Hiraeth

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Hiraeth

by BiancaAparo

Summary

'Sherlock scowled, “This is the thanks I receive for coming to fetch you.”

“I never asked you to come get me!” Violet shouted as he slammed the bedroom door...’
Hello and thank you for waiting so patiently for Part 4!

Slight change in format; I've made the chapters shorter, but that means there are more chapters. The plan is to post once a week until this fic is out of WIP hell. Then I'll post twice a week (real life allowing...)

There is another fandom in this fic that's not tagged because of spoilers.

Huge thanks and love to my beta cadoganwest, who betas with a migraine. You don't get much more BAMF than that. XOXO.

SO - let's start this story off with a trigger warning for violence and a promise of smut!

Thank you for sticking with me and this story for so long and all the comments, kudos, bookmarks and subscriptions :^)

Notes

Post SE401 Premiere Note: SO I might be in the minority because I really I liked the season premiere of Series Four. That being said, this alternative universe is only canon-compliant up to Series Three. It takes a hard left turn after HLV with some nods towards TAB and Series Four doesn't exist. Not because I hated TST, but because the majority of this fic (which is nearly 2/3 complete at this time) was written before TST aired.

SO for everyone who HATED TST and wishes it doesn't exist.... welcome to this world :^)
Irregular Opening

Chapter Summary

Irregular Opening

In early 19th century chess literature, all openings which did not begin with either 1.e4 e5 or 1.d4 d5 were classified as "irregular". As opening theory developed and many openings previously considered "irregular" became standard (e.g. the Sicilian Defence), the term gradually became less common. Opening books today are more likely to describe debuts such as 1.b4 (the Sokolsky Opening) as "uncommon" or "unorthodox".

The Solitary Hunter Series

Series Four: Hiraeth

*There's something too sure to say*
I was too afraid
It was just hard to let you know
Now it's all too late

What we had was beautiful
I didn't want to wreck it all
Every day I think about the truth

I wish I was
I wish I was
Brave enough to love you
Brave enough to love you…

Stripped away the walls I built
But no one ever has
The hardest part is never known
If we were meant to last…

From *Brave Enough*, Lindsey Stirling

**

*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.*”
From *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

**

“Don’t make people into heroes, John. Heroes don’t exist, and if they did, I wouldn’t be one of them.”

From *The Great Game*
Chapter One: Irregular Opening

“John?”

“Good morning,” John reached over to run his fingertips lightly over those sharp cheekbones, still in awe of the fact that it’s OK, I can do this now, touch him like this now. “Did I wake you?”

“Mmmm, part of me,” the sleepy, smoky voice informed John while long, white arms snaked around John’s shoulders and torso.

John huffed a gentle breath of laughter while pushing back the coal-black fringe to place a kiss on his brow. John could most definitely feel which part of his body was fully awake as the owner of the robust baritone nestled in closer to him.

“Oh really?” John smoothed back the curls again to plant another kiss.

“Obviously,” was the mildly amused reply. His voice was sleepy but still rich and resonant. Like honey and whisky, it is, John knew he could listen to That Voice for the rest of his life. And he hoped to God he could.

Then That Voice demanded, with eyes still closed, “What time is it?”

“It’s about nine o’clock.”

“In the morning?”

“Mm, yeah,” John lazily skimmed his palm down the scarred back, no longer horrified by the ridges of scar tissue. Saddened, yes. Always. Horrified, no. Never again. The whip marks were just as much a part of him as the bullet-wound in his own shoulder and the dog-bite marks in his arm and calf were a part of John.

“I should kill you now,” Sherlock grumbled, dipping his head into the crook of John’s neck and shoulder, “Waking me at this ungodly hour.”

“Says the man who thinks sleep is boring,” John reached down to tease the Part of Sherlock that was Fully Awake, ghosting it with his fingertips.

“I never said sleep was boring,” Sherlock’s voice strained against John’s skin, creating a pleasant vibration. “I said slows me down. Big. Difference.”

“Mm, OK,” John now lightly dragged his fingernails up and down Sherlock’s back. He had learned just last night this was something that made The Great Detective absolutely weak in the knees. “Whatever you say, love.”

“Ugh. Pet names,” he snarled but his body betrayed his harsh words, indolently rubbing back and forth against John. He muttered, “Insipid,” against John’s throat before mouthing kisses up and down his neck.

“Mm-hmm,” John hummed before seeking Sherlock’s mouth. “Yeah,” he pressed a soft, lingering kiss against his lips. “Yeah,” he breathed before bequeathing a second kiss, a little less lingering, a little more insistent. “You’re right,” he flicked his tongue against Sherlock’s mouth until he parted his lips. After that, the kisses became hot, wet and unrelenting, almost needy.
“Pet names,” John gasped when he finally needed air, “Stupid, completely daft.”

“Knew you’d see it my way,” Sherlock panted. Then he finally opened his eyes.

John knew he could live a hundred years and never cease being surprised by those kaleidoscopic eyes. Eyes that saw everything while revealing nothing. *Almost revealing nothing*, John amended to himself. He had learned over time to spot the little signs, to observe the emotion emitting from those mercurial eyes that other, less observant people wouldn’t notice.

This morning they were the softest blue-green John had ever seen them. The gold was nearly absent from his irises, except for the tiny aurous starbursts that would never completely diminish.

Sherlock had pulled away just enough to study John’s face with his usual intensity. John, very used to this by now, merely dropped his head to the pillow. He reached up to push a black curl off Sherlock’s sweaty forehead. Well, mostly black. “Found another grey hair, love.”

“You did not,” Sherlock muttered, sounding like the child he could still be sometimes.

But John saw it, that flash, that split-second of emotion. No one else would have spotted it, but John knew... knew *him*. Sherlock was clearly trying to work something out. Since it probably involved feelings, he most definitely was struggling for an answer.

Before John could ask though, Sherlock blurted out with his usual lack of tact. “What were you thinking? Before I fully awoke this morning?”


“You were watching me sleep. You were thinking… but what were… err…” Sherlock trailed off.

“I was thinking… that I love you. And that I led you down a long hard road to get here…”

**

15 January 2016
Somewhere in London
Friday
Time Unknown

“John? John?”

John Watson cracked open an eye.

He could only open one eye. The other had swollen completely shut.

*Please don’t let me be hallucinating...* he thought as the all-too-familiar crushing sensation of panic and anxiety enveloped him. He knew he was febrile, didn’t have to be a doctor or a genius to deduce *that*. Dried blood and feverish sweat coated his body. He had been stripped of his winter coat and jumper before Professor Moriarty (because that was how Mr. Kincaid, the old lion had introduced himself *this time*) gave the order to Holy Peters to start beating the ever-living shit out of him. The Professor had filmed the beating on his camera phone. John’s last coherent thought was he knew they would send the video to Sherlock and he wished to God Almighty that they wouldn’t.

Things became hazy when Peters got tired of using his fists and brought out a bat, an aluminum one, like the ones Americans use in baseball.
He came to later, lying in his bloody T-shirt and jeans in an unheated, damp cellar of some abandoned building. Obviously they left him to die. They left him because they wanted Sherlock to find him. They also apparently wanted his death to be slow and painful.

So it was no real mystery whether or not he was running a fever.

The mystery was why he was feverish, in other words, where was the infection?

He knew he had internal injuries. He had felt a rib give way when the aluminum bat connected with his torso. He also knew that his left fingers and wrist were shattered. Before John had passed out from the beating, Peters had made sure to stomp down on his hand hard as he strolled out, as a sort of a farewell. John heard the crack, felt the hot, sharp pain radiate from his fingertips up his arm then he had slipped into unconsciousness after one last gasp of pain.

("fucking bastards, I’m left-handed, of course they’d make sure to break the left hand…")

“John?”

He parted his lips, wincing as he felt them crack and bleed anew. He attempted to sit up then immediately collapsed as he felt fire rip through his left side, roaring from beneath his rib cage all the way up to his left shoulder. He also immediately felt the dirty floor beneath him dip and weave. His stomach clenched but there was nothing to bring up.

It’s not been three days yet… he thought blearily. One can only go three days without water and my last drink was… his thoughts trailed off as he became acutely aware how parched his mouth and throat were now. I don’t want to die thirsty… dear God, let me live…

“John?”

He tried to call out, tried to form words, tried to shout, but even that slight pressure from his diaphragm, to draw a deep breath in order to have enough air to shout brought another wave of burning pain throughout his left side while the dirty cellar started to spin again… spleen… there’s an injury to my spleen… ruptured? Dunno… hurts though… God it fucking hurts… Jesus Christ… please, make it stop… I can’t… I can’t…

“Oi? John? John Watson? Where are you?”

A different voice, but no less comforting: Greg Lestrade.

Of course Sherlock would rally the troops. Hell, he wouldn’t be surprised if Sherlock had recruited Mrs. Hudson or Molly in the search as well as Violet.

Violet… Violet is in trouble… Mycroft wants to deport her to America, so she can testify against… someone… but… she can’t leave, she’s ill…. except I don’t remember what… again John’s thoughts tapered off as his heart rate started to race while his blood pressure began to plummet.

“John?”

Sherlock’s voice again, sounding more anguished and desperate than ever.

John licked his lips, on purpose for once. He did his best to call out but only managed to rasp, “Here, I’m here, down here…” as he closed his eye. Even keeping one eye open was too much effort. “I’m here… please…”

Sick with pain and fatigue, John had forgotten Sherlock’s eerie wolf-like hearing. Before he knew it,
a pair of leather-clad hands carefully cradled his bruised and battered face. “John?”

“Sherlock,” John wheezed as he opened his good eye.

The combined look of relief and panic on Sherlock’s shadowed face made John wonder if this possibly was a hallucination after all. A comforting dream his fevered brain concocted before certain death. Dream or not, he watched Sherlock shout over his shoulder for medics and a stretcher and to hurry the bloody hell up because Dr. Watson obviously had a splenic rupture.

“I knew you’d find me,” John’s voice was little better than a strangled whisper.

“Shh, shh, shh, don’t speak, it’s too taxing…” Sherlock used his teeth to tug the glove off his right hand then started carding John’s filthy hair that now looked completely grey instead of the usual silvery-blond. “Just… keep your eyes on me, can you do that?” He continued to cup John’s cheek with his gloved, left hand.

But John couldn’t, not even for Sherlock. His eyelid drooped shut again. God, I’m so tired…

“No, no, no, don’t. John, don’t. Stop this. Stay with me, please.”

John idly wondered why he felt little drips of water splashing on his face.

He started rambling, whispering hoarsely again that he knew Sherlock would find him and it was OK, really, everything was OK now, maybe it was meant to end up like this, that the universe was sorting itself out and he didn’t have to worry about Sherlock being alone because he had Violet now and she loved him as much as he did… because I do, you’re my best friend, the best man, the best everything… the best thing to ever happen to me…

“Stop it, you’re talking nonsense, you’re being stupid.” The words were harsh, but the voice, That Voice, that resonant, authoritative baritone trembled.

“Just… promise…” John felt his strength ebbing. Awkwardly, he reached up with his right hand, wanting to touch Sherlock’s face. Instead he weakly clutched at lapel of the Belstaff.

“John, you’re going to be fine, you’re going to be alright…”

“Promise me you’ll find her, find Maisie before Mary does… find her and raise her…”

“John?”

“… as your own child.”

“What?”

“You and Violet, together, be her parents. Her mum and dad,” John finished before passing out.

**

15 January 2016
The Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew
Friday night
11:51 PM

Detective-Inspector Greg Lestrade studied the paper cup of tea in his hands as if it were the Holy Grail. He didn’t look up until he heard footfalls coming closer. Only then did he raise his head to see his wife, Molly Hooper-Lestrade and John’s wife, Mary Morstan-Watson approaching.
Both women’s faces were as white as snow and they carried their winter coats now that they were inside. They had both obviously dressed in a rush. Faded jeans and jumpers normally not worn outside the house. Mary wore an old jumper of John’s, the hems of the sleeves fraying. Molly had a spit-up stain on her cardigan, the one Lestrade liked, the one with the cherries. Molly’s shoulder-length auburn was tied back in a messy ponytail. Her soft doe-like eyes were wide with concern and worry. She had her arm firmly around Mary’s shoulders, as if she was afraid Mary would bolt at any given moment. Mary had made some sort of attempt to smooth her short platinum hair down but like Molly, hadn’t bothered with any make-up. Her cornflower eyes were glassy and her mouth was drawn tight.

“Hey,” Lestrade put the paper cup on the hideous coffee table and stood up. He furrowed his pewter-grey brows together. “Henry settled in alright at Mrs. Hudson’s?”

“He was a bit fussy, but Mrs. Hudson said she could handle it.”

Lestrade would have preferred to have the child be minded by MI-6, the entire British Army and Mary Poppins, but Mrs. Hudson would have to do. His stomach twisted, thinking about what had happened to John; how he had been tortured mentally and physically just to get to Sherlock.

Jim Moriarty’s words haunted him still:

See, your child was bought and paid for, Sherlock, before he was even born. I was actually supposed to deliver him today but it may be prudent to wait a bit, let him grow up a little. I’m sure I can convince the buyer of that. Tell him to wait until the boy is… seven? Before taking possession that is…

Little did Lestrade know that (per Sherlock’s request) MI-6 had set up surveillance on Lestrade and his entire family. Agents currently babysat Baker Street as Mrs. Hudson minded the baby.

“How is he?” Mary could barely get the words out as she reached up to clutch Molly’s hand.

“Mary, please. Sit down, just for a moment,” Lestrade gestured to the uncomfortable waiting room love seat he had been occupying. “Let me get you a cuppa, you’re white as a sheet.”

Blinking back tears, she shook her head. Both Greg and Molly knew Mary would have been at the hospital the minute she got the call that John was found alive and being rushed to St. Bart’s, but she had been staying with Mrs. Hudson ever since she found out John had been abducted. No one wanted her alone at the terrace house she shared with John, plus she was still recuperating from her own horrific injuries, when Jim Moriarty returned from the dead and stabbed her in her pregnant belly, causing her to miscarry later that awful night. She still couldn’t walk very fast nor could she drive yet. Mrs. Hudson kindly had offered to drive, but she was one of the worst drivers in London, if not England. Just as she was about to damn the expense and try to hail a taxi, Molly came to the rescue. After he had contacted Mary, Greg had called Molly and told her to fetch Mary.

But one cannot come to the rescue quickly when one had a two and a half month old infant. In agony, Mary had limped back and forth in Mrs. Hudson’s lounge as Sweetie, the bait dog she had rescued, followed her around whining. Finally Molly arrived, carrying an unhappy and howling baby (which was what she considered “a bit fussy”) along with all the necessary infant paraphernalia. Mary longed to scream Hurry the bloody hell up as Molly had handed the caterwauling infant to Mrs. Hudson while issuing instructions.

Mary, however, managed to restrain herself. A tiny bit of logic had punctured through her cloud of agony and terror. John was in surgery. There wasn’t a damn thing she could do while he was on the operating table. The surgeons wouldn’t allow her inside the theater to watch. She was no longer a
nurse, she was Next of Kin.

“Greg,” Mary’s voice wobbled.

She looked so small and pitiful, Lestrade wanted to scoop Mary up in his arms and hug her until all this misery passed. Both he and Molly were oblivious to Mary’s dark side, that the woman they pitied was also the same woman who’d tried to end Sherlock’s life.

He cleared his throat, “He’s still in surgery, Mary. It… it’s bad, I’m afraid,” Lestrade fumbled through the specifics, only half-comprehending the medical gobbledygook the A&E doctor had spouted off as he explained the extent of John’s injuries. Greg Lestrade was not a stupid man and had more than just an elementary understanding of medical terminology, thanks to his job and his wife. But exhaustion and shredded nerves had turned his brain into Swiss cheese. “He’s got a broken rib, a ruptured spleen, a broken hand, and, well it’s going to be a long road, but,” he leaned forward and put a comforting hand on Mary’s shoulder. “We’re all going to be traveling the same road together, yeah?”

Mary tried to be brave. She started nodding her head but her lower lip began to shake. Then her face crumpled and she sobbed uncontrollably into her hand. Molly pulled her closer for a cuddle. As Mary buried her face in Molly’s shoulder, Molly mouthed to her husband, Where’s Sherlock?

He shrugged. Molly frowned then asked out loud, “Where’s Violet?” as she stroked Mary’s hair.

Greg hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Molly’s frown deepened. “She and John were close. She wouldn’t just… I mean, surely she would have…”

“Excuse me?” a pleasant tenor voice with the slightest hint of an Indian accent interrupted them.

The three of them turned and saw a short, stocky man with coppery skin wearing the dark blue scrubs of a surgeon. His hair was hidden by the surgical cap. The surgical mask dangled around his neck.

Molly recognized him and smiled, “Hari.”

Dr. Hari Sodhi smiled, “Hi Molly,” he said, always pleased whenever she said his name, as she was the only one who came close to pronouncing it correctly. Everyone else seemed to want to say Harry instead of Hur-ree. “Greg,” he nodded at the detective-inspector. “Are you Mrs. Watson?” he asked Mary gently. “You are also employed here, yes? In the A&E?”

“Yes,” Mary mopped her face. “I am. How is my husband?” But she didn’t sound as desperate as she had earlier. Surgeons don’t make pleasant chitchat if an operation went wrong.

“Doing splendidly considering he just underwent an emergency splenectomy,” Dr. Sodhi assured her. “He’s a fighter, Mrs. Watson. Mind you, this is just the beginning of a long recovery process. We will also need to go back and properly set his broken wrist and hand later.”

“Why didn’t you take care of that while you were in there?” Lestrade demanded.

Bone-tired and dead on his aching feet, Dr. Sodhi still managed to explain patiently, “The ruptured spleen and other internal bleeding caused by the cracked rib took top priority. Now that he’s stable, rest and pain management are the new top priorities. The hand and wrist can wait a bit since that’s not life-threatening. Also we’ll need to refer him to an orthopaedic surgeon. The damage was… rather extensive I’m afraid. I’m a trauma surgeon. Orthopaedics really is not my specialty,” he added
almost apologetically.

“Oh,” Lestrade cringed, unconsciously flexing his own, healthy, unbroken hand.

“Can I see him?” Mary whispered.

“Yes, of course, but… ah… well, this is a bit awkward…” Dr. Sodhi scratched his nose.

“Is there a tall, thin, unpleasant man standing sentry over Dr. Watson?” Molly asked with half a smile on her lips.

“Black, curly hair? Kind of bluish-green eyes? Rude as all get out?”

“Yeah, that’d be him,” Lestrade sighed. “How many nurses did he make cry?”

“No one, but he’s... a bit terrifying,” Dr. Sodhi confessed. “He’s been hovering by the surgery doors the entire time and once we brought Dr. Watson to recovery, he has refused to leave his side. I know it’s against protocols bu-”

“No, it’s fine,” Mary searched her coat pockets for a tissue. “He’s his best friend. They’re very,” Mary choked, “Close.” She pressed her hand to her heart, “May I see him now?”

“Please,” Dr. Sodhi gestured for Mary to follow him.

Once she was out of earshot, Molly asked, “What do you mean you don’t know where Violet is?”

“Molly, you’re going to be pissed at me.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Lestrade sank back down onto the uncomfortable loveseat. “I’ve been keeping something from you.” He patted the seat next to him. “Violet’s not what she seems to be.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She’s American.”

“What?” Molly dropped her coat and scarf in shock.

“That’s not all...”

As Lestrade proceeded to explain that Violet Smith was actually Violet Hunter, an American federal agent in hiding because she was framed for crimes she did not commit, Mary blindly followed Dr. Sodhi down the hallway towards the recovery ward. She did not see the cheerful, inoffensive pictures on the wall, nor the nurses checking clipboards, nor the doctors checking their smart phones. She didn’t hear the wheels of a gurney squeaking on the floor or a concerned loved one asking the doctor the same question over and over, hoping for a different answer. She was deaf, dumb and blind to everything and everyone. She felt numb but not the comfortable numbness she felt right before a good kill.

She felt dead.

Bit by bit, her world had been crumbling ever since Charles Augustus Magnussen had summoned her to his office that fateful day, that horrible day that set all of this in motion...

“Here he is,” Dr. Sodhi used that hushed tone people use only around seriously ill people. He drew
back the curtain.

Mary tried to stifle her sobs when she saw her husband, the love of her life, the last bit of light in her ever-darkening world, the last fucking good thing in her world. “Oh John,” she breathed as she took in the sight of him, hooked up to machines, tubes running in and out of him, a cannula under his nose to help him breathe. His left hand was splinted and rested suspended on a sling. His face, his dear, sweet face, so expressive, so open and honest, was a mess of bruises.

On the left side of the hospital bed, Sherlock Holmes sat studying him, legs crossed, fingers steepled. His coat, that damn swishy Belstaff, was filthy and he was wearing the same suit and shirt he had been wearing two days ago. His face was sallow and gaunt, like a half-melted candle, the flame about to go out. He needed a bath and a shave.

He flicked his eyes up at her and they were just as eerie and bright as ever. Blue. Green. Gold.

“Thank you, doctor,” Mary whispered and Dr. Sodhi nodded and left them in peace.

“Greg said you found him,” Mary staggered to the chair on the right and sunk down.

“Mm,” Sherlock fixed his eyes on her, never blinking.

Mary wanted to snap at him that this wasn’t the time for him to be making his little deductions. Then she remembered that John had said “he can’t turn it on and off like a tap, love.”

She burst into tears again. “Oh Sherlock,” she wept, hugging her coat to her, at a complete loss. “He actually believes we’re decent people, you and I.”

“I know,” Sherlock bowed his head. “He’s an idiot.”

“Can we,” Mary leaned forward to gently rest her hand on top of John’s unbroken fingers, careful not to disturb the IV catheter stuck in the thin skin on top of his hand. “Can we pretend for tonight that you’re a kind man and I’m a good wife and we deserve him?”

“We can entertain that pleasant fiction for this evening.”

Mary tried to pull herself together. “Where’s Violet? Off to get coffee?”

Sherlock shook his head, starting to disappear into himself.

“Sherlock?” Mary tilted her head as Sherlock stretched out his long legs and crossed his arms. “Where is Violet?”

“Gone.”
Adjournment

Chapter Summary

Adjournment:

Suspension of a chess game with the intention to finish it later. It was once very common in high-level competition, often occurring soon after the first time control, but the practice has been abandoned due to the advent of computer analysis.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Two: Adjournment

16 January 2016
221 Baker Street
Saturday morning
5:51 AM

Without even looking, Sherlock withdrew money from his wallet and mumbled, “Keep the change,” as he handed the folded bank notes to the cab driver.

“You owe me another tenner, mister,” the cabbie, a hefty, pasty-skinned fellow with patchy bald spots drawled. He held out his gloved hand, palm up and waited.

Sherlock jerked his head up, his eyes first widening then narrowed. “You picked me up at the hospital at the visitor’s entrance precisely forty-nine minutes ago, which is how I know you took the scenic route in order to inflate my fare. That being said, I had exactly sixty pounds in my wallet, two twenty pound notes, a ten pound note and two fives, which not only would have covered your fare (should you have chosen to be honest and taken the direct route to my home) but provided a more than adequate tip. Since you decided I really must have wanted to direct around Big Ben and Parliament as if I were some Yankee tourist, your tip is now quite miniscule but there is still enough there to cover the fare.”

The cabbie blanched. Given the hour he had picked up Sherlock from the hospital and how knackered he looked, the cabbie thought the tall, thin man in the dirty suit and smelly coat wasn’t paying attention, that he would be an easy mark. He, like so many criminals before him, he had thought wrong.

“I-” he pulled his hand away now.

“Shut up,” Sherlock snarled. “You are, by far, the most boring criminal I have yet to encounter in my career. Preying on exhausted hospital visitors who have been emotionally drained after seeing their loved ones in pain in order to earn an extra five or ten pounds? Honestly,” Sherlock shook his head as if he still had his shaggy mop of black curls instead of the shorter cropped look he had gotten before going back to Paris the second time last December. “Could you possibly be anymore lacklustre in your criminal efforts?”
“Gimmee all your money or I’ll beat the shite out of you,” the cabbie tried to sound threatening but ended up squeaking instead.

