurate. My fellow Americans will be surprised to hear that, in researching this, I learned that the UK doesn't normally vaccinate children against chicken pox (though it's been common in the US for more than 20 years).

And dangerous yeast? Yup, it can be--some forms of yeast have been implicated in a variety of neurological disorders. But no, I don't know which yeast Sherlock was monkeying around with (since I knew maryagrawatson would ask...)

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