“How? You’re at least two stones overweight. Judging by the rings under your eyes and the red in your sclera, you’ve worked a double-shift so you’re clearly exhausted. You also have been unwell, sore throat, mild fever,” Sherlock droned as the cabbie grabbed his swollen throat. “Before you could even heft your portly arse out of the driver’s seat, I’ll already be inside with the door locked and the kettle boiled.”

“I know where you live, I can always come back,” the cabbie sounded a bit more menacing now.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Everyone knows where I live. Did you not hear me when I gave the address or was this location,” he gestured towards the block of flats. “Just a lucky guess?”

The cabbie finally put two and two together. “Oh.” His mouth made a perfect O, which made him look perfectly ridiculous. “You’re him.”

“And you’re a moron.”

“You’re actually a bigger dick in person than you are on the telly,” the cabbie sounded awestruck now.

Sherlock had enough. He hadn’t slept since…

(... since Violet disappeared...)

… since John had been kidnapped. His head pounded, his bones ached. He needed a shower, tea, maybe food but most definitely sleep and in that exact order.

He opened the cab door, “Go away before I decide to ring your supervisor. I’m well acquainted with the London Black Cabs and I doubt a call from me would endear you to your boss.” Before Sherlock got of the cab, he added in a nasty, spiteful voice. “And thank you, by the way, for wearing gloves, even though your rash is not contagious, well,” he smirked, “At least it’s not contagious by a handshake.”

“What rash?”

“How thick are you? I can see the raised pustules in the sliver of skin between your glove and coat sleeve.”

“Wha-?” The cabbie tugged his shabby coat sleeve down. “Are you really criticizing my eczema when you smell like you’ve been at the bottom of a skip for a month?”

“I am aware of how pungent I am at the moment, but my problem can be remedied with a hot bath. Your problem is going to require a more complicated solution.”

“My… problem?”

“Oh yes. A rash that doesn’t itch, fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, headaches, oh and can’t forget about your hair. That’s not male pattern baldness.”

“What?”

“You may fancy a chat with your wife, sir,” Sherlock purred. “She’s been unfaithful and she gave you syphilis. Ta-ta,” and with that, he slid out of the taxi and slammed the door. He was safely inside
Baker Street before the cabbie could recover.

Alone at last, he slumped against the door, running his hand over his tired face, trying to process everything that had happened within the last forty-eight hours. He shook his head, realizing he couldn’t. His Transport was overriding the Mind, as it was wont to do from time to time. He leaned his head back against the door and closed his eyes…

... he kept his eyes on the jet plane as it roared past them while it rose from the earth, the wheels tucking themselves inside the belly of the plane.

Then the plane exploded…

His eyes flew open as his breath hitched. He forced himself to slowly inhale and to relax as he surveyed his surroundings, taking comfort in familiar things despite the dim light.

“Right,” he mumbled as he automatically reached for his scarf. Then he remembered he hadn’t been wearing on That Night…

No sentiment. Don’t give my brother the pleasure of your pain…

Never…

Good girl… then he had looped his scarf around her throat and she had teased him…

I thought you said no sentiment?

He felt the unfamiliar stinging of tears as the weight of John’s ordeal and Violet’s departure rested heavily on his thin shoulders. He stoutly told himself to pull it together.

He unbuttoned the Belstaff and hung it on the hooks by the staircase. Hopefully Mrs. Hudson would find it and take it to her dry-cleaner, who must be some sort of sorcerer. The man had gotten all sorts of questionable stains out of his beloved coat without even raising an eyebrow.

He plodded up the seventeen steps to his empty flat.

Well, not entirely empty.

The minute the door creaked open, Gladstone leapt from his spot on the sofa and trotted towards Sherlock. Sherlock managed to crack a smile and drop down to one knee. “Hello Stone,” he said in a warm, affectionate voice only a few people knew he was capable of producing. “Have you been a good boy for Mrs. Hudson?”

But Gladstone broke away from Sherlock and started pacing and whining, obviously looking for someone… oh.

“She’s not here,” Sherlock knew it was futile to try and explain the concept of Gone to a dog.

Gladstone continued to whine and pace, clearly agitated now. His big, brown doggy eyes pleaded: Where is she?

“I don’t know, Stone,” Sherlock scratched Gladstone’s ears. “At least, I don’t know yet.”

He straightened up and strode into the kitchen to make sure the Alsatian didn’t need any more food or water. Mrs. Hudson, bless her, had not only fed and watered Gladstone, but she had fed and watered Sherlock as well. On the countertop, there was a plate of Nutella sandwiches, a plate of her special fairy-cakes, the lemon ones with the raspberry icing that she knew he loved, a bottle of water
and a cup with a tea bag already in it. All it needed was hot water.

There was also a note. In her spidery, old-lady handwriting, she had written:

So pleased that John is safe.
Eat and rest. I’ll pop in to take Stoney
Out for his walkies, I won’t wake you.
You can tell me what happened to
Violet in your own time.

Mrs. H XOXO

Sherlock couldn’t help but smile. He found he didn’t have the energy to make tea. He ate half a
sandwich and two fairy-cakes. Everything tasted like saw dust. He washed the meal down with the
bottled water, warm after sitting out for so long.

What he wanted was a cigarette… or the needle… a seven-percent-solution…

Stop…

He went and had a shower instead.

He dressed in his second favorite pair of pyjamas bottoms but didn’t bother with a T-shirt. He had
gotten out of the habit of wearing a T-shirt when he and Violet started sleeping together (properly
sleeping together, not just platonically sharing a bed…) because he felt he no longer had to hide his
scars from her.

John had seen his scars. John had seen more than just his scars…

Jesus Christ, your back…

His throat started working again. He had to bit his lip to stop another wave of tears and to shove that
awful image of John unconscious in the hospital, John beaten within an inch of his life, John, his best
friend, his best man, the best everything…

He stopped cleaning his teeth. The toothbrush, still foamy with toothpaste, slid from his hand and
clattered to the tile floor. He gripped the edge of the sink and lowered his head, covering his face
with this other hand. His shoulders started to shake as he folded his lips together, still fighting the
tears even though they had already started rolling down his face.

Even if he hadn’t been cursed with an eidetic memory, he knew he would never forget the sight of a
bruised and bloodied John, sprawled out on that dirty floor of that damp cellar of the abandoned
building in Vauxhall. Once he had finally figured out where in London Professor Moriarty and Holy
Peters had dumped John, it had been easy to locate him. Vauxhall was a familiar location to Sherlock
but not well-loved, having been dragged to the “Voho” nightclubs and discos by his closeted
boyfriend, Victor Trevor.

He also remembered the flophouses and drug dens he and Victor had visited to score drugs.

Leaving John there to die was more than a slap in the face from the Professor to Sherlock. Shots had
been fired. You killed who I loved. I kill who you love while rubbing your ultimate weakness in your
face.

But the Professor had lost this round; John, stubborn, wonderful man that he was, refused to die.
Sherlock refused to leave his side. He rode with him in the ambulance, longing to shout instructions
to the medics, but wise enough to keep his mouth shut. He prowled outside the surgery theater, scaring off anyone who tried to escort him to the waiting room with only a look. Once John was wheeled out of surgery, Sherlock followed. He grabbed a chair and parked himself next to him, watching John breathe and waiting for the inevitable arrival of his wife.

Before Mary showed up, he had sat still and silent as a stone by John’s side. He so wanted to touch him, to reassure himself that John was safe, John was alive, John wasn’t going to leave him again… idiot, I left him. Twice now, once for the Fall and secondly for Violet, although to be fair, he pushed me towards her…

He cared for Violet, of course. Maybe he even loved her a little.

But he ached for John, with every fiber of his body…

Sherlock, John had whispered when he had woken up from his overdose last December, You mustn’t. You’ll get us in trouble…

Shut up, Sherlock had replied in a horribly shaking voice as he undid John’s restraints. Just shut up for once in your life and let me have this before I go back to my real life…

As soon as John’s hands were free, Sherlock’s mouth had crashed down upon John’s, his long, elegant hands cupping John’s face. He kissed him as if it was the last time he ever would kiss him. He kissed him as if the world was ending.

So Sherlock knew he couldn’t touch John now, because he wouldn’t be able to stop. Considering that John’s wife could be a bit…murdery, probably not a good idea to touch him as he slept, even if it was innocent as removing a bit of fluff from his silvery-blond hair.

Still his mind had raced, trying to think of ways to make John wake up, to talk to him in private, to ask Did you really mean that? You would trust me with your daughter? Molly doesn’t completely trust me with Henry and he’s my son but you honestly believe I would be a good father to Marissa?

Sherlock got himself under control again. Delirium. Had to be, he was in so much pain. He didn’t know what he was saying. He splashed cold water on his face. He picked up his toothbrush and binned it. He decided that he would shave tomorrow and headed towards his bedroom.

Mrs. Hudson had also taken advantage of his absence to tidy up the flat. She had re-made his bed with fresh linens and for this he was profoundly grateful. After the mental and physical suffering he had just endured, nothing felt better than crisp, clean sheets.

Gladstone leapt into bed next to him and snuggled close, his snout resting on Sherlock’s chest. Idly, Sherlock stroked the dog’s massive head as he stared at the ceiling, thinking.

Then, he started to laugh. A proper belly-laugh.

John was safe. Violet was alive.

“Oh my dear Violet,” he gasped after his laughing fit. “I thought we agreed it was pointless to lie to each other?” Then he burst out laughing again, delighted as a child on Christmas morning.

Before he dropped off to sleep, his last thought was Did they really think they could outwit me…

**

17 January 2016
John Watson cracked open an eye.

His other eye was still swollen but he managed to open it to just a slit.

He saw sunlight streaming in through the window blinds. He saw a television mounted on the wall, a muted re-run of *The Great British Bake-off* playing. He heard the *beep beep beep* and the soft hum of medical equipment.

He tried to move his left arm and gasped in excruciating pain.

He tried to sit up only to experience another wave of pain so bad, he nearly vomited.

He squeezed his eyes shut. Confused images swirled in his head… he was falling into the dry gritty earth of Afghanistan sand as he watched Violet sprinting through the desert, scooping up a child, a little French-speaking girl, shouting *Go, go, go!* at him, not even realizing she had dropped the faux British accent. Meanwhile, as a searing pain flared through his arm, his hand, his side, Sherlock cried out *John, keep your eyes fixed on me, can you do that?*

Disoriented, his chest immediately tightened as his heart started to race and he started to tremble and sweat. His throat constricted, his chest tightened even more. *I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe…* He struggled to get out of the hospital bed as the heart monitor started beeping wildly.

“John, *John,*” cool, comforting hands suddenly cradled his face. Someone started stroking his hair. “John, love,” a gentle, feminine voice crooned to him. “John, you’re having a panic attack, it’s alright, sweetheart, you’re safe, you’re safe, no one will hurt you again, I promise.”

Mary.

John tried to reach for her with his dominant hand but Mary anticipated this. “No, love, it was broken, your hand and wrist. Just keep still and breathe. OK? Slow, deep breath now,” she sounded more like a nurse than a wife at the moment. “Breathe in for me.”

John obeyed then let loose a shaky exhalation at Mary’s instruction. “Hurts…”

“That’s the broken rib, dear. Do the best you can.”

A nurse popped her head in. “Everything alright?”

Mary continued to stroke his hair, “I think so Sandra, but maybe have the doctor stop by and see if we can prescribe something for anxiety.”

“No,” John finally muttered, his voice a guttural and harsh thing. “I don’t want drugs.”

“Love,” Mary smiled at him. “You’re already on morphine and loads of antibiotics. Something to take the edge off your anxiety while you’re recuperating really isn’t going to hurt any, now is it?”

Love.

*Love, love, love…* John wanted her to stop saying that.

It made him feel so damned guilty.
He continued to slowly inhale and exhale, clutching the top sheet with his good hand, until his heart
stopped racing like a prizewinning thoroughbred horse. Mary had found a flannel and wetted it with
cool water. As she dabbed his sweaty brow, he whispered, “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about, unless you’re apologizing for getting yourself kidnapped again.”

“Yeah, I need to stop that,” John rasped.

“Thirsty?”

“Parched.”

Mary kissed him on the forehead and rose to get him a glass of ice water. As she returned with a
plastic cup and straw, John painfully remembered when he woke up from his overdose and it was
Violet not Mary helping him drink. Mary was the one in hospital, still recovering from being stabbed
by Jim Moriarty and the miscarriage that followed.

She was barely mobile herself.

He let Mary fuss over him, help him drink water, adjust his pillow, rearrange the tangled duvet and
top sheet. Nurse Sandra came back with ice-packs, a large one for his abdomen, to help ease the pain
of the broken rib and a smaller one to help reduce the swelling of his horribly blackened eye. She
informed Mary that the doctor was coming to check on John and to see what they can prescribe him
to help ebb the panic attacks as his recent trauma obviously triggered his PTSD.

“Right here, ladies,” John reminded the two nurses, his voice still ragged. “I’m right here.”

“And doctors make the worst patients,” Mary reminded him, squeezing his foot affectionately.

Once Sandra departed, Mary sat back down again. “Greg will want to speak to you when you’re
strong enough,” she told him. “Get your statement about your abduction.”

“He won’t find him,” John clumsily held the ice-pack to his face with his right hand. “Either one of
them, Holy Peters or Professor Moriarty.”

“Sherlock will,” Mary said with utter conviction. “He found you.”

“Wher-”

“Hopefully at Baker Street, resting,” Mary answered him before he could even ask. “I asked Mrs.
Hudson to stand guard, make sure he doesn’t leave until he’s fully re-charged his batteries.”

“Mrs. Hudson?” John felt dread pooling in his gut. “Why not Violet, he can run circles around Mrs.
Hudson.”

Mary paled. She looked over her shoulder at the closed door. “I have bad news, John.”

“Oh God no,” Tears rushed to John’s good eye. “Is she dead?” he whispered.

“That’s the problem,” Mary threaded her fingers through John’s good hand. “We’re not sure.”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you all soooooooooooo much for the comments and kudos and bookmarks :^)
Tension

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three: Tension

A position in which there are one or more exchanges possible, such as a pair of pawns facing each other on a diagonal where either can capture the other, is said to contain tension. Such a situation differs from a threat in that it does not need to be immediately resolved – for example, if both pawns are defended. The consequences of resolving the tension must be constantly considered by both players, in case there is a possibility of winning or losing material. This makes calculating the best move more complicated, and so there is a natural temptation to release the tension by making a like-for-like exchange or by moving the attacked piece. To keep the tension is to avoid resolving it, which is sometimes good advice depending on the position.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Three: Tension

17 January 2016
The Diogenes Club
Sunday morning
10:49 AM

“Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft Holmes sighed and put down his cup of tea. The porcelain cup didn’t even make a sound as it settled neatly into the matching saucer. “Yes?”

“Your brother wishes to see you,” the somber young man in old fashioned butler’s livery informed him. “Will that be tea for two then, sir?”

“He won’t stay but fetch the trolley out anyway,” Mycroft coolly informed the youth. “Manners and appearances are important.”

“Couldn’t agree more, sir,” the butler-in-training nodded his approval.

“Make him cool his heels since he arrived unannounced. Bring him in at exactly eleven o’clock.”

“Very good sir,” the young man bowed slightly then whisked away.

Mycroft rubbed his temples, not happy by the intrusion but not surprised. He had hoped for one more day’s reprieve, so he could have a good long think about how to handle the latest mess his brother had gotten himself into.

He closed his eyes, recalled the last time he’d seen and spoken to his brother…

He hadn’t been watching the jet plane taxiing on the runway. He’d been typing out a text instead.
I’ll need your mobile, Sherlock, he had muttered as the jet plane started to speed up. Althelney Jones is my top computer analyst. She thinks she can pinpoint a location where John may have been when that video was recorded.

Fine, good, yes, Sherlock had kept his eyes on the jet plane as it roared past them while it rose from the earth, the wheels tucking themselves inside the belly of the plane.

Then the plane exploded.

The force of the explosion as well as their proximity knocked both Mycroft and Sherlock to their arses. Mycroft recovered first and scrambled over to grab Sherlock by the scruff his damnable coat and haul him away as the fiery wreckage started curve downwards back towards the earth. The air became polluted with thick, choking smoke, scented with fire and jet fuel.

Coughing, hacking, Sherlock allowed Mycroft to lead him to safety. Other agents appeared, barking orders into walkie-talkies while escorting the Holmes brothers back to the hangar.

Once inside, Sherlock lifted his head. Mycroft had seen his little brother in a variety of moods, from being a moony-love struck boy infatuated with that wastrel Victor Trevor to being completely strung-out on cocaine and God-only-knew what else.

He had never seen the pure, unadulterated hatred in his brother’s opalescent eyes.

Hatred for him, Mycroft.

Brother, Mycroft held up a hand, the palm bleeding as he had scraped his hand when he tried to catch himself from falling. Brother, listen to me now. This… this was not me. Do you hear me? This was not me.

The hatred never left his eyes. Mycroft knew whatever slender bonds of brotherhood had tethered them together had been finally irrevocably broken.

This had been one betrayal too many.

But all Sherlock had said was I’ll deal with you later, then demanded an agent to take him back to London immediately…

Mycroft studied his bandaged palms with interest until the mahogany doors to his inner-sanctuary burst opened. Sherlock strode in, wearing a black pea-coat instead of his usual Belstaff. It suited him. Following closely on his heels, was the young butler pushing an elegant, old-fashioned silver tea service.

Just as the young man lifted the beautiful antique teapot, Mycroft held up his bandaged hand, “I’ll be Mother, thank you.”

He waited for Sherlock to make a withering comment at his expense and was surprised when his younger brother actually held his tongue. Mycroft watched his pale, slender brother peel off his alternate winter coat and unwind from around his neck an old maroon scarf Mycroft forgot he had. Mycroft frowned, wondering why Sherlock hadn’t been wearing the new cobalt blue scarf he had given him for Christmas. Then Mycroft remembered Sherlock had given his scarf to Violet, she had been wearing it That Night.

“What happened to your usual coat, Sherlock?” Mycroft asked, curious. He knew how much he loved the Belstaff. It had been a Christmas gift from their father.
Sherlock didn’t reply. He kept silent until the young man left them. Only then did he sit down in the leather wing chair across from Mycroft.

“William,” Mycroft said, only to needle him.

Sherlock ignored the jab. He steepled his fingers, “Where is she, Mycroft?”

“You were there, you saw what hap-”

“Where. Is. She.”

“Sherlock, I am painfully aware she was special to you. But you cannot wallow in denial, it is not healthy. I will not allow you to labor under this delusion.”

“Oh,” Sherlock lifted his shaggy black brows. “Like how you told John to lie to me about Irene Adler also going into that Witness Protection Program in America? But I believe she had really got her head chopped off by some very unpleasant religious fanatics in the Middle East?”

Or would have, if I hadn’t intervened, Sherlock added silently in his head.

“How…oh,” Mycroft stood up, shaking his head. “John Watson is a terrible liar. I should have done the job myself,” he grumbled as he poured tea for himself and his brother.

“Where is she, Mycroft? I’m tired of repeating myself.” As Mycroft held out a cup towards him, Sherlock childishly added, “And you didn’t add sugar to mine.”

“You won’t want sugar with this,” Mycroft rolled his eyes. Sherlock grudgingly took the cup. Mycroft sat down, settled himself comfortably in his big leather chair and took a sip. Only after that, did he say: “I told her it wouldn’t work. I told her you’d see through the deception in two seconds.”

“Of course I did, she gave herself completely away in the hangar,” Sherlock said blandly. He took a sip of tea and couldn’t help but hum in approval. Mycroft, for all his proclamations about tradition, had a rather adventurous taste in tea and rarely made a misstep in his choices. Sherlock took another sip of the Great White Grape Tea. He tasted rose hips, black currant, cornflower petals, mallow blossoms and grape juice. Mycroft was right, as usual. Sugar would have ruined the delicate flavoring. “But what I have not been able to figure out is how a woman with only above-average intelligence and an American at that, was able to outwit you?”

“Who says she did?” Mycroft said loftily as he lifted his tea cup to his lips.

Sherlock arched an eyebrow.

“Fine,” Mycroft set his cup down again. “Our collective IQ’s are well above hers, but her emotional intelligence far outweighs ours. Also, her manipulative abilities are parallel to none. She knows no limits to how far she’ll go to get what she wants.”

“Tell me.”

“If you insist…”

**

10 January 2016
London Millennium Footbridge
Sunday morning
“… Demand Number Four, you tell the FBI and MI-6 that while I was unable to get the information from Sherlock, he agreed to give it to you and to you alone. Meanwhile, your spooks put the word on the streets that Sherlock never knew about the code and I had it all along. That way, when I leave England to go back to the US and into WitPro…”

“The underworld believes the code went with you thus diverting the target from Sherlock to you,” Mycroft nodded at the good sense of this move. “Anything else?”

“Oh yes,” Violet suddenly produced the bitterest of smiles. Sorry, Sherlock, this is where I go off script… “There’s more.”

“Pray continue.”

“You help me fake my death.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“Think about it, it makes perfect sense. It’s the only way to keep my family and yours completely safe. The bad guys believe I’m the only one with the code, I get on the plane, the plane explodes and you blame the mole.”

“Sherlock will see through that ruse in two seconds.”

“Not if you plan the details,” Violet started shivering and not just from the cold. She was exhausted and emotionally wrung-out. “Mycroft, you’re the only one who can help me pull this off.” When the older, thin man didn’t move or make a sound, Violet groaned in exasperation, “He’ll look for me even though I’m supposed to be in WitPro. He won’t be able to resist…”

And I won’t be able to say no…

“That’s true,” Mycroft gruffly assented. “He can never resist a mystery. He’d seek you out someday just because he was bored.”

“I can’t take that risk, not with the lives of my sister-in-law and niece on the line.” Not to mention the lives of Henry Lestrade or Maisie Watson… she silently added. Out loud, she told Mycroft, “However, my final demand is one that I think you will enjoy.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“I want you to kill the Earl of Winchester.”

“If it was that easy…”

“I want you to kill the Earl of Winchester,” Violet firmly repeated herself. “That doesn’t mean you send one of your minions so that the Earl has an unfortunate accident. You pull the trigger. You get your hands bloody.”

“I simply can’t just murder a peer of the realm. As I was trying to explain before you so rudely interrupted me, if it was that easy, I would have murdered him myself years ago.”

“Bullshit.”

“I have few regrets, Agent Hunter but I do regret how poorly I handled… oh,” he exhaled suddenly,
digging in his coat pocket. When he extracted a packet of cigarettes, he asked, “Do you mind?”

“Your lungs,” she shrugged.

He held out the pack, “I know you used to indulge.”

Violet looked at the pack longingly then shook her head. “Last thing I need is nicotine poisoning. When I smoke, I chain-smoke.”

“They’re low-tar,” Mycroft pointed out but when she still refused, he managed to light one anyway, despite the wind and wet snow. He inhaled then blew out a plume of smoke with great satisfaction. “The only way to explain the decisions I made when I was a fourteen-year-old boy is to employ a crude and vulgar vernacular. I… to put it simply, fucked up.” He inhaled again. “You are correct, I wasn’t a child, but I wasn’t an adult either. I simply did not have the maturity to make the right decision. That is not an excuse. That is a fact. I’m sure Sherlock told you about how Heathcliff manipulated him, how he convinced Sherlock that he would murder me and our parents if Sherlock did not…” his lips twisted, “Comply.”

“Yes.”

“What Sherlock fails to understand is that Heathcliff told me that he would murder Sherlock if I went to the authorities. This was no idle threat. This was not a bogey-story to frighten a child into submission. As he told me all the very realistic and plausible ways he could take my brother’s life, he snapped a pigeon’s neck right in front of me. I was… terrified. It was my Sophie’s Choice: Watch my brother suffer, or watch my brother die. To my never-ending shame, I submitted to Heathcliff’s will, but… not completely. I didn’t just hand my brother over to him and leave him to his devices. No. I taught Sherlock how to run, how to hide. We found all the bolt-holes and priest-holes in the estate plus we devised other hiding spots. I told him never to go to the grove alone again, ever. Many nights, Sherlock stayed in my room when the Cullen-Culpeppers came to visit. He’d hide in the cupboard or under my bed until it was time for lights out and…” his face softened. “He’d sleep with me, curled up in a tight little ball, clutching this ratty blue teddy our nanny had gotten him years ago. He was so…” his face closed up. “Damaged. When he started that fire, when he tried to burn Heathcliff to death, I knew that something in my little brother had been irrevocably broken.”

“How sad,” Violet kept a straight face. “Then you’ll have no problem blowing His Lordship’s brains out, will you?”

“Nothing would give me more pleasure, but-”

“I’m not unmerciful. I’ll give you a year to carry it out. Knowing you, you’ll want to plan it down to the minutest detail.”

“Violet,” Mycroft spluttered. “I am not going to… I can’t…” He took another drag to steady himself. “The reason why I have been so successful is because of my reputation, despite Sherlock’s best intentions to drag me down. People actually believe I hold a minor position in the British government. My job depends on my plausible deniability.”

“That’s why I’m giving you a year,” Violet smiled.

“What happens in a year if I do not agree to your request?”


“How? You’ll be in WitPro, you’ll be heavily monitored.”
“I know. That’s why I made a friend and what I mean by that is I paid someone a shit-ton of money to release the story if the Earl of Winchester isn’t dead by January 9, 2017. Oh yeah,” Violet’s smile widened, became positively devilish, “I should mention that if anything happens to me, if you get any cute ideas about eliminating me, my friend releases the story. If my friend doesn’t hear from me on a regular basis, the story gets released. In fact, if you get called into your supervisor’s office because there’s a breaking news story that His Lordship liked to bugger little kids and your brother was one of his firsts, you should assume that I had stopped breathing. Sooooooooooooooo,” she fluttered her eyelashes at him. “It really was a good idea that I didn’t make a swan dive into the Thames after all. It’s really in your best interest to make sure I keep breathing.”

“You’re no better than Magnussen,” Mycroft scowled.

“You’re no better than Moriarty, playing with people’s lives, playing with your brother’s life.”

Mycroft stayed quiet for a moment, studying his smoldering cigarette as the icy snow started pelting down. “Come here, before a lump of ice hits you on the head,” Mycroft said softly as he dropped the cig, smushing what was left of it with the toe of his shoe. “I’m not going to hurt you. Or your dog,” he added as an afterthought.

Violet and Gladstone joined Mycroft under the umbrella. It was a tight fit, almost intimate. “Please understand one thing,” he whispered. “My brother has had a death wish since he was eight years old. He has been intent on throwing his life away ever since Heathcliff… sullied him. But I have been intent on preserving it. He’s not just an asset, he’s my little brother. Of course I want to save his life. I worry about him, constantly. But when it became obvious that he did not care what his death would cost me and my parents, I guided him towards risks where if he did die, it would not be a waste. Does that make any sense?” he pleaded.

“Not really,” Violet admitted.

Violet noticed for the first time that his eyes were not actually black, but extremely dark brown and extremely sad. Standing close to him, within kissing distance, she saw the fine lines around his eyes, the deep lines around his mouth, the receding hairline. How he had aged prematurely, how he looked nearly sixty and he was only forty-seven.

“Does this make sense then,” Mycroft locked his sad, brown eyes on her exhausted, hazel eyes. “If I was clever enough to build a time machine, I would go back and change everything.” His eyes actually watered although he did not weep. “My brothers were all I had and I had failed them both,” his voice cracked on the last word.

“I’m willing to make a compromise,” Violet said after a beat.

“I’m listening.”

“You kill the Earl, I give you Mary.”

“Agreed.”

They shook hands.

“There’s a twenty-four hour café not far from here. We both need to warm up. We’ll tell the owners he’s your service dog,” Mycroft crooked out his arm, like the gentleman he had been bred to be. “You need to compose yourself before returning to Baker Street or else Sherlock will see through your deceit and ruin all our plans.”

Violet placed her trembling hand in the crook of his elbow. As they walked off the Wobbly Bridge,
she said, “We’re on the same side, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” he sighed. “The sad thing is, Sherlock will never know. Or appreciate it.”

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17 January 2016
The Diogenes Club
Sunday morning
11:26 AM

Sherlock stayed silent after Mycroft finished speaking. He studied the dregs of his tea before stating, “Well, since our private lives aren’t splashed out on The Daily Mail yet, we know she’s alive. Where is she now, Mycroft?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t play with me. I am in no mood for your games. Not anymore, not after learning about how you betrayed Ford,” Sherlock set his empty tea cup on the table dividing him from Mycroft.

“I am not playing with you Sherlock,” a muscle twitched in Mycroft’s thin cheek. “And Ford took that mission of his own accord.”

“You covered it up.”

“It was my job.”

“It was also your job to keep Violet safe. Where is she?”

“I don’t know. We… lost track of her after Washington D.C.”

“You… how?”

Mycroft puffed out his cheeks. “Perhaps it’s best that you know. We could use your help.”

“Oh really?” Sherlock’s voice was soft and dangerous. “Why?”

“Because it went wrong, it all went horriby wrong.”

Sherlock glared at Mycroft, lips pursed, eyes flashing blue-green-gold sparks of fury.

“What happened?” he asked again in that soft, dangerous voice.

“We… lost her.”

“You… lost her?”

“Yes.”

“I thought Mitton was with her.”

“We’ve had no contact with either Agent Mitton or Agent Hunter since their plane touched down in Washington DC.” Mycroft rubbed his temple. “There’s been a complication…”

“Oh really,” Sherlock sneered.

“Senator Josiah Woodhouse is dead.”
Sherlock blinked. This was news. He did not keep up on American politics. He only knew of the name due to his ties to Moriarty’s criminal enterprise, a cult of villains known as The Red-Headed League. A small, wealthy tight-knit group of criminals that made the Mafia look pale and insignificant in comparison.

The Senator’s nephew, Special Agent-in-Charge Jonathan “Jack” Woodley, had betrayed his country by using the FBI’s VICAP computer system as a backdoor to hack into the Pentagon’s systems. He stole vital military secrets and sold them to America’s direst enemies. A computer analyst, Dorothy Sweeney, discovered the hack and reported the breach to her supervisor, Section Chief Robert Carson. Carson assigned Violet to investigate. Woodley killed every single member of her team, including Sweeney and Carson.

Violet killed Woodley, after he tortured her extensively.

Violet’s freckled face immediately popped into Sherlock’s head. He recalled the strange, crescent shaped scar she had now, thanks to Woodley punching her in the face while wearing his Army ring.

“What was the Senator murdered?” he asked.

“The official cause of death is suicide,” Mycroft informed him.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Check the American online news websites and you’ll deduce the problem,” Mycroft said acidly. “CIA is convinced Violet was behind his death.”

“Ridiculous. He was obviously killed by Professor Moriarty’s people to silence him.”

“That is what the FBI and MI-6 believe as well, but since we can’t find her…” Mycroft held his hand up helplessly.

“Have you had communication with her at all?”

“Yes… a brief telephone call…”

“When?”

“The day before the Senator died.”

“Tell me everything. Omit nothing, Mycroft.”

“Very well. I received her call after I had learned you had located John Watson…”

**

15 January 2016
Mycroft Holmes’ private residence
Somewhere in London
Friday morning
9:26 PM

“Thank God,” Mycroft Holmes said sincerely after a female Met sergeant with a New Zealand accent called Alexis MacDonald rang to tell him the good news that Dr. Watson had been found and was being rushed to the hospital as she spoke. “Have you spoken to my brother? Does he need anything from me?”
“No.”

“Ah,” Mycroft was a bit disconcerted. Then he remembered that Anthea had told him that Sergeant MacDonald was a One to Watch. Sharp, dedicated, loyal and sparse with words. “Well, should there be any new developments with Dr. Watson’s condition, please have either my brother or DI Lestrade contact me at once.”

“Sure,” and with that she rang off.

Mycroft stated at his smart phone, shaking his head. The woman probably used all of ten words during their entire conversation.

He set his mobile down on his beautiful desk and stared out the enormous windows overlooking the city. He loved the view, loved looking up at the expansive skyline of this ancient and royal city. No place like London.

There was a whirring then an old fashioned telephone ringing sound coming from his desk. Startled, Mycroft whipped his head around.

He never expected that mobile to ring again.

He dug his keys out of his pocket and unlocked his desk drawer. Then he opened the fake panel he had personally installed in that drawer and took out the prepaid mobile. He was shocked that the batteries hadn’t died yet.

“Holmes.”

“What the actual hell, Mycroft?” Violet Hunter snapped.

“Where are you? Where’s Mitton?”

“You set me up, you son-of-a-bitch.”

“I most assuredly did not. I gain nothing if I set you up.”

“Then your mole has infiltrated more of MI-6 than you thought. Shit, he’s probably got access to this call right now…”

“Stay on the line,” Mycroft ordered her tersely. “You called me on the prepaid mobile. You very well know no one has access to this line, except me.”

“You sure about that?”

“The only thing I am sure of that it is in my best interest to keep you alive. Are you in New York?”

“We didn’t land in New York, we landed in DC,” Violet spat at Mycroft. “We were intercepted by CIA, not FBI. They separated me and Mitton. I don’t know where he is. I got away.”

“CIA?”

“La Ligue des Roux plants,” Violet said sourly, using the French name for The Red-headed League. “They intercepted the plans to deliver me into WitPro.”

Mycroft pressed his ear closer to the phone, trying to listen for background noise while checking his watch, mentally subtracting the time difference. “You’re in Washington DC now?”
“I’m on the East Coast,” she vaguely informed him.

“I cannot help you if you do not give me your location!”

“If I can get to Canada, can you help me then? Mycroft, I can’t stay in one place here in the States. Not with CIA up my ass and MI-6 has no jurisdiction in the US.”

Mycroft scoured his brain, trying to recollect North American geography. “Do you think you can make it to Toronto?”

“I think so… I can act like a tourist visiting Niagara Falls.”

“You didn’t have a passport in England. How will you leave America without a passport?”

“Still working on that part.”

“John Watson is alive,” Mycroft blurted out. “He was just found tonight.”

There was silence. “Good,” she finally said in a quavering voice. “Good…. And Sherlock?”

“Currently is none the wiser. He thinks you perished in the explosion.”

“Keep it that way. I’ll be in Toronto in a few days. I have an errand I need to run first.”

And she rang off.

**

17 January 2016
The Diogenes Club
Sunday morning
11:39 AM

“And there’s been no communication since,” Mycroft finished. “But the Senator was dead the next day.” A grim little smile appeared on his face, “Along with all his… secrets.”

“Oh?”

“His laptops are missing, his personal laptop as well as the one issued by the government. Both his personal and business mobiles are missing as well.”

“Ahhhh…I see,” Sherlock steepled his fingers. He looking up at his ceiling as he thought, “That is why the CIA believes that the Senator was murdered, the missing devices.”

“Quite. And Violet Hunter is in the wind.”

“Well,” Sherlock pushed himself out of his seat. “Thank you for your time, Mycroft.” He reached for his black pea-coat. “See you at Easter lunch. Mother will insist so let’s make the best of it.”

Mycroft blinked. “You’re not going to look for her?”

“Well, of course I’m going to look for her. She’s not safe on her own.”

*For more reasons than you realize*, Sherlock thought, as he recalled her twitching hands and bouts of clumsiness.
He heard John’s frantic voice mail again in his head:

_Sherlock, please call me back right away. Whatever you and your brother and Violet are planning, you need to stop it. You need to stop it right now and get Violet to hospital immediately. She’s seriously ill… Fuck, I don’t want to leave this on your bloody voice mail… Sherlock, she’s showing symptoms of ALS. It’s almost text-book. We all missed it because of the Copper Beaches and everything… call me, OK?

“But you won’t help me look for her, is that it?” Mycroft sounded peevish.

“Where is Marissa Watson?” Sherlock silkily asked as he drew on his gloves. When Mycroft didn’t reply, he asked a follow-up question: “Where’s our brother, hmm? Your childhood idol and your best friend? Where is Matthew Sherrinford Holmes?”

“Sherloc-”

“Good luck killing the Earl,” Sherlock snapped, turned on his heel and stormed out of the club.

Chapter End Notes

The definitions for the chess terms in the chapter summary are all from wikipedia because I'm a lazy piece of shit:

Thank you all so much for reading :^)
Deflect

Chapter Summary

Deflect

The inverse of a decoy. Whereas a decoy involves luring an enemy piece to a bad square, a deflection involves luring an enemy piece away from a good square; typically, away from a square on which it defends another piece or threat.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning due to a certain bastard showing up in this chapter...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Four: Deflect

17 January 2016
Mycroft Holmes’ private residence
Somewhere in London
Friday evening
6:50 PM

“Was dinner not to your satisfaction, Mr. Holmes?”

Startled by his housekeeper’s question, Mycroft looked up from his pristine first-edition copy of *Simulacres et Simulation*. Even a minor government bureaucrat needed to unwind from a stressful day and every encounter with his younger brother had been stressful as of late. Sunday was never really a day of rest for Mycroft, not since he began his career at MI-6. After the unexpected and inevitably hostile meeting with Sherlock, Mycroft fled to the sanctuary of one his many offices scattered across London. At half-past four, he rang his housekeeper, Mrs. Pringle, and asked her to have a light supper prepared and waiting for him when he got home.

Like his brother, Mycroft had several bolt-holes across London as well. But Mycroft’s hiding spots were far more lush and spacious than Sherlock’s. Mycroft also rarely went to his official private residence. His intense need for privacy had him resenting Mrs. Pringle’s fleeting presence. His expensive flat resembled a posh hotel rather than someone’s home. The only personal memento he had in his official home was a picture of his parents on his nightstand.

His more private items and keepsakes he stored elsewhere, at other secret locations that Mrs. Pringle knew nothing about.

She was the perfect housekeeper, Mrs. Pringle. Silver-haired and pleasant, Mrs. Pringle had been heavily vetted for her position, of course. A childless widow, she didn’t even have a parking ticket. She dressed neatly, usually a twin-set and black skirt during the warmer months or black trousers and a twin-set during the colder months. But she always wore sensible shoes and had reading glasses on
a chain around her neck. She was consistently polite but did not overstep her boundaries, like a certain Not-Your-Housekeeper over on Baker Street. Mycroft paid Mrs. Pringle well and she paid him little kindnesses like slipping him biscuits or giving him extra sugar when he was stressed. But that was as far as she went. She did the cooking, the cleaning and the laundering and did it all very well. But she didn’t adopt Mycroft the way Mrs. Hudson had taken Sherlock on.

This arrangement suited Mycroft just fine. He didn’t need a second mother like Sherlock did.

So her question surprised Mycroft a little. He was not used to her questioning his eating habits. He looked at the half-full bowl of soup and the plate of uneaten chicken and pesto sandwiches. “Perfectly satisfactory,” he said in his usual oily voice while arching an eyebrow.

Mrs. Pringle was unruffled. “I only asked because I tried a new soup recipe and I used marble rye instead of the baguettes you prefer as we are out. If you aren’t pleased with your meal, I would be happy to cook something else.”

“Oh,” Mycroft felt slightly abashed. “I apologize, Mrs. Pringle. The soup was delicious. I am apparently not as hungry as I thought I was. Also, I got a bit engrossed in my book. Perhaps leave the sandwiches here for me to nosh on?”

“Very good sir,” Mrs. Pringle collected the soup bowl and the cutlery, “A spot of tea, perhaps?”

“That would be lovely, thank you,” Mycroft had already turned his attention back to his fascinating novel, which he was reading in the original French, of course.

*Never read an English translation of anything, William. Always read a book in the original language first…*

Mycroft blinked. Where on earth did that memory come from?

Sherlock was not the only one who deleted memories.

He put the novel carefully facedown so not to lose his page. Then he put his elbows on the beautiful dining room table he had purchased while in Rome and had shipped back to London. Like everything else in the flat, it was masculine and expensive: hand-carved from beech wood and accented with twenty-four karat gold trim. The matching chairs with leather seats and back-pads were also hand-carved from the same wood.

But he did not act like a wealthy and powerful man. He pressed his palms to his forehead as if he were a little boy coming down with a fever.

Then he sucked in his breath and jerked his hands away from his face. He grimaced at the Elastoplast on his scraped hands, recalling that the last time he had skinned his hands, he had been barely six years old. He had been trying to learn how to ride a bicycle.

He shook away the humiliating imagery of his rotund younger self wobbling on a bike before wiping out in the gravel driveway. He closed his eyes and massaged his temples instead.

He heard the delicate clink of a cup, saucer and additional plate being set on the table. “Anything else I can get you, sir?”

“Yes, please. A glass of water and paracetamol, I have a splitting headache.”

“So sorry to hear that sir; shan’t be but a moment,” Mrs. Pringle bustled off.
Mycroft lowered his hands as Mrs. Pringle disappeared. Then he pressed his fingers to his mouth, where Violet had punched him. The paracetamol was for dentaglia, not cephalalgia. Even four days later, his mouth still bloody hurt. Worse yet, his dentist wasn’t able to put his tooth back in; Mycroft would have to get either a bridge or an implant.

Fortunately he didn’t smile much.

He stood up, stretched his aching back and meandered towards the impressive buffet, also hand-carved from beech and accented with the same gold trim. The massive mirror hanging above it was framed with the same beech and gold as the dining room set.

Mycroft studied his face in the mirror. He looked old. He looked tired.

He ran his hand over his head, frowning at his hairline, which seemed to have receded another centimeter. Then he sighed and opened the middle drawer where he kept his Gauloises cigarettes, a Zippo lighter and a small crystal ashtray he had gotten from Sherlock for Christmas, the same Christmas Sherlock identified Irene Adler’s body.

He strongly suspected the ashtray was the one that had been stolen from Buckingham Palace.

He didn’t care. Sherlock usually didn’t give him gifts. He thought the gift was a sign he was getting better, that he was growing up. That their fractious relationship was mending.

The sound of the flint striking within the Zippo was music to Mycroft’s ears. He didn’t smoke often. Actually, he had only recently taken it back up. If Sherlock had been in a jesting mood, he would have remarked on the scent of the cigarette smoke wafting from Mycroft’s suit jacket.

Sherlock was no longer in a jesting mood.

There was no repairing their relationship.

Mrs. Pringle reappeared with the bottle of paracetamol and a glass of cool water. She placed both items next to his tea cup and plate of buttery shortbread biscuits dipped in milk chocolate. She asked him if he wanted breakfast here or if he planned on dining at the Diogenes Club in the morning. Mycroft told her he planned on working from home tomorrow if he still felt poorly, so yes, he did want breakfast ready tomorrow.

“Right, I’m going to prep the meal now so I won’t disturb your rest in the morning,” Mrs. Pringle nodded and took herself off to the kitchen.

But Mycroft wasn’t paying attention to her any longer, nor was he thinking about food. As he smoked and drank his tea, he stared off into space, going inside his own Mind Palace, trying to determine what triggered that odd yet particular memory….

*Never read an English translation of anything, William. Always read a book in the original language first…*

*But I’m not very good at French, Mycroft. It took me all morning to learn the alphabet…*

*I’ll help you, but we have to be quiet, no one knows you’re in here, remember?*

“Ohhh,” Mycroft exhaled a plume of smoke then closed his eyes.

Now he remembered.
He took another drag then snubbed the cigarette out. He took four tablets and drained the glass of water. He picked up his book again and appeared to be placidly drinking tea and carefully munching biscuits, breaking the shortbread into small pieces and chewing on the undamaged side of his mouth. Inside, however, he seethed. Internally he raged against Violet Hunter.

Damn her. Damn her for digging into our personal lives, my personal life. Damn her for threatening to undo everything I’ve done to protect Sherlock from shame and humiliation, not to mention being locked up for life, or worse.

She doesn’t bluff though. How in the world am I supposed to kill one of the biggest financial backers of La Ligue des Roux without making an already perilous situation even worse? If it was that simple to murder him, I would have done so ages ago. He has protection set in place. He’s bought off powerful people to guard him. Worse yet, he is still a force to be reckoned in Parliament. He’s still threatening to reduce funding to MI-6 as well as demanding transparency.

I can’t have that. If MI-6 is forced to declassify documents, then Sherlock’s involvement in Charles Augustus Magnussen’s death is exposed.

If Heathcliff lives, Violet exposes us all. I will be drummed out of MI-6 and my life will be measured by minutes. Sherlock’s career as a consulting detective will be ruined. Without the Work and without John Watson next to his side every waking minute, he will dive right back into the world of drugs and promiscuity. I cannot allow that. I’ve failed him so many other ways. I cannot allow him to destroy what’s left of that beautiful mind of his.

I must remember that Violet gave me a year. Even though I quite resent her for forcing me into this position, she did give me time to plan. She’s no fool, Violet. She knows ridding the earth of filth like Lord Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper, Earl of Winchester, is no easy feat.

First, I must determine who is protecting him. Then I must convince those protectors of the reasons it’s in their best interest to abandon their posts. I will also need to find a way for him to lose his seat in Parliament, or at the very least, to diminish his influence in the House of Lords. Only then, can I pull the trigger.

You misjudge me, Agent Hunter. I’ll gladly pull the trigger on that bastard. I’ll finish the job Sherlock started with fire…

**

27 August 1983
The Holmes Estates, England
Saturday night
9:41 PM

“Where is he, Myc?”

Mycroft ignored the handsome, golden-haired teenage boy hovering over him. He continued to do his sit-ups. He was still rather stout for his age, but his clothes weren’t so tight around his middle anymore and he could do twenty sit-ups before getting winded and needing a break. A month ago he could barely manage five.

“No… idea…” Mycroft puffed. His normally pale face reddened with exertion.

Not often denied his demands, young Master Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper started storming around Mycroft’s room, throwing open the wardrobe doors, flinging the heavy old velvet drapes aside.
Angrily he pushed the neatly stacked tower of school books and encyclopedia sitting on top of Mycroft’s forgotten toy chest to the floor. As they landed with a loud clatter, Heathcliff flipped the lid open and started rooting around, throwing over his shoulder a fire engine, a Han Solo action man, an Optimus Prime action man that wouldn’t transform into the lorry anymore.

As Heathcliff searched everywhere a seven-year-old boy would and could hide, Mycroft kept carrying on with his exercise, grimacing as his obliques and abdominis began to burn.

Unable to find the child, Heathcliff stomped back over to Mycroft, still on his back, still doing his sit-ups. Heathcliff delivered a stinging kick to Mycroft’s exposed ribs. Tears of pain sprang to Mycroft’s eyes as he rolled over to his side. Heathcliff was on the football team at school so his kicks were no joke. Mycroft knew he would have a wicked bruise in the morning.

He also knew he needed to get to his feet right quick before Heathcliff decided to give him a proper beating. Despite his girth and despite the throbbing pain in his side, Mycroft quickly scrambled to his feet. He straightened up the best he could. “That’s all you got then? No wonder you prefer little boys instead of picking on someone your own size.”

Heathcliff’s handsome face twisted into something practically demonic. “Where the fuck is he?”

“I. Don’t. Know.” Along with exercise, Mycroft had been practicing his diction, watching the news with his father and paying close attention to how powerful men spoke during interviews. Since he couldn’t always control if and when his voice would crack, he made it a point to closely mind how he enunciated his words. He knew it would pay off when he was an adult, the ability to intimidate not just with pronunciation, but also with volume control.

Words had power, after all. But it was a power best wielded as one would a rapier, not a sledgehammer.

“We agreed,” Heathcliff balled his fists. “We agreed I could have him.”

“No,” Mycroft rubbed his side. “You told me to stay out of your way or else you’d kill him. We made no such agreement about me delivering him to you.”

“Semantics,” Heathcliff snorted.

“Actually no,” Mycroft took a step closer. While making a concentrated effort to shed the fat and build muscle, he also recently experienced a growth spurt. He had grown taller this past month and was now taller than Heathcliff. “Semantics is the study of the meaning of words. There was nothing in your threat that implied I was to give you my brother. You quite clearly communicated that if I don’t stay out of your way, you’ll murder my brother, send my family into penury and me into prison, framing me for the perversions you commit at school. I am abiding by my end of this so-called deal.” Mycroft continued to advance on Heathcliff. “It’s not my fault or problem you can’t find a seven year old kid.”

Heathcliff’s face mottled with fury. A spoiled, pampered young man used getting his way; he had little experience on how to handle individuals who defied him. “Call him, you fat know-all,” Heathcliff hissed. “Call him and tell him to come out.”

Mycroft shrugged. “William?” When there was no response, he dramatically hollered, “Wiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiliam?” When there was still no answer, he grumbled, “He’s not here, Heathcliff and I’m tired. I’m going to bed. Get out of my room.”

“But we’re meant to have a sleep-over,” Heathcliff purred. “What will Mother and Father think if
“Who are you sharing a room with at school this year?” Mycroft deflected Heathcliff’s jab. “Another first-year? Jesus, what is wrong with you? What is it about little boys that gets you going anyway? Why can’t you throw a leg over a girl like a normal bloke? Maybe you’re the freak instead of my brother.”

Heathcliff snapped. With a primal cry, he lunged himself at Mycroft. Even though his side still screamed with pain, Mycroft used his height and weight to his advantage. He easily caught and threw Heathcliff to the rug, grinding his knee into Heathcliff’s chest. He balled his fist and held it over Heathcliff’s face. “Or maybe I should just beat the shit out of you now, you filthy pig.”

“You calling me a pig? Oh that’s ric—” But Heathcliff didn’t to finish his taunt as Mycroft’s fist mashed his face. “Careful, Myc,” Heathcliff wheezed as blood trickled down his nose. “I can still do very bad things to you.”

Mycroft lumbered off of the young lord. “Get out of my room,” he snarled, pulling his T-shirt down. “And stay away from me at school, you hear me?” He lowered his voice, “I can do very bad things to you too.”

“Like what? Tattle on me to the headmaster?” Heathcliff laughed as he wiped his bloody nose with his knuckles “My father makes regular and massive donations and one of my uncles is a school governor.”

Mycroft longed to yell what he could do to him. Since he was learning to master his tongue, he kept his plans to himself. No, I won’t tattle. But I’ll start rumors. Whisper in the ears of the bigger boys about how you don’t like girls, that you’re a fairy, you won’t last long once the rumors start flying. The football team alone will flatten you, much less the rugby team. I won’t even have to bring up what you do to little boys. And none of them will trace back to me.

I can start and end a war without getting a drop of blood on my hands.

Out loud, he only said, “Get out of my room.”

Childishly, Heathcliff retorted, “You’ll regret this.”

“I already do,” Mycroft fired back. “I regret every second I have known you.”

And after I ruin your reputation at school, I will kill you. That is a promise.

“Your brother will pay for this,” Heathcliff pointed to his nose as blood continued to dribble down. “When I find him, I’ll make him bleed, I swear to God.”

Mycroft had learned that the calmer one acted, the more it infuriated one’s antagonist. “If you find him,” he stood in the middle of his room, hands behind his back. “I told you, he’s clever and fast. Don’t say I didn’t warn you when you decided to engage in this little enterprise.”

Heathcliff, in a full strop now, sulked out of Mycroft’s bedroom. Mycroft counted slowly to ten then he limped to his bedroom door, the adrenaline wearing off and the pain reasserting itself. He poked his head out his bedroom door, looking left and right, making sure that Heathcliff wasn’t skulking around in the halls.

He hoped Heathcliff would sneak outside as he’d done in the past. Steal a bottle of his father’s liquor and saunter down to the barn to drink and smoke.
He hoped Heathcliff would accidentally set the barn on fire and be unable to get out.

He twisted the lock on his door, jumping a little when the ancient bolt slammed home. Hurting and exhausted, he trundled over to his neglected toy chest, actually an antique travel trunk his mother had painted baby blue before she realized the value of it. Still, it was a heavy old thing, even with his forgotten toy trucks, building blocks and action men thrown out of it. He put his old abandoned toys back in the travel trunk and closed the lid quietly, flicking the locks shut. He sucked in a deep breath and started to push. His aching side protested along with his long underused muscles. Still, he managed to push it and push it, scratching the aged wood floors in the process, until it blocked the door. He then carefully stacked his schoolbooks and encyclopedias back in place on top of the lid. Even if Heathcliff managed to pick the lock, he wouldn’t easily be able to get in. Even if somehow the evil little bastard could get the door unlocked and push it open with the trunk blocking it, the books would fall. The noise would be more than enough to wake Mycroft in time to hide William again, or at the very least, lock him in the loo until he could make Heathcliff go away.

Lastly, Mycroft went to the middle of the room, where the Oriental rug was, where he had been fighting Heathcliff only moments ago. He rolled the rug back. Then he knelt down and tapped three times on a floorboard.

One of the most wonderful bits about living on the estate was the history behind the old manor he called home, especially exploring the hidden corridors and the priest-holes where his Elizabethan ancestors had held secret Catholic masses until they had decided it really wasn’t in their best interest to go against the Virgin Queen. It had started as a game last spring, but now had become a necessity.

William’s bedroom didn’t have a hidey-hole, as his little brother erroneously called them, but Mycroft’s did.

After tapping the floor, he bowed down closer and called out their secret code word:

“Sherlock.”

There was a sound of a latch sliding open. Then the trap door flew open, nearly hitting Mycroft in the face. William clambered out and launched himself into Mycroft’s waiting arms, nearly strangling him in the process.

“Shh, calm down,” Mycroft rocked himself backwards so he was sitting rather than kneeling. He stroked William’s dark curls as the boy shook from head to foot. “He’s gone, but you must be quiet. I don’t know where he went.”

“I did exactly as you said,” William whispered. “I ran. I hid. I locked the trapdoor. Did you see that I managed to get in and close the door without disturbing the rug too much?”

“I did,” Mycroft actually had been very impressed. William was becoming a master at concealing himself. Mycroft only had to smooth the rug out slightly when he entered his room, observing immediately that William was hiding in the priest-hole below his floor.

“And I didn’t make a sound until you said my second name, like we practiced.”

“Yes you did, well done, Little Brother,” Mycroft crooned. “And he’ll be gone in the morning and school starts next week. You’ll be safe.”

William whimpered, “Until the Christmas holidays.” Fat tears started rolling down his too-thin cheeks. “He said he was going to make me bleed. I’m tired of running and hiding,” William’s trembling started up again. “Mycroft, please… make him stop, please,” the little boy begged. “You
said, you would make him stop, you said he’d leave me alone after the first time… please.”

“William, I’m trying, I’m doing the best I can. Did he… did anything happen this weekend?”

William nodded against Mycroft’s neck. “At the dinner table tonight, he sat next to me and…” a sob choked him and he couldn’t continue. He tightened his grip around Mycroft’s neck again.

“But you did what I said and you ran away, after dinner, didn’t you? You ran and you hid and you stayed quiet until he was gone.”

“You beat him up,” William whispered, lifting his head, smiling at Mycroft. Hero-worship lit up his kaleidoscopic eyes. “I heard you.”

“I did,” Mycroft whispered back. “I threw him to the floor, had my knee to his chest and bloodied his conk. And I’ll thrash him at school and I’ll do everything I can to make him stop once and for all, I promise.” Mycroft clumsily wiped the tears off of William’s face with the hem of his T-shirt. “I was there for you before. I’ll be there for you again. I’ll always be there for you. This was my fault.”

“No, Mickey,” William said innocently. “It was mine, I was bad. I went to the grove by myself when Mummy and Papa told me not to go…”

“William,” Mycroft made himself sound as stern as he possibly could, which was difficult when his voice still cracked periodically. “Listen to me, what has happened to you is not your fault. It’s mine. I’m the eldest while Ford is away. It’s my job to mind you. I should have watched out for you better. But I’m here now, Little Brother, I’m always here.”

“OK,” William’s lip wobbled but he wasn’t crying anymore.

“Did you eat anything at dinner?”

William shook his head. “I tried. But I threw up.”

“Will, what’s with the baby talk?” Mycroft hated how William’s speech patterns had started regressing, when he actually spoke that was. Nowadays, he was so quiet around the adults, Mycroft wanted to scream at his parents to notice that something was terribly wrong with their youngest child. He resented taking on the role his parents should be playing. But his parents were too busy trying to rebuild and secure their financial future. If they were all thrown into the street, then there would be no way to help William at all.

The pair of idiots may even think having Mycroft and William go live with the Cullen-Culpeppers would be a good idea if they weren’t able to recoup their losses.

Mycroft decided he’d rather lie about his age so he could join the military and send William to live with Ford and his Irish girlfriend before he’d allow that to happen.

So he tried to the best of his fourteen-year-old ability to do the job his parents should have been performing. “Try again.”

William sucked in a quavering breath. “I threw up. Heathcliff put his hand in my lap at dinner an-an-and I got sick afterwards,” he lowered his eyes. “I threw… threw up in one of Mummy’s jugs. The one Granny Vernet got her while she was on holiday in China. The one that Papa hates.”

Mycroft cringed then made a mental note to find the Ming dynasty vase his brother had vomited in and clean it out before anyone was the wiser. “Well, at least you weren’t sick all over yourself. Are you hungry? I have nibbles.”
Even though Mycroft struggled with losing weight, he was unable to rid himself the habit of hoarding sweets and bags of crisps in his room. Lately, he’d been feeding his hidden junk food to his little brother.

“Do you have any Rolos?” William shyly asked.

“I do, come on. First, let’s get you changed for bed.”

He hefted himself to his feet then pulled William up. William giggled, a rare sound these days.

Mycroft now kept a spare toothbrush in his small washroom for William. Even though the boy was about to eat a massive amount of choccies, Mycroft still made him clean his teeth. He also gave him a spoonful of Pepto-Bismol in case his tummy was still upset. William made a face but choked down the thick, pink liquid. “Yuck.”

“Well, you don’t want to eat loads of Rolos only to have them come back up,” Mycroft scolded him mildly. As he watched his little brother kick off his black sandals then change out of his black shorts and periwinkle jumper, he was shocked to see how William’s ribs protruded.

Mycroft found of his old rugby jumpers and tugged it over William’s curly head. It was far too large for him. As he pushed the sleeves up, William wheedled, “Can we have a story?”

“Course we can,” Mycroft said as he pulled his own pyjamas on. “Already got one picked out so crawl in. The torch and the sweets are under the pillow. I’ll be there in a second.”

Mycroft double-checked his barricaded door, wondering if the grown-ups would continue laughing and drinking as they tended to do. Nanny Rose was out of town for the weekend, a family emergency had cropped up. Mycroft wondered if Rose suspected something was wrong, she tended to check on William more often when the Cullen-Culpeppers spent a weekend.

*If she suspects, why isn’t she saying anything? I don’t want to be the adult anymore…*

Mycroft shoved that thought and the last vestige of childhood behind him.

Meanwhile, William had rolled back onto his belly, reaching back into the priest-hole, reaching for something, nearly falling in the process. Just as Mycroft went to snatch him, William righted himself, smiling happily at the bedraggled blue teddy bear he had retrieved. Mycroft sighed as he scooped William up and tossed him into bed, just to make him giggle again.

As he closed the trapdoor and rolled the rug back over it, Mycroft thought again that William was honestly too old to be still sleeping with stuffed animals. After this horrible summer however, Mycroft didn’t have the heart to deal with it at the moment.

With a shudder, he suddenly remembered the horrors everyone endured when his parents decided to wean Baby William from his paccie. The incessant howls threatened to deafen everyone in the village, as well as their neighbors. If Mummy and Daddy hadn’t persevered in their efforts, Mycroft was sure William would still have his paccie to this day. But after that, there was the terrible phase where he sucked his thumb, which brought on another set of screaming temper tantrums when Mummy and Daddy set on breaking him of that bad habit. Mycroft knew it was no coincidence his little brother loved lollipops. Mycroft was also the only one who didn’t find it amusing when William used to strut around with the entire lolly shoved into his mouth and the stick hanging out like a cigarette. *William is going to have some sort of oral fixation for sure,* the amateur psychologist sighed to himself again as he turned off the lights and carefully made his way towards his bed, where his damaged little brother waited.
William had turned the torch on and had already started gobbling the Rolos. “What are we reading tonight, Mickey?”

“Oh, I think you’ll like it. It’s about a little boy who goes on all sorts of adventures.” Mycroft opened the drawer in his nightstand and drew out a slender book.”

“Like a pirate?” he squeaked in his little bird voice.

“He’s a prince who lives in Outer Space. That’s loads better than a pirate.”

William shone the light on the cover. “Le Petit Prince,” he stumbled over the pronunciation. “This isn’t an English story?”

“No, it’s obviously a French story, don’t be thick, Little Brother.”

“Does it come in English, Mickey?”

“Never read an English translation of anything, William. Always read a book in the original language first.”

“But I’m not very good at French, Mycroft. It took me all morning to learn the alphabet and I still mess up when to use le and la and I only know how to con-con-conjugate verbs in the present tense,” William whined, not comprehending that what he had learned in three days many people couldn’t accomplish in three months.

“I’ll help you, but we have to be quiet, no one knows you’re in here, remember?”

William shrank against the pillows, remembering why he was sleeping in Mycroft’s room instead of his own. He started trembling again. The Rolos slipped from his hand, forgotten.

“Don’t be frightened,” Mycroft whispered. “Fear clouds the mind, remember?”

William nodded but he clutched his teddy bear, anxiety causing his face to pucker again.

“William, the light, it’s your job to be the light.”

“Oh,” William snuggled against his big brother and shone the light on the book again.

“Right, ready?”

William nodded, curling up into a ball next to his big brother.

“Now, do you remember what petit means?”

“Little,” William whispered. “Like me.”

**

17 January 2016
Mycroft Holmes’ private residence
Somewhere in London
Friday evening
8:50 PM

“Mr. Holmes, is there anything el-” Mrs. Pringle started to say as she entered the dining room. She fell silent when she realized that Mr. Holmes had nodded off at the dinner table. She couldn’t help
but smile when she heard his soft snores.

She doubled checked to make sure that his cigarette was actually out. The last thing anyone needed to deal with was a house fire. She then collected his empty tea mug, the empty water glass, his untouched plate of sandwiches and the empty plate that once held biscuits.

“Asleep, at last,” she sighed. “Now I can get some work done.”

It was impossible for her to accomplish anything with him underfoot.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for reading and bookmarking and the comments! :^) <3
Back-rank Weakness

Chapter Summary

Back-rank Weakness

A situation in which a player is under threat of a back-rank mate and, having no time/option to create an escape for the king, must constantly watch and defend against that threat, for example by keeping a rook on the back rank.

~*~ or ~*~

John is home from hospital! Yay!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Five: Back-rank Weakness

31 March 2016
John and Mary Watson’s residence
Thursday evening
7:20 PM

“John, what are you doing?” Mary entered the lounge carrying two mugs of green tea. Sweetie lolloped in after her, wagging what was left of his tail.

“Just trying to figure out how to rob Peter to pay Paul,” John didn’t even look up from the stack of papers sitting in his lap. Clumsily he tapped out numbers on the calculator app on his mobile. The mobile slid off the arm of his chair and clunked to the floor. “Damn.”

“Here,” Mary quickly set down the mugs, not even bothering with coasters. “Let me.”

“Mary, I’m supposed to move around,” John suppressed a sigh. Ever since he had been released from hospital, she was trying so bloody hard, acting like everything was like it was before. She was the loving devoted wife, a nurse who liked to bake and knit. Not a killer. Not the person who gunned down his best friend…

(... love of my life…?)

“I know, and you’re doing aces, but well, it’s just quicker for me,” Mary knelt next to his armchair and held up his mobile. “For me to fetch the phone rather than you. Besides,” she gave him a bashful smile. “You took such good care of me while I was in hospital and afterwards, I just figured it was my turn.”

She pressed her lips to his knuckles. Then she gave him That Smile that had initially melted his heart the first time he had seen it. The one where her eyes were almost closed and her nose scrunched up just a bit. She smiled with her entire face.

Is it real though? Is anything about her real? John wondered, not for the first time.
Maisie. Maisie, Maisie, Maisie, play the game until she’s found… then you can leave this bitch.

The vehemence of his own thoughts shocked him. To cover, he directed his attention back to the stack of unpaid bills. “I really don’t know how we’re going to dig out of this.”

“We’ll be fine, John,” she put a hand on his forearm. “I’m working aga-”

“But I’m not,” John cut in. “Mary, there’s a strong possibility I could still lose my medical license completely. I still have to face the review board and they may not take pity on me just because of… well, what happened last January.” John shifted in his chair, his rib mostly healed but still not strong enough for the physical activity John was used to. The inertia driving him mad, he explained to Mary: “I’m still not fit enough to go on cases with Sherlock and won’t be for a long time. So if I can’t practice medicine and if I can’t work cases, I honestly don’t know how we’re going to make it.”

“We’ll make it.” Mary squeezed his right arm. The left arm was still encased in a plaster cast. She bit her lip; another facial expression of hers that John had originally thought was cute. “Sherlock met me for lunch today. Well, I mean, he saw me at the canteen at Bart’s and I ate lunch and he watched. OK that came out a bit creepy,” she ran her fingers through her short platinum ringlets, which she was growing out. The longer curls suited her, softened her face.

“No worries, sweetheart, it’s a bit unnerving at first, trying to eat in front of him when he doesn’t. I used to think he just absorbed nutrients from the smog.”

Mary laughed but immediately sobered, knowing what she was about to say would irritate him. “Anyway, he, ah… brought up the subject of a loan again and I thoug-”

“No.”

“John, it’s a loan.”

“He’ll go overboard and we won’t possibly be able to pay him back.”

“Well, John, honestly, what else is he going to do with his money?” Mary frowned now. “What does he buy really but smart phones, posh suits and old books from secondhand stores? If it wasn’t for his clothes and gadgets, one would have no idea how much money he has. So he wants to spend it on us? That dodgy little flat can’t cost that much to live in, even though the location is prime. He doesn’t have a car. He doesn’t have a wife or child to support either.”

Oh but he does have a child to support, John thought, for the first time without feeling guilty that he’d never told Mary about Sherlock’s coke-fuelled one-night-stand with Molly Hooper that had produced little Henry Lestrade. John had asked Sherlock about it once and he had muttered something about paying for his education and setting up a trust fund then changing the subject to the toxicity of the white oleander plant and how it was a pity they didn’t grow very well in London.

“I won’t take advantage of him,” John said firmly, choosing not to remember how he had almost asked Sherlock for a loan after having a row with a chip-and-pin machine at Tesco.

“He said you’d say that,” Mary drew a cheque out of her jeans pocket. “That’s why he made it out to me.” She unfolded it and showed John the amount, but wisely kept it out of his reach.

“Dammit, Mary…”

“Well, you were just saying that you didn’t know how we were going to make it! It’s not like he gave us millions,” Mary’s cheeks flushed. “He gave us exactly the amount we’re short so we can
catch up with the bills we’re behind on. No more, no less.”

“And how are we going to pay him back?”

“We’ll figure that bit out when you’re healthy.”

“I am healthy, just a bit broken at the moment,” John held up his casted arm and groaned. Even if there had been a chance to overcome the intermittent hand tremor he had obtained after being shot in Afghanistan, Peters smashing his fingers and wrist was the final nail in the coffin for his surgical career. He doubted he could do a simple suture much less perform a complicated surgery like the ones he had been used to while in the field during the war. “Do not deposit that. Mary,” he glowered at her when her face became mulish. “I really mean it.”

“Then what do you propose we do?”

“Sell this place,” John leaned back in his chair. “Honestly, what are we doing with a terrace house when a flat will do? We don’t need all this space.”

They had thought they had needed the space when they thought they would have children.

“Where would we move to?” Mary’s eyes glittered with annoyance. “221C Baker Street?”

“Well, it is a fixer-up, to be sure, but as you stated the location is prime,” John pointed out. “We could get rid of the car then, save money on petrol and insurance. We’d also get a friends-and-family discount on rent, even if we insist on paying the full amount.”

“Nice and close to Sherlock as well,” Mary pointed out archly.

“What’s wrong with that? He is my best friend and he adores you,” John stretched the truth with the last bit. “Don’t forget that we are business partners as well, me and Sherlock. Even though I’m next to useless at the moment, we are still colleagues. Might be easier to live closer instead of me having to run to Baker Street every bloody day when we’re on a case.”

Before Mary could retort, there was a knock from the back door.

“What the bloody hell?” John tried to turn around then winced, grabbing his side. “Shit.”

Mary was already on her feet, “Do you have your gun? Mine’s in my handbag.”

John reached between the cushions. “Safety’s on,” he handed her his Army Browning.

After John’s abduction and attack, neither one of them took chances anymore. John thanked his lucky stars that the one thing he could do and do well with his right hand was shoot.

Mary clicked the safety off and slunk into the kitchen.

John reached for his mobile, thumb poised to dial 999.

He heard Mary call in her normal voice Who is it? But he couldn’t hear who was on the other side of the door. He did hear the door slowly creak open, then Mary muttering something. Then the door slammed and the deadbolt shot home.

“Mary?”

“It’s alright John,” Mary said in a high sing-song voice.
“Like bloody hell it is,” he muttered.

Mary re-entered the lounge, her arm slung over the shoulders of mousy looking woman. Plain brown hair, plain round face, plain black jumper, plain khaki trousers and flimsy black Converse trainers that were soaked through. The thin grey windbreaker was also inadequate for the damp March weather. It also did not properly conceal the sidearm she was carrying. Her teeth chattered. She clutched a beaten-up leather rucksack.

She trained her russet eyes on John, coolly appraising him. John gave her a stony stare back.

*What fresh hell is this?*

*Why didn’t I marry Sarah instead, when I had the chance?*

*Oh yeah, that’s right, I wasn’t in love with Sarah…* John stifled an aggrieved sigh.

“John,” Mary said as she guided the mousy woman to the other arm chair. “This is an old friend of mine,” she threw a quilt over her shaking shoulders and shoved a mug of tea in her hands.

“Marie Devine**,” Mousy Woman said quickly. She spoke The King’s English but with a very faint Russian accent. The unobservant would barely register it. However, John noticed, thanks to years of following Sherlock around on cases.

“And how old of a friend are you?” John hated how Mary’s former life kept invading his life.

“We go a bit back,” Marie leaned heavily on Mary.

“Are you alright?” John’s doctor instincts vibrated.

“Rolled my ankle, I’m fine.”

“Marie, you can speak openly,” Mary gently pushed on her shoulder so Marie would sit down. “You can trust John and there are no listening devices in the house. John and I check daily.”

Since neither one of them took chances any more sweeping the house for bugs was part of their new routine. It was an everyday chore, like washing the dishes, taking out the rubbish or walking the dog. John limped through the house every morning with the RF detector Sherlock had somehow procured for them. Mary swept the house at night.

“We were KGB, we were raised to be KGB,” Marie admitted while Mary lifted her ankle up onto the coffee table and started unlacing her wet trainer. “We both defected, thinking we had made better choices. We didn’t. She chose the CIA. I chose *La Ligue des Roux.*”

“What?”

“John, give her a chance to explain,” Mary snapped as she rolled up Marie’s trouser leg. Observing the puffy, bruised ankle, Mary said, “You two chat, I’m going to fix up an ice-pack. Drink that tea while it’s hot, Marie.” Mary picked up the other cup and thrust it into John’s hands.

“Really went all out, didn’t she? Being British,” Marie emitted a dry-chuckle. “I thought she’d stay American after her stint in the CIA.”

“While we’re traveling down Memory Lane, care to explain to me why I’m not calling the police right now, since you’re a member of Moriarty’s cult?”

“I’m a former member, Dr. Watson,” Marie said wryly before taking a sip of the tea. Then she pulled
a disgusted face, “What is this shit?”

“It’s good for you,” John said woodenly. “How exactly does one resign from the Red-headed League, may I ask?”

“You resign by putting a bullet in Jim Moriarty’s forehead.”

John goggled at Marie for a good minute, his eyes nearly bugging out. Then he slammed his mouth shut when he realized how stupid he must look. “Right, so, you’re the one.”

Sherlock had told him someone else had taken Moriarty out, but declined to give names. John saw the sense of this and hadn’t pressed him further. Now, Moriarty’s executioner sat in his lounge, criticizing his tea with a sprained ankle propped up on his nice coffee table.

“Yeah, I’m The One,” Marie said with grim satisfaction. “Had to be done, tell you the truth. As I told your mate, Jim coming back from the dead was the worst thing to happen. It was as if he and his twin brother were racing to see who would run our organization into the ground first. Hard for a secret society to stay secret with those two idiots appearing in court rooms and on television and great big screens across England.” She looked over her shoulder, towards the kitchen. Then she turned her attention back to John, “After Mary called me and told me what Jim did to her, the stabbing and the miscarriage,” she shook her head. “It was a pleasure to pull the trigger, I assure you.”

“I’m sure it was,” John had wanted to be the one to pull the trigger. Because of Moriarty, John not only had lost his best friend for two years and his daughter Maisie for God knows how long but permanently lost his old military comrade James Sholto, his sister Harry and his unborn son.

He had really wanted to pull the trigger.

“That doesn’t explain why you’re here, in my house.”

Mary returned, carrying a mug of beef broth, a pink tea towel and an ice-pack. She traded Marie the tea for the broth then knelt to tend to Marie’s injured ankle.

“Anya was the only real friend I ever had,” Marie smiled down at the blonde woman carefully draping her swollen ankle with the tea towel then pressing the ice-pack over it. “I wouldn’t know what real friendship was without her.” She folded her lips tightly together. “You’re in danger, all of you. You two, Mycroft Holmes, the Lestrades, the Homeless Network, everyone associated with Sherlock Holmes, even his parents, even his landlady,” Marie gave John a bitter smile. “Professor Moriarty has declared war on Holmes.” She widened her bitter smile. “You weren’t supposed to live.”

“Sorry to have disappointed him,” John said faintly. “I had other plans.”

“You don’t understand, previously it was just business, keep the money flowing in. Sherlock Holmes got in the way of that. Now that both his grandsons, Richard and Jim, are dead, it’s personal. Everything will be about revenge now.” She looked at her mug of beef broth. “I didn’t know that La Roux had taken your daughter until it was too late to do anything about it, after MI-6 already retrieved her. If I had known, if I had been in the country at the time, I could have at least taken out that two-faced bitch Margaux Vos for her role in Maisie’s abduction.”

“I already handled that,” Mary said crisply.

“Anyway,” John felt his gut churning while listening to the two women casually discuss another woman’s murder. “Why are you bringing up Maisie, exactly?”
“Because as painful as it must be for you two to be separated from her, right now, it’s probably in her best interest. The Professor has plans for the Lestrade boy, you see. That’s why I’m here, to tell you to stop looking for your daughter, at least for now. You don’t want to inadvertently lead the Professor to her. I know what they have planned for the Lestrade child and…” she shivered. “I wanted to warn you, since I know you’ve been looking for Maisie.”

“But why are they targeting Henry?” Mary screwed up her face in confusion.

“There are rumors, you see.”

“Stupid rumors,” John cut Marie off, “Rumors that can’t possibly be true.”

“What kind of stupid rumors, John,” Mary asked in a cool voice.

“The kind of rumors that get innocent people killed,” John snapped. Then he told the biggest lie of his life. “Because of their odd friendship and because of her role in The Fall, a nasty rumor was started about Molly that she cheated on Greg and Sherlock is actually Henry’s father. It’s utter codswallop, especially if you know Sherlock. Sex is beneath him, because the needs of the Mind are more important than the needs of the Transport. You’ve heard him go off about love being a chemical defect and whatnot. Plus, Molly would never cheat on Greg.”

“I never heard those rumors,” Mary’s voice stayed cool. “I work at Bart’s as well, the same as Molly. I would have thought I would have heard something.”

“It was at The Met, not Bart’s, a couple of Donovan and Anderson’s old colleagues who still believe that Sherlock was a fraud, despite his resurrection and everything,” John said hastily.

“It doesn’t matter, that’s not the point,” Marie interrupted. “The point is the Professor believes it to be true, but the Lestrade boy is not his top priority, although you should warn the DI and the pathologist so they can take appropriate steps to protect their son.”

“Who’s top priority?” Mary whitened. “John?”

“No.”

While Mary looked relieved, John demanded, “Who else then? He’s not close to his family. He couldn’t really care less if Mycroft died. He really doesn’t have any other friends besides us and the Lestrades.”

“Violet Hunter, that’s who,” Marie informed them.

“She’s dead,” John said automatically, “Died in a plane crash last January.”

“Oh yeah, right,” Marie rolled her eyes as Mary sat on the sofa next to her. “Like Holmes was dead after he nosedived off of Bart’s rooftop.”

“How much is the hit on Violet for?” Mary’s voice was hushed.

“It’s worse than you imagine, Anya,” Marie squeezed her shoulder. “I should have listened to you. I should have never gotten involved with those bastards. I got sucked in.” She turned her head towards John, her russet eyes soft and pleading now. “It really is a cult, La Roux. As in, the Professor could literally order everyone to fly to Guyana at once and drink the poisoned Flavor-Aide once they are there and they would be falling over themselves to see who could get to Jonestown first.” She shuddered again. “I didn’t realize how bad it was and just how brainwashed I really was.” Then she heaved a big sigh. “And the money was really fucking good. I made three times what I would have
freelancing.”

“Charming,” John grumbled, not sure if he liked “Marie” or not.

“My ex-husband introduced me to La Roux,” Marie leaned forward to place the untouched beef broth on the coffee table, but Mary took it from her instead. Marie laughed bitterly. “I thought he loved me, how stupid. He was really recruiting me for The Cause, the eternal perpetuation of crime. I left him when I realized how insane he was. He didn’t even care. When I told him I was moving out, the first question he asked me was if I was planning on leaving La Roux as well. When I told him no, he was pleased. Said I was an asset, said he didn’t care if I left him, just so long I stayed true to The Cause. That’s when I realized he was mad. Then when Jim started craving fame and when Richard started stalking Holmes,” she shook her head. “I started to see what was behind the curtain.”

John involuntarily licked his lips. “What is behind the curtain, Marie?”

“The Professor wants Violet Hunter alive.”

“Why?”

“Did Holmes tell you about the Moriarty Code?”

“Mycroft did, not Sherlock.”

“When was this?” Mary demanded but John told her to hush.

“Richard Brook gave Violet the Moriarty Code. Word on the street is that Violet Hunter is now the last living person to possess the code.”

“What is the Moriarty Code?” Mary shook her head.

“A hacking program Richard Brook designed, he was good with computers. It’s the master hacking system. It’s a master key, designed to unlock any security program.”

That actually wasn’t an accurate description. Sherlock had described the Moriarty Code to Violet that it was like a Rosetta Stone for the Internet, specifically, the Dark Net. The code that Richard Brook had created made it easier for people to enter and navigate the Dark Net as well as where to go, what to post, how to cause maximum chaos and mayhem and how to find people to help cause the chaos and mayhem and more importantly, how not to get caught.

There were also actually four people who knew about the “code” and how it worked, not one. Sherlock Holmes, Violet Hunter, “Trinity”, a British hacker Sherlock had met during one of his many stints in rehab and “Wasp,” a Swedish hacker who was an antisocial, brilliant girl with a dragon tattoo. Sherlock had sensed a kindred spirit in her and had liked her immediately.

This was all information Marie did not have and could only tell John and Mary what she knew for certain. “His people were supposed to snatch her at Ronald Reagan airport but that all got mucked up. Since she got away, the Professor sent his best assassin to find her and bring her back to him. Alive.”

“Who’s that?” John asked.

“Her ex-husband,” Mary said softly just as Marie said, “My ex.” Then Marie added, “Holy Peters. I think you’ve met him.”

John looked at his casted hand. “Yeah, I’m minus a spleen because of him.”
Bits and pieces of his ordeal came back to him as he had recovered. The beatings didn’t happen all at once, but over a two day period. If his spleen would have been ruptured on the first day of his abduction, John would have bled out before Sherlock would have found him. That was not the plan. The plan was to give Sherlock hope and then to snuff that hope out.

Sometimes John woke up at night in a cold sweat, hearing imaginary gunfire. Other nights, he woke up gasping, hearing the sound of an aluminum bat cracking his ribcage.

Needless to say, his resumed therapy sessions with Ella were going as they had before: nowhere.

“I’m also minus my good friend James and my sister Harry as well because of him,” John added darkly while thinking, *I am not going to lose Violet as well. Not to that cold-blooded bastard.*

Mary hugged herself, betraying how utterly terrified she was. She remembered Holy Peters all too well. He had been one of the few people she actually had been afraid of when she a gun-for-hire. “Do we have proof of life for Violet?”

Marie shook her head. “If they can’t find her, they’ll go to Phase Two, which is Henry Lestrade.”

John rubbed his mouth and shot Mary a knowing look. Her eyes welled up with tears.

They both knew what Phase Two meant. It meant ripping Henry from his parents and giving him to a real monster, the Earl of Winchester.

“There will be no Phase Two,” John said quietly. “Thank you, Marie. I know you must be risking your life to tell us this. I assume you’re telling us because you can’t be seen telling Sherlock?”

She nodded. “MI-6 all but has him under house arrest. The surveillance around Baker Street is ridiculous. It’s easier to break into Buckingham.” She tried to stand, but Mary pushed her back down onto the sofa.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I can’t stay here, I have to keep moving. Do you think I found all that out without pissing some people off? My life won’t be worth shit once *La Roux* realize it was me and not Holmes who took Jim Moriarty out.” She looked up at Mary, “But after everything he did to you, I couldn’t leave without warning you because if they can’t get their hands on the Lestrades’ kid, then it will be your kid they’ll hunt down instead. I didn’t want you or Holmes to unknowingly lead those bastards to her,” She managed to smile at Mary, “*Babochka*."

“You can barely walk,” Mary chided her with a thick voice. “Stay tonight. We’ll move you to a bolt-hole tomorrow you can stay at until you recover.”

Marie looked down at Sweetie who plopped himself between Mary and Marie’s legs. Marie reached down to scratch Sweetie’s only remaining ear. The former bait dog wagged what was left of his tail and his pink tongue lolled out in contentment.

“You know,” Marie said wearily. “I wanted to be a veterinarian when I was a kid.”

“Rest,” Mary found a quilt and wrapped it around her friend. “I bought fresh berries from the market so I’ll make *oladi* for breakfast tomorrow then we’ll figure out where to hide you.”

Marie gripped Mary’s hand, mouthed *thank you* and settled herself in to sleep for the first time perhaps in days.
But the next morning, Marie was gone, the quilt folded up neatly on the sofa. There was a note on top of the quilt.

“What does it say?” John yawned, his hair still sleep-mussed. He had been surprised he had slept at all with two assassins in his house instead of just one. He also worried that he was more off his game than he originally thought, since he never heard her leave.

“Spasibo. Proshchay” Mary read out loud then translated, “Thank you. Goodbye.”

John rubbed his mouth. “We need to tell Sherlock, today,” he muttered. They hadn’t dared text or call Sherlock last night, not after Marie said how heavy the surveillance was around his flat.

“I don’t know if I can stop looking for Maisie,” Mary tearfully admitted, balling up the note into a wad. Then she pressed her fist against her mouth and nose.

“Who said we were going to stop looking?” John instinctively held her upper arm with his good hand while wrapping his left arm awkwardly around her waist. He kissed her forehead, playing the role of the Good Husband. “Let me talk to Sherlock, see what the plan is.”

How am I supposed to look for Maisie now with the Professor targeting our children?

John hid his panic by patting Mary on the cheek, “It’ll be alright. We’re going to find Maisie. We’re going to find Violet. We’re bringing everybody home, just you see.”

Just then, his mobile whirred within the pocket of his dressing gown. John scratched his nose then pulled the mobile out of his pocket. “Speak of the devil…”

Baker Street, 11 o’clock tomorrow.
Come if convenient.
If inconvenient, come anyway – SH

John rolled his eyes and Mary chuckled. Then the next text came. Both John and Mary groaned.

Bring your medical bag – SH

“Bloody hell,” John sighed.

“Do you think he had his eyebrows blown off from one of his experiments again?”

“I’ll text pictures if he did.” John paused on his way towards the kitchen. “Mary?”

“Hm?”

“What does Babochka mean?” John naturally mangled the pronunciation.

“Butterfly,” Mary tucked the wadded up note into the pocket of her dressing gown, pink instead of coffee brown, like John’s. “It’s what she used to call me, teasing me, the Muhammad Ali thing. “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,” or however it went.”

“Ah, I see,” John went to perk the coffee.

At least one mystery was solved.

He finally understood why Mary never wanted to talk about the beautiful and intricate tattoo of a delicate butterfly with sapphire and periwinkle wings inked on her lower back.
Marie Devine is the name of a canon character in "The Disappearance of Lady Carfax."
Anticipation

Chapter Summary

Anticipation

If the theme and setting of a particular problem has already appeared in an earlier problem without the knowledge of the later composer, the problem is said to be anticipated. The position does not have to be exactly the same, just very similar. Where this is done deliberately by the later composer, the term plagiarised is used. There is a real chance of anticipation if the problem has a relatively simple theme, since there are only a finite number of positions and themes, and chess problems have been composed for hundreds of years. However, anticipations are not always noticed immediately.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Six: Anticipation

1 April 2016
221 Baker Street
Friday morning
10:58 AM

“Keep the change,” John instructed the cab driver.

This cabbie was a skinny Syrian immigrant who had no interest in scamming his passengers. He was just grateful to have a job and to be able to walk across the street and (mostly) not worry about being shot at or blown up. “Have a good day,” he said, slowly enunciating.

John hadn’t really kept up with world events during his stay in hospital nor after his release. So he hadn’t observed how anxious and tense his driver was, how his body language had communicated that he expected his good fortune to be ripped away from him at any moment.

John was simply glad to be out of the house.

He was even glad to practice medicine again, even if it was just first-aid and not major surgery.

As much as he fought it, as hard as he tried to keep his mind occupied while he recuperated from his ordeal, depression and boredom had started to suffocate him. An active man, being bedridden for weeks and weeks on end nearly sent him over the edge, as it nearly had when he’d gotten shot in Afghanistan. It was the inertia, not the infection that nearly killed him.

He grudgingly admitted that the anti-anxiety medication had been the right call while he was in hospital. Now that he was becoming more and more mobile, his physician approved his request to start slowly weaning himself off the drugs. As John explained, just being able to take a walk around the neighborhood block lifted his spirits. He had never been a sit-still type of person, despite what Mrs. Hudson had mistakenly believed when she first met him.
He now stood in front of Baker Street for the first time since last December, a shadow of himself. His hair had become more silver than sandy-blond and he had lost more weight than what was healthy for a man of his height. His appetite had flagged while he had been recovering, attributed to the depression as well as a possible side-effect of the anti-anxiety medication as his stomach was often upset. Eating was currently not as enjoyable as it used to be. He ate for fuel not pleasure now. He hoped that the less and less he took the drugs; the more and more of his old energy would come back. Lethargy was, after all, also a possible side-effect of the anti-anxiety medication.

However, just standing in front of the black lacquered door with the “221” emblazoned on it gave him a thrill of simple happiness he had not felt in ages.

He felt like he was coming home after a very long and very nasty tour of duty.

Still hampered by his cast, he put down his doctor’s kit, awkwardly dug his key out with his ineffective right hand, unlocked the door, tucked the key away and picked up his kit again.

*What a pain in the arse,* he sighed to himself as he climbed the seventeen steps to 221B.

He was surprised by the sound of silence. Usually he could hear the wail of a violin or an explosion of an experiment gone horribly awry. Or, in the more recent past, Violet Smith shrieking at Sherlock for something he did that was Not Good while Gladstone barked.

His heart twisted. He missed her. He could only imagine how Sherlock must feel.

He hated that Sherlock had been alone the entire time John had been recuperating. At the same time, he had been impressed and more than just a little touched how supportive Sherlock had been while John had been out of commission. Of course, he was supportive in his own unique way (some would say *weird,* John chose to say *unique.*) Sherlock did not bring him grapes nor did he do the tea-and-sympathy bit while John was in hospital. Nor did he treat him like he was Humpty-Dumpty after falling off the wall.

No. Sherlock brought John exactly what he needed: *work.*

John would get random brain-teasers texted to him apparently out of the blue, but always just whenever he felt at his lowest:

*Look at my face but you won’t see 13 any place.*

*What am I? – SH*

*What? – JW*

*I detest repeating myself.*

*Answer the question – SH*

*Are you high? – JW*

*No. Are you? If yes, is it anything good? Morphine? Percocet? – SH*

*Not funny – JW*

*It’s a little funny.*

*Answer the question – SH*

*A clock…? – JW*
Well done. You’re less of an idiot than Lestrade at any rate – SH

Or…

Which word in the dictionary is spelled incorrectly? – SH

John, it’s been an hour since I texted you. Please tell me you haven’t been perusing the dictionary looking for which word was spelled incorrectly – SH

You’re an idiot – SH

Or…

I am the beginning of sorrow and the end of sickness. You cannot express happiness without me yet I am in the midst of crosses. I am always in risk yet never in danger. You may find me in the sun but I am never out of darkness. What am I? – SH

Well, that’s cheerful – JW

Answer the question – SH

Oxygen??

You're an idiot – SH.

Or …

The number 8,549,176,320 is a unique number. Can you tell me what is so special about it? – SH

What the actual fuck Sherlock? - JW

Answer the question – SH

It’s the only number that includes all the digits arranged in alphabetically order. J - JW

You Googled the answer. Cheating is so beneath you – SH

I did not cheat. – JW

Are you actually attempting to lie to me? – SH

Bloody hell – JW
You’re an idiot – SH

Or the most recent brain-teaser…

Two friends go on a camping trip. After enjoying a hearty dinner cooked over a campfire during a clear and beautiful night they retire to their tent and go to sleep. Some hours later, the first man awoke and asked his faithful friend:

“Look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”
So what do you see, faithful friend? - SH

Stars, of course - JW

What does that tell you? - SH

Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I see that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I know that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I realize that if there is a God, He is all powerful and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that tomorrow will be a lovely day.

What does it tell you, Sherlock? – JW

Sherlock? - JW

It tells me that someone has stolen our tent – SH

You’re an idiot - SH

*you’re – JW

That’s just petty John – SH

But it wasn’t just silly brain-teasers that Sherlock sent him to keep him occupied. While other well-meaning friends and acquaintances brought him paperback thrillers and action film DVDs, Sherlock emailed him case files. True, they were mostly cold cases, but they all had the same question in the body of the email: “Thoughts?”

The first time John emailed a tentative email, he immediately got roasted by the Great Detective:

Honestly, that’s the best you can do?
I thought the doctors removed your spleen and not your brain.
I am not asking for your opinion to be pandered to; there are (believe it or not) areas that I am not an expert in and need a professional opinion.
Now, since you rant on and on about the value of human life, I shall remind you (even
though I don’t personally care) that a man’s life is on the line as he is rotting on Death Row in Texas and he seems to think we are his only hope. So, do stop wasting my time with what you feel might have happened, re-review the case file again then give me an educated reason why you THINK the man’s wife was accidentally poisoned and not intentionally poisoned. Also since you have irritated me, I demand three credible sources to back up your opinion. Honestly, John, you’re better than this. It’s not as if you’re doing anything productive these days anyway – SH

John’s temper had flared up for the first time since last December. One-handed, he had pecked out a scathing response, but when he got to the third paragraph, his anger had fizzled out. Once calmed, he realized what Sherlock was doing. He felt like a private being dressed down by a drill sergeant. Then he told himself to stop the pity party and get to work.

Another time, Sherlock sent him an 812 page dissertation about the differences between the United States and the United Kingdom regarding crime-solving and the advantages and disadvantages of each. The email had read “Proofread this, I don’t have time.” John had cringed, fearing it would be just as dry as his online essay about the 243 types of tobacco ash. It actually turned out to be a truly interesting read. At times, actually John forgot he was supposed to be proofreading.

But they were never really able to spend time together alone. Mary, of course, always hovered in the background. She was never rude or intrusive, she was just always… there.

While he was still in hospital Sherlock faithfully visited John in person thrice a week; more if he could when time allowed. But The Work never stopped plus John suspected strongly that when Sherlock wasn’t working cases for Lestrade, he was looking for Violet. When John came home, Sherlock pared his visits down to twice a week and John wished he hadn’t. Truth be told, when Sherlock came to visit, it gave Mary something to do other than to fuss over him. Still, no matter what else he had going on in his life, like clockwork, on Sundays and Wednesdays, Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson arrived at six on the dot for dinner. Mary always made too much food and sent leftovers home with the both of them. John sadly suspected most of Mary’s culinary efforts ended up in the bin once Sherlock got home. But the regular meals did add some much needed pounds to Sherlock’s rail-thin frame.

Still, as great as Sherlock had been, John craved to be alone with him. To talk openly with him without Mary fluttering afloat, floating around in the background, or sometimes interjecting herself in the conversation, but that intrusion was rare. Usually it consisted of Mary lightly taking the mickey out of Sherlock when he got a little too wrapped up in his own brilliance. Sometimes John was even thankful for her running interference when Sherlock started boasting about his genius and complaining of the collective stupidity of humanity.

To be fair, it wasn’t always Mary who was infringing on their time together. John had a steady flow of friends and colleagues coming in and out the front door. John simultaneously felt grateful and exhausted. He didn’t know how to explain without sounding like an arse, that he just wanted to sit in His Chair in front of a roaring fire across from his best friend and just have a cuppa at 221B.

For the first time in months, John felt like himself when he reached the top stair to his old flat. He saw a note pinned to the door to 221B. John also noticed that the door wasn’t completely shut. Sherlock had left it ajar so it would be easier for John to open with his broken hand.
The note pinned into the door simply read: Enter.

John nudged the door open with his door and let himself inside.

The flat looked the same as it always did. Dusty, unkempt, eccentric and utterly homey.

John’s eyes flicked over to the lovely Steinway & Sons Essex upright piano and felt another stab of remorse. His stomach knotted as he remembered how childishly jealous he had been that day when Sherlock gave that piano to Violet. He didn’t need to look at the dust to know that it hadn’t been touched since Violet went away.

But John paid less attention to the piano and more to the ragamuffin curled up in a ball on the sofa. John felt a half-smile creep up on his face as he observed one of Sherlock’s many contradictions.

For all his protestations and disdain for humanity in general, Sherlock had a soft spot for homeless kids. He claimed he only helped them so he could maintain the necessary numbers he needed for his “Homeless Network”, a group of urchins-turned-spies who fed Sherlock all the news he needed about London’s criminal element as well as various other London subcultures. Most of these kids could put MI-6 to shame.

In the beginning, John took Sherlock at his word. At the time, John still thought Sherlock was some sort of madman or at the very least, somewhere on the autism spectrum. As time went on and as Sherlock taught John to become more observant, John realized that many of these kids were runaways, escaping abusive situations. Some of those situations were in the very foster homes they had been sent to after being removed from abusive parents. So calling social services sometimes was not in the kid’s best interest. John would patch the kid up, Mrs. Hudson would feed him up and Sherlock would find a safe place for the kid to stay. Sometimes the runaways would end up in a bedsit with other members of the Homeless Network. Sometimes the runaways would end up in hospital or rehab.

The first time John saw a dirty street kid snoring away on the sofa, he had been aghast. Convinced that the kid was either going to slit their throats or rob them blind in their sleep, or both, John protested, firmly stating that they need to call the police. Sherlock shrugged him off, by saying, “He’s a thirteen-year-old boy that’s been passed from john to john. He’s not robbing nor murdering anyone. He’s just tired and needs a place to sleep without being bothered.”

He said it so matter-of-factly John had to ask Sherlock to repeat himself, just to make sure he heard him correctly.

After Violet inadvertently revealed Sherlock’s childhood trauma, John realized another running theme with most of these broken kids. He immediately felt disgusted with himself how he had immediately assumed the very worst when he first had clapped eyes on them.

After Violet inadvertently revealed Sherlock’s childhood trauma, John realized another running theme with most of these broken kids and he immediately felt disgusted with himself how he had immediately assumed the very worst when he first had clapped eyes on them.

So upon seeing the skinny girl in barefoot but tattered jeans and a filthy oversized sweatshirt sound asleep on the sofa, John didn’t even flinch. He merely looked around for Sherlock but didn’t see him in the flat. Then he quietly shut the door behind him and walked over to the sleeping girl. The girl’s fever was evident before John even put his hand on her forehead; her cheeks were quite flushed and her entire face shone with sweat. Her nose and lips were also bright red and raw-looking. No wonder Sherlock hadn’t bothered to put a blanket over her, she’s burning up, she’d just kick it off. John thought as he opened his kit and pulled out a thermometer. Completely aware he was about to break
the law, John gently shook the girl awake, “Hey, I need you to open your eyes now.”

The girl woke up with a start and shrank away from John. She couldn’t be more than sixteen or seventeen at the most. Wide, sea-foam green eyes stared at him.

John held his hands up, “My name is Dr. Watson. I’m a friend of Sherlock Holmes. He asked me to come over to take a look at you. I understand you’ve been feeling poorly?”

John looked down and noticed the girl’s trainers and socks on the floor. The socks had turned a dingy grey and sodden. The boyish-looking trainers were also damp, but looked in fairly good shape. John also eyed the girl’s clothes and noted that while they were dirty and torn, they were in better shape than a lot of the clothes homeless people wore. New to the streets, he deduced.

“I feel like shit,” the girl rasped, then dug into her jeans pocket for a wadded up tissue. John waited patiently as she blew her nose. “Some tosser stole my coat at the shelter. I found this,” she plucked at his dirty sweatshirt, “And some gloves and cap in a bin, but I still caught cold anyway. My face feels like it’s about to explode.”

John frowned. It had been eleven degrees yesterday, not Arctic by any stretch of the imagination, but still not weather that one can go without a coat. Plus the nights were still cold. “Let’s have a look at your temperature and get you sorted out, yeah?”

John illegally took her temperature, examined her throat, ears and sinuses, listened to her heart and lungs and palpated her belly the best he could with his right hand. After he had satisfied himself that she had a raging sinus infection that was doing its best to travel to her lungs, he asked her, “What’s your name?”

“Jessica,” the girl said much too quickly. “Jessica Jones.”

John smiled, “This isn’t my first dance, miss. Your real name, please.”

“Susan,” the girl said wearily. “Susan Dobney.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Dobney,” John straightened up. “Now, I’m sure Mr. Holmes would not mind if you used his bath for a nice long soak.” In fact he may encourage it, John thought as the girl also smelt a bit ripe. “If memory serves, I think there’s some Epsom salts in the cupboard below the sink. That will help with the muscle aches.” As the girl eyed him with narrowed, suspicious eyes, he added lightly, “And be sure to lock the door for privacy so one of us doesn’t walk in to use the toilet while you’re in the bath. That would be embarrassing for all of us, don’t you think?”

Susan visibly relaxed. John wondered what hell she had been through before she ended up on Sherlock’s door.

He helped the girl to her feet and watched her scoop up her meager belongings, which apparently were only her socks, shoes and a dirty knitted hat. “Call if you need anything,” John added as she disappeared down the hall.

Then he closed his kit with a snap. Leaving it on the coffee table, he made his way towards the kitchen. He found Sherlock, sipping tea and reading something on his laptop. Gladstone was curled up on the rug in front of the eternally dripping sink that nobody could be arsed to fix.

“Tea?” Sherlock asked, as if John had just come in from the shops and not examined a filthy homeless girl.
“Yeah, cuppa be great,” John sat down in front of Sherlock.

“Fix me one as well, please.”

John opened his mouth, closed it. Then he rolled his eyes and glowered at Sherlock, “Excuse me, Mr. Observant, but do you not see that my left hand is currently wrapped in plaster?”

“I am aware of your infirmity,” Sherlock murmured, never looking up from the screen. “But I’m busy. And thirsty. And your right hand is still operational.”

“I can’t believe I actually missed you,” John scowled as he rose to refill the kettle.

“Neither can I,” Sherlock didn’t even flinch. “How is Miss Dobney?”

“Quite ill, but nothing fatal,” John nudged Gladstone with his toe so he would get out of his way. Gladstone made a whuf of dissent but grudgingly moved. John fumbled with the tap with his right hand. “She’ll have to go to a proper clinic to get antibiotics. I can’t write prescriptions at the moment. I really shouldn’t have examined her actually.”

“I’ll ask Molly for assistance regarding the medication.”

“She’s a pathologist, Sherlock. Dead people don’t need prescriptions.”

“She’s still a doctor. And she’s discreet. She’ll find someone else to help us.”

John managed to fill the kettle and plug it in without electrocuting himself. “Why didn’t you ask Molly to come over then?”

“John. Don’t be a moron. Her maternity leave is over so she’s back at Bart’s full-time plus she’s the mother of a young infant. Unfortunately she can’t drop everything as quickly as she had in the past. Also, I figured that you have a raging case of cabin fever by now.”

“You figured correctly,” John slumped back into his seat. What was I expecting? He thought not without some irritation. A hug and warm greetings? He’s not going to behave in any fashion he deems sentimental just because I came over.

“And I have a case I require your assistance on,” Sherlock muttered then spun his laptop around. “If you feel up to it, it’s mostly brainwork so no worries about exerting yourself overly.”

John read the headline from an American news website silently: Senator Commits Suicide After Private Records Are Revealed. But he read the byline out loud: “More evidence of misconduct and possible treason continue to be unearthed as the senator’s death was definitively ruled a suicide.”

John looked up. “Suicide, not murder?”

“Keep reading,” Sherlock tented his fingers together. “To yourself, if you please. I’ve already read it myself. I do not require it narrated to me again.”

John ground his teeth, wondering why in the hell was Sherlock Holmes his best friend as he read … hackvist group released documents allegedly procured from the senator’s missing hard drive, shortly before the senator’s death. A source within the Federal Bureau of Investigation revealed that earlier this week, the missing computer and hard drive were mailed to Deputy Director Barton Marshall’s office. Deputy Director Marshall had no comment at this time. Meanwhile, the autopsy reports are still pending…”

John looked up and shook his head. “I don’t understand.”
“You never do.”

John gave Sherlock a filthy look. Then he licked his lips and said, “Actually there’s something I need to discuss as well, Sherlock. Something… unexpected happened last night.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened, then he mouthed Not Here at John.

“What?” John furrowed his silvery brows.

Sherlock shook his head and mouthed Not Here again. “I take it you and Mary have repaired your relationship then?” he said smoothly.

“What?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes so hard he must have sprained something. “The unexpected event? You and Mary clearly reconciled at last?”

“Oh. Yeah, I just… yeah,” John mumbled while wondering why Sherlock was being so secretive. Every time Mycroft attempted to bug 221B Baker Street, Sherlock found them and crushed them under the heel of his expensive Italian shoes as if they really were actual insects. “Thought you’d like to know that everything’s alright between us now, Mary and me.”

“Delighted,” Sherlock droned. “Hungry?”

“What? Oh. Famished, actually,” John said, just as the kettle whistled.

“Splendid. Chinese?” Sherlock actually stood up, slamming the laptop as he did so. “Order extra dumplings,” he slid the laptop across the table to John. “You can order online at Panda Oriental now. Miss Dobney could use a feeding up, don’t you think?”

“Right, yeah. She said she was staying at a shelter but I don’t think she’s had a proper meal in days. New to the streets I take it?”

“Mm.”

“Her clothes are disgusting as well as unsanitary. Do you have anything she can borrow while we run her things through the wash?”

“I still have Violet’s things in boxes upstairs in your old room,” Sherlock kept his back to John. “I’m sure you can select something appropriate for a young lady.”

“You kept Violet’s things then?”

“I hadn’t had time to sort through them properly. What to keep, what to give to charity,” he shrugged as poured the tea. “Too much work to do. Lestrade’s been keeping me busy. Speaking of which, fancy a trip to New Scotland Yard after lunch?”

“Absolutely,” John said quicker than he intended. “New case?”

“Mm, a Miss Cushing called 999 this morning when she found a cardboard box containing severed ears on her doorstep,” Sherlock shrugged. “It’s a four at the most but of course the half-wits at the Met can’t make heads nor tails of it.”

“Ears?”

“Mm,” Sherlock set the mug of steaming Earl Grey tea in front of John. “Out of milk I’m afraid.”
John didn’t care. “Human ears?”

“Of course. They wouldn’t call me if it hadn’t been human ears. Now, lunch?”

“Oh,” John felt his appetite depart. “Right, yeah. You want the won-ton soup, right?”

“Oh John, how well you know me,” Sherlock purred as he added sugar to his tea. “And get eggrolls for Gladstone. Chicken, not pork.”

“Eggrolls for…” John huffed a disapproving sigh as he crossed his arms. “Violet said not to give the dog people food.”

“Well, she’s not here now, is she?” Sherlock said archly as he daintily sipped his tea.

But John heard the unspoken, Not here yet, at any rate.

Chapter End Notes

Susan Dobney is the name of a canon character from The Adventure of the Cardboard Box.

Sherlock probably cheated and got the brainteasers from this website: http://buzzkenya.com/brain-teasers-for-adults/

Some of you may have recognized The Tent Riddle: http://www.sunnyskyz.com/funny-jokes/20/Sherlock-Holmes-and-Dr-Watson-Go-Camping#xhTlbYEGRO0L5URpk.99

The ”812 page essay” was inspired by the 812 page monster that is ”Paracosm.” (I swear, it wasn't supposed to be that long, it just sort of... happened.) Again, props and love and gratitude to my beta-reader cadogan for having to slog through the first-draft mess of that monster-sized fic. XOXOXOXOXO.

A cookie goes to whoever noticed the Marvel Easter Egg (btw, go see Doctor Strange if you haven't already!)

Finally, on a slightly personal note, I have a feeling I'm not the only one who wants to give 2016 a hard reboot right about now. Here's hoping that 2017 is better... it has to be better... we're finally getting Series 4, right? Right???

Until then, as long as I have internet access and an overactive imagination, I'm happy to provide this little bit of escapism, for what it's worth.

Here's to better days. Stay safe, stay weird. :^) XOXOXO
Mysterious Rook Move

Chapter Summary

Mysterious Rook Move

Following Nimzowitsch's idea, a move with a rook that seems to have no threat or purpose, but which actually discourages the opponent from a certain type of action (prophylaxis), or sets up a very deep, well-concealed plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seven: Mysterious Rook Move

1 April 2016
221 Baker Street
Friday morning
1:31 PM

Claiming she felt better, Susan Dobney managed to eat all of her egg drop soup and half of her Szechwan chicken. John felt a bit disconcerted to see the young girl wearing a pair of yoga bottoms, a pearly-pink jumper and fuzzy electric blue socks that had belonged to “Miss Smith.” Now that her face and hair were clean, Susan looked even younger than John had guessed, maybe only fourteen or fifteen. But she still burned from fever and her nose had started running again after eating the spicy food, so after lunch, John ordered to lie back down on the sofa. John hovered over her until she drank a large glass of water, swallowed two paracetamol tablets to help with her headache and then chugged another glass of water. He told her he’d be back with orange juice, but ordered her to keep drinking water because staying hydrated was important. He handed her a thin top-sheet, apologizing for his clumsiness, gesturing towards his broken wrist.

“’S’OK, Dr. Watson, I can manage,” Susan pulled the sheet over herself.

As John pressed a cool compress over her forehead, tears started leaking from her pretty sea-glass green eyes. “What’s the matter, sweetheart?” John crooned.

“Sorry,” Susan mopped her eyes with the sleeve of Violet’s pink jumper. “Just, it’s been so long since somebody’s been nice to me.”

John patted her on the top of her clean, shiny blonde hair. “Get some rest. We’ll be back.”

Sherlock re-entered the lounge, buttoned up in his Belstaff, a dark blue scarf knotted around his throat. He placed a prepaid mobile on the coffee table. “My number is programmed into the mobile. Call if there are any problems.”

“Can I watch telly?” Now she sounded like the young girl she really was.

Sherlock didn’t say anything but swooped over towards the set. He turned the screen so she could see it and switched it on. Then he placed the remote next to the prepaid mobile. As John tugged at his coat sleeve, trying to pull it over his cast, Sherlock stopped and deftly pulled it down and over the
cast. His long fingers brushed past John’s.

John felt his heart stop. Felt his lungs stop. Felt his breath stop…

*He’s too close, too close. I can smell him, tobacco, formaldehyde, the fancy cologne that smelt like sandalwood, cedar and cinnamon.*

“Come along, John,” Sherlock’s rich baritone jump-started John’s stalled heart.

“Right,” John mumbled and followed Sherlock, as always.

John thought Sherlock would hail a cab as usual, but was surprised when Sherlock did a sharp about-face and started walking westwards. John trotted after him but he still started to lag behind him. “Slow down, Sherlock, I’m not at my best yet.”

“Ah, of course,” Sherlock slowed his long-legged stride until John caught up. “How discourteous of me, naturally I observed that while you are healing nicely, you are clearly not back to your full strength and stamina. Unfortunately, even I can be distracted when I’m preoccupied. And preoccupied I am, so much so, I neglected to ask you how you are feeling. Physically,” Sherlock hastily added, in case John mistook his friendly inquiry as an opening to discuss emotions and other human frailties abhorrent to the Great Detective’s meticulous and precise nature.

“I feel pretty good most days. I’m just not up to chasing criminals yet.”

“At least, not on foot,” Sherlock said. “But your brain is still fully functional.”

“Wait, are you actually paying me a compliment?”

“I know where Violet is hiding,” Sherlock blurted out.

“You do? Oh, thank God, has she gotten in touch with you then?”

“As I faked my suicide to protect you, she faked hers to protect me. The difference is that she gave herself completely away while I was trying to give you clues that I was really wasn’t about to die but your sentiment got in the way, oh don’t give me *that* look.”

“What look?”

“The look you give me when you think I’m being insensitive.”

“You *are* being insensitive!”

“I just bought you lunch and have asked for your forgiveness a thousand times. What more can I do for you so you get over me deceiving you regarding The Fall?”

“Well, to start, you’re going to buy me lunch for the rest of my natural life, then.”

Slyly, Sherlock asked, “So, you’ll allow me to buy you cheap Chinese meals but you won’t let me give you a loan while you and your wife are experiencing financial difficulties? How telling.”

“That’s *completely* different.”

“Yes, and I’m sure you’ll entertain me with your bogus excuse why you can’t accept my money, but what if I told you I have an actual opportunity to earn money instead of borrowing?”

“How?”
“Violet,” Sherlock shoved his hands in his pocket. “We must bring her back to the UK. Letting her go to America was a mistake.” He shook his shaggy black curls, now grown back out to their usual unruly length. “She is beset by enemies. So far she is managing to stay one step ahead of them, but it won’t be long before her body starts completely betraying her mind and she will be utterly incapacitated. Then it will be a race to see who can get to her first.”

“Maybe I was wrong,” John said desperately. “My initial diagnosis, I mean, I never actually examined her or ran any diagnostic tests.”

“What did you observe?” Sherlock asked silkily.

John didn’t want to answer. He forced himself to say: “I observed her motor skills slowly dwindling in a manner consistent with ALS.”

“Precisely,” Sherlock breathed. “The clues were there. We all missed them. I, of all people, should have perceived… but…” he shook his shaggy curls. “We must move forward, not wail about the past. What is done cannot be undone so we must take the next logical step and find Violet before her enemies do. She has acquired some fascinating enemies during her exile, I must say. Even I’m not as hated as she is, and that is quite a feat.”

“Sherlock, why couldn’t we have talked at the flat?”

“My brother,” Sherlock’s face darkened. “The last time I was this closely monitored was after a near-fatal overdose I had suffered when I was a young man. I’m sure my brother enjoyed seeing me strapped down to a bed.” When he looked down and saw John’s eyes as wide as saucers, he sighed, “Sorry, I thought you knew.”

“No, well, yes,” John spluttered. “Mycroft implied it was bad, but you never told me.”

“Well, now I have,” Sherlock said mildly. “It was quite unpleasant.”

“Right.”

Sherlock cleared his throat. “Anyway, every time I remove one bug, Mycroft’s agents come in and add three more. He wants to find Violet as much as we do.”

“He does?”

“Of course, he wants the Moriarty Code. Since I refuse to hand it over to him, he’ll go after her. Also,” here Sherlock sniggered, in that odd yet endearing manner of his whenever he found something truly amusing, “He wants the fifty million pounds.”

“The what?”

“The fifty million pounds Violet stole from the gangsters.”

“Of course he does,” John grumbled, not sure why Sherlock thought that was funny. However, sometimes even John didn’t understand Sherlock’s sense of humor. Many things Sherlock thought were hilarious flew straight over John’s head.

Sensing this, Sherlock added, “I still find it amusing that Violet made the gangsters believe it was Jack Woodley who was the thief.”

“Oh yeah,” John said automatically, still not seeing the humor in the situation, “Right. So, anyway, why else would Mycroft want to find Violet before we do?”
“She’s blackmailing him,” Sherlock added, the humor from his voice gone now.


“The Earl,” Sherlock confirmed, his face paling a trifle.

“And where are we with that?” John asked Sherlock.

“I told her to blackmail him.”

“What?”

Sherlock succinctly explained the original plan, how Sherlock told Violet to blackmail Mycroft into giving her safe passage back to the United States and how Sherlock had only learned a few months ago that Violet went off-script by adding some conditions of her own.

“He’s going to kill her,” John was aghast.

“He’d have to get in queue,” Sherlock stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. “I freely confess that Miss Dobney’s appearance on my doorstep works towards my advantage as I plan to have her mind the flat while she mends. If I can keep Mycroft out of my flat for at least a week, I can get the rest of the listening devices and web-cams out of my home,” his eyes blazed with fury. “He’s waiting for me to slip up, to reveal where Violet is hiding.”

“What’s the story with Susan anyway?”

Sherlock shrugged negligently. “The same story when a young person comes out of the closet to homophobic parents.”

Remembering the ugly, near-violent row that had occurred when Harry came out to their homophobic father, John snarled, “So they just chucked her out, just like that?”

“Just like that, with only the clothes on her back without two pence to rub together.”

John instinctively and immediately hated Susan’s parents. *I would give anything to be a parent to my child. I would not give a toss who Maisie loves, unless the love of her life is an arsehole… or an assassin. Then we might have words…*

“Your hatred of her parents won’t help Miss Dobney.”

“I know,” John mumbled, used to Sherlock deducing his thoughts by now. He cleared his throat. “So keeping Susan at Baker Street will give us the head start we need over Mycroft. What about the others? What about Professor Moriarty? Sherlock, that ‘unexpected event’ I was alluding to? Before I knew Mycroft had your flat bugged again? Mary and I did not reconcile.”

“Obviously.”

“Does the name Marie Devine ring any bells?”

Sherlock stopped in his tracks. “Tell me everything. Omit nothing, even if it’s boring or seems insignificant to you.”

John complied, even including Marie calling Mary “Butterfly” and the note she left.

“This complicates things,” Sherlock tightened his lips and started walking again.
“No shit, Sherlock,” John grabbed Sherlock by the coat sleeve to slow him down as he had resuming his normal long-legged gait, “I can’t look for my daughter, Sherlock.”

“I will continue searching for Marissa. You and Mary must cease and desist, at least for now. I know how to evade enemies like Professor Moriarty. You don’t. Mary thinks she does, and if she protests, remind her of the mess she made during The Copper Beaches Massacre.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Just sit with my thumb up my arse?”

“Patience, John, I’m getting there, but first I must tell you what I have learned while you were recuperating. I didn’t tell you-” Sherlock snapped just as John opened his mouth to yell at him.

“Because you needed to get well, you needed to focus one hundred percent of your energy into healing. Professor Moriarty did everything he could to break you, mentally, physically and emotionally. I could not afford to distract you when you need to focus on your health. If something earth-shattering would have cropped up, I would have notified you immediately, I assure you.” He stole a glance and saw that John’s face still looked mutinous. “I would have, John. I do not keep secrets from you because of lack of trust in you. I keep secrets because circumstances force me to do so. As you have just learned, I cannot speak freely in my own home and obviously we cannot speak freely in front of Mary. Surely you can set aside your anger long enough that I am telling you the truth now.”

Only slightly mollified, John clenched his teeth and said, “Fine. So, while I was out of commission, what has been going on?”

“Violet released that information regarding the senator on the Internet, not a hackvist group.”

“What?”

“Oh yes, I thought that much would have been obvious.”

“Why the hell would she do that?”

“She still believes in truth, justice, the American way and all that patriotic rubbish,” Sherlock snorted. “Since she barely escaped with her life once again, she had no intention of testifying in open court. She elected to have the Senator tried in the court of public opinion instead.”

“Did she kill him,” John whispered. “Sherlock, the Senator, did she…?”

“Violet has only killed in self-defense, with the exception of Jack Woodley, but she was not herself at the time,” Sherlock reminded John. “He had tortured her. She was in pain and not in her right mind, although her solution was the expedient one. Now, I can clearly tell you are out of practice regarding the science of deduction, so let’s have a remedial lesson, shall we? What did you observe about the news article?”

“Errm… an American politician is dead?”

Sherlock exhaled noisily.


“Where was the body found?”

John cudgeled his brain, trying to remember, “At his private home in New York?”

“Quite right,” Sherlock hummed, as if that was the answer to everything.
John waited for Sherlock to expound while the busy street traffic of Baker Street whizzed past them. When Sherlock didn’t reply, John counted to ten then politely asked, “So because the Senator was killed in New York, Violet didn’t murder him?”

“Obviously.”

“No. No, not obviously. Not to me.”

“Violet has history in New York City. She has family in New York, her sister-in-law and niece as well as her deceased fiancé’s family.”

John finally cottoned on. “The police would have surveillance on all of them, to see if she would risk contacting them…” he inhaled sharply. “They think she went to New York! But she would avoid New York like the plague, wouldn’t she?”

Sherlock gave a small nod of agreement.

“Right, so our girl was still in DC when the Senator died, wasn’t she? They underestimated her, how well she can blend into a crowd, to hide in plain sight.”

“Well done, John. What else?”

Emboldened by Sherlock’s mild praise, John continued, “Uhh, she would also avoid New Mexico because her first job as an FBI agent was in New Mexico and… um, shit, I can’t keep track of all the ridiculous names of American states. It starts with an I? Idaho? Anyway, she wouldn’t go to where she lived as a child either. Her old friends and colleagues and what’s left of her family are all being monitored.”

“She spent her teenage years in Indiana on her grandmother’s farm after her father was killed,” Sherlock corrected him. “As far as rudimentary deductions go, that was only subpar, not nearly as bad I thought you would be after being out of practice for so long.”

“Glad I didn’t disappoint you,” John said sourly. “So what did I miss?”

“Violet wouldn’t risk assassinating the Senator, but she did contact him.”


“I already told you “What” so I shall not repeat myself. The “How” is still a mystery to me but not a top priority so I shan’t pursue that at this time. “Where” was obviously not New York, (but as you did correctly deduce.) Washington DC, shortly after her thrilling escape from Moriarty’s people,” Sherlock concluded.

“How did you deduce that?”

“Elementary, a child could solve that,” Sherlock scoffed. “It was the least likely place she would have stayed. The fools thought she would scarper. Idiots,” Sherlock actually chuckled affectionately. “As you stated, she did what she did best. She blended in, she hid in plain sight. Then she contacted the Senator, again I must stress I do not know if she rang him or instant messaged him. Apparently, the Senator did not live up to her expectations.”

“Why do you say that?”

Sherlock pulled out his iPhone. Tapping on the screen, Sherlock explained, “I made some contacts during my time in America during the Great Hiatus. I called in a favorite and have a copy of the
preliminary autopsy reports,” Sherlock handed his mobile to John. Ignoring the people milling around them, trying to get their shopping done, both men stopped in the middle of the pavement. “What do you see, Dr. Watson?”

“Um…” John scrolled through the pages of pdf files, squinting at the screen.

“Would you please purchase some reading glasses?”

“I will when you will,” John retorted sweetly then frowned. He scrolled back up, “Hang on…” he licked his lips, the old tic back in full force. “His Achilles tendons had been severed.”

“Both ankles.”

“Yeah… Violet did that?”

“She was quite thin the last we saw her,” Sherlock took his phone back from John. “She could easily fit underneath a bed and…” he made a swiping motion with his arm.

“Jesus.”

“Did you forget about the knives she carried on her person when she was unable to bring a gun? When I packed up her things, I could not find her switchblade.”

“Jesus Christ.” John rubbed his mouth. “But wait… the ALS. Would she still have the agility and mobility in order to do something like that?”

“As theories go, it’s quite unlikely she did the deed herself although not quite implausible. As I have told you before, Jo—”

“She threatened him,” he interrupted like an eager schoolboy.

“You are getting ahead of yourself,” Sherlock scowled, “It is irresponsible to jump to conclusions without conclusive evidence. We have circumstantial evidence directing us towards the conclusion that it is possible she could have committed the crime. However,” he fixed a stern look at John. “You and I are the only ones who know about the high probability of Violet suffering from ALS. So you and I are the only ones who understand how very unlikely it was that she had the stamina as well as the stealth to sneak into his house (which I had confirmed was under FBI surveillance at the time of his death,) hide under his bed and have the strength to cut through his Achilles’ tendons, which as a physician I should hope you know the sonographic measurement of that particular tendon is -”

“Average range is from roughly 4 to 7 mm,” John grumbled under his breath.

“Correct,” Sherlock popped the “T” at the end of the word. “So, while it is not impossible, it is most unlikely she did him an injury then coerced him into suicide days later. But as I do not have access to the actual crime scene nor can I speak to the lady in question at this time, it is foolish to form any firm conclusions.”

“But… if she didn’t cut the Senator,” John mused, “Then someone is working very hard to make it look like she did… the article described an eyewitness saying that there was a strange woman seen around the Senator’s house that sounded a lot like Violet.”

“I make a point of never having any prejudices, and of following docilely where fact may lead me**,”” Sherlock said airily. “However, I have not ruled out the possibility that someone is setting Violet up in order to flush her out of hiding.”
“Yeah, ‘cause that worked so well in the past,” John snorted. “But she definitely contacted the Senator and threatened him?”

“Mm.”

“He didn’t take her seriously.”

“Nope.”

“She called his bluff and released… what exactly?”

“Everything,” Sherlock tucked his mobile back into his pocket. “And I do mean everything, not just his connection to the Red-Headed League, but tax evasion, bribes from lobbyists and political donors, recreational drug use (which I cannot condemn but he is a public figure, after all and had standards to maintain,) and an enthusiasm for beating underage prostitutes, which I’m sure cannot sit well with the Widow Woodhouse.”

“She ruined him.”

“She did more than, John. Don’t be dull, think,” Sherlock cajoled him as he started walking again. “She didn’t only ruin his political career. That’s not something to commit suicide over. One thing about Americans, they may love watching someone fall, but they love a come-back story even more. What would drive the Senator to suicide?”

“Is it actually suicide or murder to look like suicide?”

“He died by his own hand. The autopsy proved that without a doubt… the autopsy that was recently leaked to the press,” Sherlock’s eyes twinkled now. “Someone was not pleased that the Senator’s death was being passed off as murder.”

John stopped walking. Sherlock was three steps ahead before he realized John wasn’t by his side. He turned and clasped his hands behind his back.

John locked eyes with Sherlock. “Hecocked up.”

“Explain,” Sherlock looked more like a benevolent schoolmaster than an impatient detective.

“By allowing his connections to the Red-Headed League to be exposed, the last two cells left in America were compromised. Didn’t you say that the last two Red-Headed League cells were in New York and Washington DC?”

“I did.”

“Right, well, that’s that. He’d rather eat a bullet then endure whatever the Red-Headed League had planned for him.” And I can’t say I blame him, John couldn’t help thinking.

“Exactly so, they no longer have any influence in American events. At the very least, Professor Moriarty would have initiated the ultimate punishment, the Sign of Four.”

John shivered. He knew exactly what that meant. He heard Violet’s voice in his head, explaining what that order meant:

It’s their signature… what links them to all the crimes they consulted on… when they feel someone must be made an example of, they initiate something called The Sign of Four… first they discredit you… then they torture you, which can be either physical, emotional or both… then they threaten
your family… then they kill you… Messy, prolonged. It’s how they got discovered by the authorities. Couldn’t just have a simple murder, oh no… they had to get… cute about it.

The Sign of Four had been ordered on Sherlock, which was how he wound up on St. Bart’s rooftop on that fateful day.

John looked down at the plaster peeking out from his coat sleeve. He wondered if what had happened to him was a Sign of Four order.

You see… I admire you…

“John?”

John cleared his throat. “Why did she take so long to release the information?”

“She needed him,” Sherlock said simply. “As for what, I do not know, not yet at least. However, he failed at his task and that’s where we are at now.”

“Great, so… where are we exactly?”

“The middlegame.”

“The what?”

“You really ought to learn how to play chess. The middlegame, what comes after the opening, of course. We actually have a simultaneous chess game in play, John. Both Mycroft and Professor Moriarty seek to take our Queen. However,” Sherlock gave John one of his rare, genuine smiles. “You shall be my mysterious rook move.” When John still looked mystified, Sherlock explained, “The mysterious rook appears to have no threat or purpose, but in reality, that chess piece discourages either the opponent from a certain type of action or sets up a very deep, well-concealed plan. You, John, shall do both.”

“Great,” John felt a familiar and welcome rush of adrenaline flood his bloodstream. “How?”

“Recall that I stated that I have an actual opportunity for you to earn money instead of borrowing,” Sherlock lifted his pointer finger up then at John. “Also you have concerns about continuing your façade of the Loving Husband around Mary.” Sherlock gave John a crafty smile. “How would you like to be out of the country for two, three months?”

*Out of the country*… John wondered if this was how a condemned man feels when he receives a stay of execution. “That sounds fantastic.”

“Excellent. You will help set up a false trail for both MI-6 and the Red-Headed League to follow. A wild goose chase, if you will. Who knows, you might even have a bit of fun while you’re gone.”

“When do we leave?” John was already mentally packing his suitcases.

But Sherlock hesitated. “I… will not be accompanying you, John.”

“What? Why? Am I to go alone?”

“Of course not, Dupin is joining you.”

John nearly tripped over his brown lace-ups, so shocked was he by Sherlock’s statement.

1. Auguste Dupin, former Interpol agent and brilliant private detective in his own right, had
started off as an antagonist for Sherlock. John, however, had liked Dupin almost from the start, recognizing another genius like Sherlock. Violet had acted like a star struck schoolgirl when she’d met him in person, as he had been a shining star in her profession, when he was in his prime, before he had lost the love of his life.

Unlike Sherlock, Dupin incorporated emotions in his investigations in a process he called “ratiocination.” He defined this as investigation methods based upon obtaining hard, scientific data in order to create a logical conclusion while at the same time, not ignoring the infinite possibilities available despite the absence of data.

Sherlock, of course, dismissed Dupin’s methods out of hand, smugly believing that his method, the science of deduction was superior to ratiocination. Despite Sherlock’s arrogance and Dupin’s eccentricities (as well as mental illness, the poor man was a desperate hoarder), Sherlock and Dupin managed to form something close to a friendship. To be more accurate, it was more a professional regard and appreciation as one detective to another.

Dupin had more than just professional ties to Sherlock. He and his beloved work and life partner, Marie Rogêt, had been close friends with Sherlock’s adopted older brother, Matthew Sherrinford Holmes.

“He’s agreed then? Dupin?”

“Most readily,” Sherlock pulled out his mobile, checked a text message, thumbed a quick reply and hit Send. After tucking the mobile away again, he reminded John, “Do recall that Dupin blames Mycroft completely for his beloved Marie’s murder. He jumped at the chance to thumb his nose at Mycroft.”

“And how is he doing? With the hoarding and all?”

“Much better, he found a different therapist, got a new prescription that doesn’t have most of the side effects the original medication did, cleared out most of the clobber in his flat, hired a new housekeeper and he only has ten cats instead of thirty now.”

“That… great,” John muttered. He hated cats.

“The official story is that you were hired by Interpol as a consultant on an international jewel heist. After the gigantic blunder that led to the false accusation and arrest of his young protégé Jacque Honoré; Interpol more than owed Dupin a favor.”

“No one is going to believe that I was hired over you,” John scoffed.

“Remember, John, I’m not supposed to leave the country. One of the “conditions” of my freedom after Jim Moriarty made his big screen debut on New Year’s and my plane was turned around.”

“Right…” John started to see the big picture. “But Mycroft and the Professor will think you sent me and Dupin to track Violet down.”

“Exactly.”

“You have no intention of staying in the country.”

“Not one bit.”

“How are you going to pull that one off?”
“Best you don’t know right now, not because I don’t trust you,” Sherlock cut John off before he could protest. “I’m being practical, not distrustful. When the risks are this high, it’s best to play *sans voir* chess.” When John made *That Face* he made whenever he wasn’t keeping up with Sherlock, he elaborated, “*Sans voir* chess is when one or both players are not allowed to see the board. It’s not in your best interest or mine for you to see all the pieces in motion. However, if everything goes according to plan, Violet will be safely ensconced in 221B Baker Street, as Violet *Hunter* no later than July.”

“No sooner?”

“Sudden moves are risky moves, John.”

“Violet might not *have* until July, Sherlock.”

“I am aware of that!”

The two men walked in a stiff and uncomfortable silence. Finally John mumbled, “I’m sorry, Sherlock. I can’t imagine how difficult this all is for you right now.”

“I’m fine.”

“No. You’re not.”

“I’m better than I was a year ago. A year ago, I had been drugged against my will then held captive in an abandoned candy factory that was rigged to explode.”

“Oh…” John’s mouth dropped open a bit. “That’s right. It was a year ago you went off like a cock in pursuit of Anderson by yourself.” Then his face hardened. “Sherlock, tell me that you have someone going with you when you go after Violet. Look at the mess you got yourself into a year ago when you pranced off by yourself on a case.”

“I do not *prance*,” Sherlock dragged out the last word to four syllables.

“You find a way to stay in contact with me while I’m with Dupin,” John demanded. “I don’t care if it’s by old-fashioned telegrams. If I don’t hear from you on a regular basis, I’m going to assume you’re in trouble and come after you.”

“You really would, wouldn’t you?”

Sherlock’s voice was so soft, John nearly didn’t hear him. “‘Course I would, you idiot,” he kept his eyes on the pavement as they walked. “You’d do the same for me… you *have* done the same for me.” He cleared his throat, mechanically started to raise his left hand to scratch his nose, then switched and awkwardly rubbed his nose with his right hand. “What about Mary? How will we make sure she doesn’t do a bunk and go looking for Maisie while I’m gone?”

“Oh, I have a plan for Mary as well. One that will keep her quite occupied and one you’ll even approve of, I think. I believe that my plan for Mary is what is considered a Win-Win.”

“OK, good,” John still kept his eyes on the pavement.

“John?”

He stuffed his cold hands in the pockets of his parka. “I’m not sure I can do it, Sherlock,” he finally admitted out loud, the thoughts that had been tormenting him since December, since he confided in Sherlock the real reason why he stayed with his contradictory and treacherous wife. “I don’t know if
I can stay with her, pretend I’m in love with her… I…” he shook his head. “Even with a two month break, I’ll still have to go back to her unless a miracle occurs and Maisie is found, but I can’t imagine how that would be possible if everyone is looking for Violet and all I want to do is go back to 221B and … sorry,” he cut himself off when he realized how forlorn and pitiful he sounded. “Forget it.” He felt Sherlock’s eyes piercing him. “Sherlock, I said forget it.”

With a nimble elegance normally only seen in professional dancers, Sherlock side-stepped around John so John now walked closest to the road instead of Sherlock, then quick as a wink, Sherlock disappeared down an alley.

“You git,” John groaned, turning heel to run after him.

The narrow alley smelt like damp and refuse. Sherlock stood next to a skip, waiting for him, his face in shadows. Not that it mattered as his face was usually so unreadable anyway.

“What is it?” John jogged up to Sherlock.

“No CCTV cameras,” Sherlock murmured when John was centimetres away from him. “Big Brother is always watching you know.”

“Right,” John swallowed hard. “Moriarty’s people hacked into the CCTV cameras as well. That’s how they were watching me and Violet when we were looking for you.”

“You actually meant it, didn’t you,” Sherlock sounded slightly awestruck, as if he couldn’t believe that John would say anything but the truth. “You’d come for me.”

“Yeah, I did mean it. I do mean it,” John felt his heart starting to speed up as again the same refrain starting repeating in his head Too close, too close, too close...

As if disconnected from his panicky, frenzied brain and despite the heavy plaster cast, his left hand automatically reached to lightly touch the buttons on the Belstaff. As his fingertips grazed the slightly rough wool and the smooth glossy buttons of the expensive coat, John whispered, “You didn’t bring me here to hide from Mycroft’s cameras, did you?”

“Yes, I did.”

With that, Sherlock surged forward, cupped John’s face with his leather-clad hands and kissed him as if the world were going to end in ten minutes.

Chapter End Notes

So I think this is a good place to leave things off for tonight... 0:^)

***Sherlock’s quote comes from "The Adventure of the Reigate Squire."
Chapter Summary

Romantic Chess

Romantic chess was the style of chess prevalent in the 19th century. It is characterized by bold attacks and sacrifices.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Eight

Or maybe the world did end. John’s legs buckled as if the ground had opened up beneath him. As he stumbled backwards until his back hit the damp brick wall, his arms flailed until they were coiled around Sherlock. He accidentally thumped Sherlock hard on the shoulder with his heavy cast, causing him to grunt in pain.

“Sorry,” John huffed against his mouth.

“S’fine,” Sherlock hissed back then resumed kissing him as he unzipped his parka, peeled back his argyle cardigan and expertly flicked open the top two buttons of his dress shirt. Only now he wasn’t trying to devour him. The kisses changed timbre, now they were soft and tantalizing, as if they had all the time in the world instead of only ten minutes, tempting John to want more, more, more…

More what?

John Watson found he was now wallowing in the most exquisite and divine hell.

As he arched against the weeping brick wall, eyes fluttering shut as Sherlock abandoned his lips to toy with his earlobe then lave his tongue down his sternocleidomastoid working his way down to his clavicle, John’s brain screamed: Not gay! Not gay! Not gay!

His heart argued back: best friend, the best man, the best everything… the best thing to ever happen to me…

He groaned as Sherlock’s fingertips slid down his thighs, then back up again, then back down. John twisted his head in order to capture Sherlock’s mouth again, lightly lapping at those plush Cupid’s bow lips until they eagerly parted. John blissfully plundered Sherlock’s mouth, dimly grateful that Sherlock really had given up smoking. As he continued to kiss Sherlock, he cupped Sherlock’s face with his right hand, his thumb resting lightly on one of those impossible cheekbones while his fingers threaded through the tangled black curls. As far as his useless left arm went, John kept that loosely wrapped around Sherlock’s waist, his fingertips maddeningly out of reach of Sherlock’s backside. Not that it really mattered since Sherlock still had that damnably thick woolen coat on.

John wanted to rip that fucking coat off as well as the posh suit and silk shirt. Strip him to the core, remove all artifice and armor. To finally be able to look and see and observe, then say, “Oh… there you are. I knew you were there all along.”
John could feel Sherlock’s chest rising and falling in rapid succession against his own as he pressed his long, lanky frame against John, flattening him completely against the wall now. John’s own breaths came out in a staccato pulse, his heart racing faster than he could ever remember. He knew he was growing hard and was finding extremely difficult to care about what could be a potentially embarrassing situation, especially in a public setting, despite their seclusion in the alley by the skip.

Dreamily, he realized he could ask Sherlock do anything right now and he would comply. He wouldn’t even have to say anything, all he’d have to do reach down and undo his belt buckle. Imagining that mouth and that tongue on his cock, John even rubbed himself up on Sherlock and the pressure pleased and maddened him. Sherlock wouldn’t need further instruction, John thought as Sherlock frotted back and John’s hips bucked back in reply. No, he’d deduce immediately what I wanted and probably drop to his knees in a trice and...

John’s blood ran cold.

He really would do anything I asked...

He suddenly remembered Dupin’s disgusting flat, how he and Sherlock had stayed in a guestroom that had not been turned into another glorified skip for Dupin’s rubbish. How Sherlock had started prattling in his sleep, tormented by a PTSD dream. A nightmare triggered by John nearly perishing in the Catacombs earlier that night...

No, no, no, he’s under the water, I can’t find him, but there’s blood, I see blood... there’s blood in the water...

Sherlock, I’m not in the water. Not anymore, you saved me. I’m here. I’m right here...

But Sherlock didn’t wake up, not immediately. He continued babbling a tormented, nonsensical somniloquy, until the babbling started to make sense, at least enough sense for John to finally ask the question that had plagued him since Sherlock pulled him from the bonfire:

Sherlock, are you... in love with me?

Oh yes...

“Oh God,” John involuntarily huffed against Sherlock’s mouth.

He deserves better than this, better than me. Something better than a quick secret snog in a filthy alley... John felt his throat start to tighten as he remembered something Sherlock had said after he had finally and permanently showed that twat Victor Trevor the door:

I always wondered if he would stop being embarrassed by me...

John broke the kiss, quickly but gently, so not to hurt his feelings. He wrapped both his arms around the detective the best he could and rested his face against his shoulder, not ready to meet those omnipotent, kaleidoscopic eyes quite yet. “Not like this,” he reached up to cradle the back of Sherlock’s head, carding his fingers through those heavy black curls again. “Not like this, not like this...”

Not like you’re some cheap rent boy I’ve bought off for a quick, meaningless fuck...

He felt Sherlock pressing his cheek against his silvery-sandy hair, then press a kiss on the crown of his head. “I’m sorry, John,” he rumbled, “This was... foolish.”

“You’re sorry?” John jerked his head up, wide-eyed. “Sherlock, I was five seconds away from taking
complete advantage of you by telling you to blow me against the brick wall!”

“Oh, well, I should have waited five more seconds then.”


Sherlock somehow managed to look angelic. But a devilish smile still pulled at his lips.

“This isn’t funny,” John spluttered, his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

“You’re right,” Sherlock sighed airily. Content to stay in John’s arms, he added, “Think what performing fellatio would have done to the knees of my suit in this alley. You wouldn’t be able to afford the dry-cleaning bill.”

The juxtaposition of Sherlock’s elegant voice and the crude imagery the vulgar words produced did John in. He started laughing like he hadn’t since last November. Seconds later, Sherlock joined in, his deeper, lower chuckles harmony to John’s higher-pitched giggles.

Sherlock gracefully broke the embrace and somehow slithered his way around John to lean against the wall beside him, his arm pressing companionably against John’s shoulder. Both of them continued to giggle but eventually the laughing fit passed. John looked up and saw a patch of impossibly blue sky peeking through a gap of dense, grey clouds.

“This was foolish because I do not know what is going to happen when I bring Violet home,” Sherlock finally rumbled. “I haven’t allowed myself to think that far. Becoming sentimental regarding her is not going to help bring her back. I need to focus one-hundred-percent of what so you so derisively yet admiringly call my “massive intellect” to help her.” He stared down at his normally shiny black shoes, now flecked with grime from the pavement. “I do not know if she wants to pick up where we left off or not when I find her. That I will not be able to deduce until I see her.” He then sighed mightily. “Then she’ll want to talk about it, of course.”

“Do you want to?” John blurted out before he could stop himself. “Get back with her?”

The heavy silence was telling…and crushing.

“Sherlock, it’s alright if you do,” John reached up to re-button his shirt, cursing his broken left hand as he fumbled with the buttons with his right. “Nothing’s changed. What I said last December, I still mean it. I want you to be happy. If it can’t be with me, I want it to be with her.”

Even though he did mean every word, John felt a sharp, breathtaking stab of pain in his chest, as if someone stabbed him over and over with an ice-pick as he spoke.

“I don’t know what I want,” Sherlock finally admitted, still studying his shoes. “I believed for so long that the Work was enough but…” he looked down at John with such a heartbreakingly earnest, such a human expression on his face, John wanted to take him into his arms again and never let go. “You completely ruined that for me.”

“Sorry.”

“No. You’re not.”

“Not one bit,” John grinned. “But I suppose you still want me to portray you as an emotionless machine in the blogs, right?”

“Oh of course. The readers find that Sherlock Holmes persona far more interesting than the real me and
“it provides the real me with much needed privacy.”

“I think the real you is just fine,” John said gruffly.

“You’re an idiot.”

“So you keep telling me.”

“John, listen, this is important. This is what I had planned on telling you before I got… uh,” Sherlock’s normally ivory cheeks pinked up slightly, “Carried away.”

“OK…”

“No matter what happens, you will always have a place at Baker Street. Whether you decide you’ve finally had enough and risk leaving Mary now or twenty years from now, you can always come home. Also, your home is Marissa’s home as well, for as long as she likes.”


“We’ll make it work,” Sherlock said firmly.

“What about Violet?”

“If Violet and I maintain only a platonic relationship, she’ll be delighted you’ve left Mary and pleased to have you back where you belong. If Violet and I do take up with each other again, she’ll have to find a way to deal with it because you are non-negotiable. But make no mistake John,” he fixed his eyes on John’s again. “I’m never packing your room up again and no one else shall be allowed to let it. Nor will I move Your Chair to storage again. Do you understand?”

The last three words were slightly tinged with desperation. John could hear the subtext as if Sherlock had shouted in a megaphone what he was really trying to convey:

*Please understand what I’m trying to tell you. Please understand how completely and truly I am in love with you…*

*I would do anything for you, John. Die for you. Watch you marry another. Kill for you. Sacrifice my freedom. Turn away a chance at happiness with someone else… please understand, please observe what you mean to me…*

“Yes.” John didn’t trust himself to say anything more than that. But he infused that solitary syllable with resolution and utter sincerity.

Sherlock’s fingers grazed John’s. “It was stupid and maudlin of me to make such physical overtures, not to mention selfish. But I perceived that you have been desperately unhappy, even resorting to taking anti-anxiety drugs since what you really needed to combat your depression was a nice, exciting case full of murder and midnight chases throughout London as the thrill of hunt pumped through your veins.”

“Hang on,” John had kept all his medication in the bath upstairs and as far as he was aware, Sherlock never went upstairs when he and Mrs. Hudson came over for roast beef and mashed potatoes. “How did you know I was taking anti-anxiety meds?”

Sherlock threw him an exasperated look. “Really?”

“Can you at least give me the illusion of privacy?”
“John, you just confessed to me that you wanted me to go down on you in a dirty alley. I think even the illusion of privacy is a thing of the past.”

“God, you’re a cock,” John groaned, leaning his head against the wall. Still feeling Sherlock’s leather-clad knuckles grazing his own bare hand, John grew bold and lightly rested his fingers on top of Sherlock’s hand. “I really missed you.”

Sherlock lowered his lashes, suddenly fascinated by his dirty, expensive shoes again. “And I you,” he added in an almost inaudible voice. “In a few weeks, I shan’t see you again for another two months.” He cleared his throat and his lips trembled. “And I’m not easy in my mind about it.”

“About what?”

“About sending you. It’s an ugly business, John, an ugly dangerous business, and the more I see of it the less I like it. Yes, my dear fellow, you may laugh, but I give you my word that I shall be very glad to have you back safe and sound in Baker Street once more.”

“I would like that very much myself,” John dared to curl his fingers around Sherlock’s hand. He didn’t reciprocate but he didn’t pull away either. “I’ll be alright Sherlock. I survived Afghanistan.”

“You got shot.”

“I survived,” John testily pointed out. “I worried about you.”

“Wasted energy.” Now Sherlock pulled his hand away, straightening up. “Focus on leading Mycroft and Professor Moriarty astray.”

“With pleasure,” John fumbled with his cardigan buttons. “Dammit.”

“Oh, let me.” Before John could protest, Sherlock deftly did up his cardigan buttons and parka zip just as quickly as he had undone them.

“Thanks. Bugger this cast.

Sherlock’s face softened and he uncharacteristically cupped John’s cheek. “Everything will be alright, John.”

“I know.”

Sherlock withdrew and with a flap of his coat, stalked down the dripping alleyway, as if he and John just hadn’t shared an incredibly intimate moment, physically and emotionally. “Now, let’s get the matter of the severed ears sorted out at the Met. As I said before, it’s a Four and that’s stretching it, but once body parts start falling, the Met loses its metaphorical head. At any rate, this case will at least provide a solid entry in your blog. I’m sure your fans are tired of reading about what life is like living without a spleen. Don’t forget to get prescriptions your refilled and your immunizations up to date as you will be traveling abroad. I assume you need to take a low-dose antibiotic for the rest of your life?”

“Yes, but, wait, Sherlock!”

Sherlock spun around, no mean trick in such a narrow space. But he managed and waited, with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Something I want to say before we go back out there,” he pointed towards the busy, thrumming street. “Back where you have to be Sherlock Holmes and I’m Dr. Watson.”
“Yes?” Sherlock almost managed to hide his impatience to get back to work.

John drew in a breath. “I just wanted you to know... that no matter how things turn out, err, no that’s... shit,” John gave himself a shake then stammered, “If I do move back in Baker Street and you and I become... uh... you see, I... err...” He closed his eyes. “I won’t ever ask you to do something you’re not OK with.”

“Um, alright...?”

The uptick in Sherlock’s voice clued John in that he didn’t quite understand what John was trying to get at. *How can someone be such a fantastic kisser yet be so clueless about sex itself?* John moaned to himself. “I meant, ah... in the bedroom.” John finished in a rush.

“Oh.” Then Sherlock’s face darkened. “Not this again,” and he turned away.

“Yes, this again,” John shouted after him and Sherlock stopped. But he didn’t turn around. John trotted to catch up to him, determined to have his say. “That’s why I stopped, that’s what I was blathering about ‘Not here, not here.’ I didn’t want whatever was about to happen to happen in a dark, filthy place as if it was a secret, as if I was embarrassed by you.”

Sherlock’s shoulders lowered just a bit. “Oh.”

“You deserve better than this, you know.”

Sherlock peered at John over his broad shoulder, “And you don’t?”

John steadfastly ignored the jibe. “Look, I know you don’t like talking about what happened to you when you were a boy and that’s fine,” John added hurriedly as Sherlock looked away and his shoulders tensed up again. “We don’t have to talk about it, right now. Whenever you’re ready, that’s... that’s fine. That’s up to you, I won’t push, I promise.”

“You sound like you’re pushing.” There was a distinct edge to Sherlock’s voice now.

“I don’t want to end things with a row before we’re separated for two bloody months,” John could feel his temper rising. “But it’s important to me to tell you that I don’t want you doing something you don’t want to do just to please me.”

“Fine, good to know,” Sherlock’s voice still sounded clipped.

“I’m not trying to piss you off.”

“Piss me off?” Sherlock turned again, but the wicked glint was back in his eyes. “Oh no, I’m merely compiling a list of things I am no longer beholden to do since they are all things I don’t want to do but I do because they make you happy. Let’s see... where to start, oh yes. I no longer have to stay sober. I no longer have to stay off cigarettes. I don’t have to wear trousers in public any longer. Oh! I definitely do not need to be polite to imbeciles any longer...”

“You are such an arsehole,” John groaned.

Sherlock grinned, “Got your breath back yet?”

“Ready when you are.”
Thanks for your patience! Hope it was worth the wait :^)

**Sherlock's quote about being uneasy about sending John on mission comes from ACD canon HoB:**

Chess Variant

Chapter Summary

Chess Variant

A chess variant (or unorthodox chess) is a game "related to, derived from or inspired by chess". The difference from chess might include one or more of the following:

• different rules for capture, move order, game objective, etc.
• addition, substitution or removal of pieces in standard chess (non-standard pieces are known as fairy pieces)
• different chessboard (larger or smaller, non-square board shape overall or different intra-board cell shapes such as hexagons)...

~*~ OR ~*~

Someone else is playing the game by his-or-her own rules....

Minor trigger warning... things in this chapter are a little bit... gross.

Posting a day early because I'm going on vacation tomorrow! (Yay!)

Notes at the end!
Thank for your reading/commenting!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Nine: Chess Variant

1 April 2016
The Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew
London, England
Friday afternoon
3:31 PM

En route to New Scotland Yard, Sherlock’s mobile had thrummed. Lestrade had texted instructions to head to Bart’s instead of The Met. Earlier this morning, a body of a transient woman had been found in Croydon and had been transported to Bart’s morgue. Normally this wouldn’t be exciting news, but when Molly had gotten around to doing the Jane Doe’s autopsy, the first thing she noticed was that the corpse was missing her ears. When Molly asked the mortuary registrar if this had been called into the Met and had received a negative answer, she immediately rang her husband. After confirming that yes, the Met had an open case regarding severed ears, he ended the call with her and texted Sherlock.

Lestrade waited for Sherlock and John outside the morgue doors, holding two cups of coffee. “Black, two sugars,” he held one up for Sherlock. “And with milk,” he held the other up for John.
“Cheers, but where’s yours?” John fumbled with the Styrofoam cup, trying to get a good grip on it. *I am bloody sick of this cast…*

“Oh, my blood pressure is too high,” Lestrade groused. “Molly’s taken me off all caffeine.”

Sherlock, of course, ignored the small talk and sailed right past them, ignoring the proffered coffee. He pushed through the swinging doors with all the arrogance of a king who cared not whether he was loved or feared.

“Be a shame to let terrible canteen coffee go to waste,” Lestrade took a sip, grimaced and muttered, “Oh yeah, that hit the spot.”

John chuckled. “You must be desperate.”

In a more serious tone, Lestrade asked, “When’s the hearing?”

“Tuesday,” John licked his lips nervously then to cover, took a swig of the terrible coffee.”

“Nervous?”

“A bit,” John didn’t see the point of lying. “I’ve complied with the requirements of my probation with the best of my ability. It could honestly go either way, my medical license. I mean, I haven’t really been a proper doctor in ages, worked in a surgery or hospital that is. Volunteer here and there between cases of course, but I always wanted to keep going back into private practice an option.” He gazed at his cast, “In case I got hurt on a case and couldn’t keep up with Sherlock for example.”

“Plus we never know when Sherlock will get shot again,” Lestrade quipped but hastily asked “Too soon?” when John shot him a filthy look.

The hard look dissolved from John’s face. “No,” he sighed. “I’m surprised it took this long for him to get shot to be honest.” He cleared his throat, feeling a bit disloyal. “But, yeah, it all comes down to Tuesday. Once Tuesday comes and go, then…” he shrugged, unable to continue.

“I get it, mate,” Lestrade said sagely. “I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t be a cop anymore. It’s in my DNA just like being a doctor is in yours.” He gave John an encouraging smile. “It’ll all sort itself out, I’m sure of it. They’d be stupid not to let you doctor anymore.”

John wished there were more elegant, meaningful words he could have used instead of “Thank you.” Lestrade had been a true friend. Granted, he hadn’t been sure of John in the beginning when he started working and living with Sherlock and vice-versa. Once John slogged through his trust issues and saw that Lestrade was genuinely good man and Lestrade realized that John kept Sherlock grounded, they became fast friends. Lestrade had been a rock after Sherlock’s “suicide” and the two terrible years afterwards. John returned the favor when Lestrade learned who the biological father of Molly’s baby was.

But “thank you” was all John had, so he uttered the completely inadequate words then added, “We better get in there, before His Majesty sends Molly to fetch us.”

“Wait,” Lestrade held up a finger then chugged the coffee.

“Jesus, don’t burn your mouth,” John scolded him but as his own coffee had been lukewarm at best, he figured Lestrade’s wasn’t that warm either.

“Don’t tell Molly,” Lestrade pitched the cup into a nearby bin.
“Wouldn’t dream of it,” John promised, awkwardly shoving his cup into the bin as well.

Sherlock, however, had not gotten the memo. “Ah, excellent, now that you’re finished drinking the coffee meant for me, can we proceed?”

Molly glared daggers at her husband.

“It was just one cup!” he pleaded.

“Three,” Sherlock muttered under his breath.

“Next time you’re in the drunk tank, I’m leaving you there,” Lestrade promised.

“Girls,” John said sternly as Molly opened the cabinet door where the body currently resided. John always marveled at the strength of the petite woman whenever he watched her pull out a metal slab or pushing a gurney carrying a heavy body. Idly, he wondered what she could bench-press as she unzipped the black plastic body bag.

She peeled the plastic back, revealing the victim’s face.

There was a sharp intake of breath next to him. John whipped his head around, looking up at Sherlock. Noting that he was paler than normal, he asked, “Sherlock? You alright?”

“I know her,” he said faintly. “Sarah Cushing.”

“Sorry, Sarah who?” Lestrade started rooting around in his trench coat pockets, looking for his pen and notepad.

“Sarah Cushing, known as Crusher on the streets,” Sherlock studied the woman’s immobile face with his usual intensity, all emotion tucked away, locked in one of his Mind Palace’s rooms. “Sarah’s ears were sent to her sister, a Susanne Cushing, correct?”

John walked around the table, standing next to Molly. He leaned forward to get a better look. He didn’t recognize her but he noted how young she had been, probably was in her late teens, early twenties. She might have been pretty, although death had robbed most of her charms. Her eyes were closed so John had no idea what colour they might have been. Her lips were full and plush, but white now. She had shiny blonde hair, but it had been carefully pulled back so the bloody holes where ears used to be could be seen.

He thought about young Susan Dobney back at 221B and shuddered.

“She was a member of the Network then?”

He remembered Marie Devine’s dire warning how everyone connected to Sherlock was at risk and he felt a little sick.

Sherlock fixed his glacial eyes on Lestrade. “That stays off the record.”

“No one would believe me anyway,” Lestrade sighed, “A gang of kids running a counterintelligence organization that would make MI-6 green with envy? People would accuse me of having a brain injury if I even hinted something like that existed in the slums of London. Besides, think of all the court cases that would get overturned if it was found out that evidence had been gathered by hackers and street punks instead of by proper police procedure.”

“Boring,” Sherlock grumbled.
“Sherlock,” John’s voice held a hint of warning, as it usually did when what passed as manners for Sherlock started dissolving.

“Before you lot got here, I spoke to Alexis,” Molly jumped in, also recognizing Sherlock’s impatience. “She’s working on getting the ears transported from Chesterfield Royal to here.” Molly stepped away from the body, her hands behind her back, looking tiny and fragile, even next to diminutive John. “I told her to rush it if at all possible, since you’re already here.”


“She was not a prostitute,” Sherlock muttered as he drew on purple latex gloves. “So it shall not be Jack the Ripper again, unless you have located another fake skeleton lounging in a gravesite rumored to be Jack the Ripper’s final resting place?”

“I still don’t know how the hell Anderson set all that up.”

“Anderson had more brains than I gave him credit for,” Sherlock started circling the body, peering at the blood-crusted holes with his magnifying glass. “I thought he had the tiny brain of a dinosaur. Rather his brain was approximately the same size as a rat’s, which while not impressive, still an improvement from my first assessment.”

“Sherlock, it’s Not Good to speak ill of the dead,” John murmured.

“Why not? That didn’t stop the media from vilifying me when I was dead.”

“Because it’s impolite, that’s why,” John sighed, wondering how only two hours ago they had been snogging like teenagers and now he lectured him as if he was an impertinent child.

“Alexis sent me photos of the ears,” Molly leapt in the conversation again. “I knew you drive yourself and everyone around you mad while waiting. She texted the pictures to my mobile,” She pulled off her glove then stuck her hand in her white lab jacket. Only then did John notice she was wearing a spectaculalry unflattering mustard jumper and a maroon skirt paired with tights that matched the jumper. John grinned, he adored Molly’s unconventional fashion sense and judging by Lestrade’s adoring face, he more than adored her clothes. Lestrade was enamored with Molly from the top of her auburn head all the way down to her toes, which were clad in maroon coloured ballet flats decorated with little black bows.

Sherlock, of course, didn’t pay one bit to Molly. He stared enrapt at the first photo of the ear then rumbled, “Swipe to the next one.” He didn’t want to touch Molly’s phone after poking around the body.

Molly complied then held the mobile back up. Sherlock sucked in a breath again. “That ear does not belong to Sarah Crushing,” he turned his back on Molly and called, “Come along, John.”

“What?” John gaped at Sherlock while Lestrade shouted, “Oi, hold up!”

“No time, there’s been another murder,” Sherlock shouted back, not even turning around.

“I’ll compare DNA to confirm,” Molly told Lestrade then called after Sherlock, “But why where both ears sent to her sister if they both didn’t belong to Susan?”

“To ensure I get involved,” Sherlock called back then paused to look at Lestrade, “I should prefer that you do not mention my name at all in connection with the case.”**
“The Met already knows you’re here and looking into this case, where are you going?”

Sherlock ignored him and stalked out of the morgue. John mouthed “Sorry,” to both Lestrade and Molly then bolted to follow Sherlock.

“This is Professor Moriarty, isn’t it?” he demanded when he caught up with Sherlock.

“It is,” Sherlock’s eyes were clouded and his hands were balled up in fists.

“Sherlock, I’m sorry, I should have texted or rang last night when Marie told u-”

Sherlock interrupted with a shake of his shaggy head. “It would have been too late for her anyhow. Surely you have perceived that rigor mortis had come and gone. She had been dead for well over thirty hours, before Marie even knocked on your door.”

“Jesus Christ, how old was she?”

“Twenty-two,” Sherlock said as a muscle twitched in his cheek. “She wasn’t homeless, not any more. After she fled from her stepfather’s untoward advances, the Network sheltered her. They gave her the leg-up she needed and she made something of herself. She’d just finished her degree in social work. She only moonlighted with the Network nowadays. Mostly she acted like a den mother. Got her degree in social work, you see. Made sure the younger members had a safe place to go until they could fend for themselves.”

The cool, clinical tone of Sherlock’s voice did not deceive John for a moment. He knew his friend was hurting right now. He wished to embrace him, but knew that would be impossible. Not because they were in public but because he knew Sherlock long enough that he simply needed time to process, to put things in perceptive when something dreadful happened. It was how he coped. Cuddles wouldn’t make it better, it would only annoy him.

So John said in a quiet, angry voice, “I don’t care if Mary pitches a fit. Susan will stay with us until we bring Violet home. She can stay as long as she needs to, actually.”

Sherlock actually smiled, or rather, his mouth quirked up in a small grin. “Funny you should mention that. That was actually my plan to keep Mary occupied while you were gone.” Then he whispered, “Are you carrying?”

“Of course,” John sighed. Mary had loaned him her sleek little Beretta. It fit neatly in his ankle-holster. “But I don’t know what good it will do me,” he added when they reached the lift.

“You can shoot just as well with your right as your left,” Sherlock mashed his finger angrily against the Up button. “I need you to check in with Bill Wiggins. Make sure he’s alright and tell him to spread the word to the rest of the Network.”

“And where are you going?”

“To see Raz.”

“Who?”

“My art consultant.”

“You mean that little graffito shithead who get me that ABSO is part of the Network?”

“You’re still bitter about that?”
“Am I still… are you kidding me? Do you have any idea how much that fine was? Not to mention how humiliating it was to stand there in front of the magistrate while he lectured me how I was old enough to know better, that it was a disgrace that a military man such as myself would get involved in something as childish as tagging a building… you’re not even listening to me, are you?” John demanded as they got on the lift.

“Sorry, what?” Sherlock shook himself from his revive.

“Never mind,” John leaned his head against the wall as the lift doors.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to giggle or scream.

**

3 April 2016
Conan & Doyle Private Investigative Services
Cardiff, England
Sunday night
4:31 AM

Lugging a heavy rucksack full of surveillance equipment, Sally Donovan humped the burden up the flight of stairs that led to the backdoor. She punched in the after-hours security code and shoved the door open with her shoulder.

The assignment had been boring, her job was boring. There was nothing glamorous about being a private investigator. It consisted mostly of her tailing unfaithful spouses and snapping pictures. Sometimes she had to discover assets a bitter spouse tried to hide during a messy divorce, but even that was dull. Just a lot of staring at computer screens. To add insult to injury, she had to do more paperwork as a PI then she ever did as a cop.

Even the office space was dull. It wasn’t like the noir films or books at all. It was just a bland, mostly forgotten one-storey office building built sometime during the 1970’s, located in Llanishen, within walking distance of the HMRC offices. They didn’t even have the building to themselves. Part of the building was let out to a struggling estate agency that was probably going to be shuttered within a year or so. The other part was deserted but over the door there was a faded “Caffè Nero, Coming Soon: 2014” taped on the door.

Inside the private investigative office, there were a neat row of cubicles, a large closet where all the equipment was kept, a break room the size of a broom closet, an even smaller lavatory (barely enough space for a pee) and a smallish office that the owners shared.

Donovan never saw the owners, whose names were painstakingly etched into the glass of the front door. She usually dealt with Arthur, the man who manned the front desk and was the de facto office manager even though his official job title was Receptionist.

She got along with Arthur, even found him attractive. However she had learned the hard way not to mix business with pleasure.

Even in the dim lights, she found her cubicle with ease. Hers was the only one without any personal affects. No photographs of friends or family. Not even a plant or goldfish to brighten her space up.

Donovan switched on her desk lamp, unzipped her rucksack and took out one of the company’s cameras she had used, an excellent Nikon D5 that cost more than more than her car. Then she dug out her laptop, a shitty Toshiba that had seen better days, but it served its purpose. She put the laptop
in its docking station and turned the power on. But before she connected the camera to the computer so she could download the pictures of the fat bastard she had spent most of the night following around as he treated his latest mistress to a night out on the town, she decided she needed coffee.

She yawned mightily and rubbed her face. *A lot of coffee...* she decided as she rose, stretching her back. She tossed the USB cords onto her desk and made her way to the tiny canteen.

The break room literally only had space for a small sink, a dodgy coffee maker, an even dodgier microwave no one used for fear of electrocution, a sweets machine and a tiny table with two mismatched chairs. There had used to be a refrigerator, but people kept leaving food and milk in it for too long. Then no one would clean the fridge out when the food and milk spoilt. The owners (with some urging from Arthur) made an executive decision to remove the nasty refrigerator and replace it with the candy machine instead. There was barely enough room for two people in the break room and only two thin people at that.

Donovan dug some change out of her trousers and deposited enough coins so a Cadbury Dairy Milk would fall. After retrieving her chocolate, she tossed the bar onto the tiny table littered with gossip mags and newspapers. She began the arduous process of making coffee in the decrepit percolator the office had lovingly nicknamed “The Monster.”

As The Monster sighed and groaned while the coffee perked, Donovan sat down with a soft groan. Her back ached after sitting in a car all night and watching that cheating prick grope his latest toy, this month’s model a stunning blonde.

Donovan rolled her eyes.

She hated her job, hated being a PI. But not a single police station would touch her with a ten-foot-pole, not after her role in The Fall.

She tore the wrapping off her chocolate, her face pulled down in a sour frown. The sweetness of the chocolate did nothing to brighten her mood. As she munched, she randomly picked up a paper for something to do while she waited since she had left her mobile at her desk.

She flipped through *The Sun* without any real interest until a stock photograph of her old supervisor, Greg Lestrade caught her eye. She felt a pang of remorse, hating how things had ended with him. She hadn’t been romantically involved with him, hadn’t even been interested. But she liked him, had been a fair boss... except when it came Lestrade’s blind spot regarding The Freak, of course. Despite this, they had always got along, worked well with each other.

Until he found out she ignored a series of telephone messages that could have proved The Freak was innocent of everything she (as well as the media) had accused him of. As far as Lestrade was concerned, she was partially responsible for his suicide.

“You’re lucky I’m not firing you,” he had sneered at Donovan after he demanded her badge.

She was reinstated, of course. She had argued during her hearing she honestly thought the telephone calls came from a nutter and an American nutter at that. She wasn’t fired, but she almost wished she had been. Not only did Lestrade treat her with a professional coolness that bordered on disdain, but she now found herself an office pariah, even by those who still hated The Freak.

Even Anderson, who had been her staunchest ally, had started up a *fucking fan club* for the demented consulting detective. Rather than being on her side, rather than saying that Donovan made the right call in suspecting The Freak really had abducted the ambassador’s kids, he had become obsessed with Sherlock Fucking Holmes instead.
Donovan’s eyes flicked down to the garish headline NOW ‘EAR THIS: NO NEW SERIAL KILLERS, SAYS MET DI.

Donovan skimmed the article, expecting to see The Freak’s name pop up. This was a case right up his psychopathic alley. Surprisingly, the only mention of The Freak was when Lestrade had been asked if The Freak was consulting on this case, Lestrade had said no.

Well, maybe Greg’s starting to see the light, Donovan let the paper drop from her hands.

But she wouldn’t let the matter drop from her mind. She couldn’t.

Donovan ran her tongue over her teeth as she went over the timeline in her mind.

She had felt bad about The Freak’s suicide, but not responsible. If he was mentally unhinged, then his death was inevitable. She had just been glad he hadn’t taken anyone else with him. She was wise to keep this unpopular opinion to herself, kept her head down and did her job.

Just as things had finally calmed down, when people were forgetting about The Freak and his spectacular Fall, he fucking came back.

She had heard that Dr. Watson tried to strangle him in a fancy restaurant when he returned. She wished the good doctor would have finished the job.

Then the Freak had gotten himself shot. Had broken into Charles Augustus Magnussen’s offices and gotten himself shot. Donovan did not feel bad about that at all. He was trespassing, after all, despite his claims that he had been visiting his alleged girlfriend.

After the Shooting, The Freak disappeared from the spotlight until New Year’s Day 2015, when Moriarty returned in living colour to every screen in London and Magnussen’s death had officially been confirmed. A break-in on Christmas Day at Appledore, there had been a struggle, a single gun-shot to the head.

Donovan smelt a cover-up.

Donovan also smelt a rat when Moriarty roared back to life, in a digital format at any rate. She had believed it was all some sort of trick, one giant deception, somehow. Just as she sensed there was something fishy going on with Magnussen’s death as well but couldn’t put her finger on it… at least, not then.

So she started poking around the Moriarty Resurrection as well as Magnussen’s murder, partially as a hobby but partially because she didn’t believe that it was a coincidence. No, there was no way it was coincidental that Moriarty came back when Magnussen had died when the common denominator was one junkie freak. After all, the junkie freak had investigated both Moriarty and Magnussen.

She had read the tabloids with glee when they reported how he had fallen off the wagon, how he had been found in a drug den by Dr. Watson. How sexually perverse he really was, according to Janine What’s-her-name, the stupid woman who had gotten involved with The Freak. Donovan thought Holmes was using her as a beard but after she had questioned Janine off-hours and off-record, Janine had admitted he had fabricated a relationship so he could gain access to Magnussen’s office. Then she had frozen, as if she realized she had said too much then snapped at Donovan to leave her the hell alone, to leave the issue of Magnussen along.

“He was a monster,” Janine had snapped. “He deserved to die. Except that,” she had shuddered, “Just because he’s dead, doesn’t mean he’s still not dangerous. Leave it alone, Miss Donovan. Don’t dig anymore because you won’t like what you find.”
Donovan kept digging. She hadn’t like what she found, what she discovered, that Jim Moriarty, along with other crimes, had been involved in human trafficking, primary children. Before she could report these findings to Lestrade or Dimmock or anyone else, Moriarty’s people found her. Made it very clear she had two choices: help them distract The Great Detective from their real crimes or die.

In terror, she turned to the only person she trusted: Philip Anderson.

They weren’t even sleeping together anymore. He had returned to his wife. But he was still her best friend and she his. He didn’t say ‘I told you so’ when she gibbered to him how Moriarty’s goons had broken into her flat, harassed her, terrorized her, threatened all sorts of horrors upon her, from peeling her flesh from her bones to sodomy minus lubrication. He had merely grabbed her by her shaking shoulders and said “What do you need?”

“I can’t do what they’re asking,” her teeth had chattered. She had never been so afraid in her entire life, up until that point yet. “I can’t sabotage a police investigation. I can’t…”

She couldn’t, so Anderson did. He planted evidence at the Watsons’ after a home invasion to send the Met down the wrong road. When Sherlock stubbornly stayed on the right road, Anderson set him up, told him he had a lead regarding a series of bombing Sherlock had originally been investigating. Anderson made sure Moriarty’s people captured him, drugged him and then eventually kill him.

But John Watson had shown up, along with Sherlock’s latest beard, a chestnut-haired snob who had all the warmth of an ice sculpture.

“Violet Smith,” Donovan murmured, her finger pressed down on the old picture of Lestrade.

Then she rubbed her lips and chin, thinking.

There had been something odd about Miss Smith as well, besides the fact that she seemed to willingly date The Freak.

Donovan recalled their first meeting, in the canteen at New Scotland Yard, how she had nearly run into Donovan. How the hot coffee had sloshed all over her neatly manicured hands.

Donovan studied own nails, short-clipped, unfiled and her left pointer finger had a hangnail.

Donovan remembered how much make-up Miss Smith had been wearing. Foundation, face powder, blush and even her eyes and lips had been done to the nines as well. At first, Donovan thought she was just one of those stuck-up cows who couldn’t leave the house without doing their face. Now she wondered… was she hiding something?

Her mouth twisted. Abuse? Hiding bruises?

But her demeanor wasn’t one of an abused woman. She had been pleasant and polite at first, like a visiting dignitary. Regal, really; Miss Smith was a very the self-possessed woman. Donovan had to give her credit for that. When Donovan started pushing her buttons, just to see how she would react, instead of retreating, Miss Smith pushed right back. Donovan had been the one who reacted and reacted poorly, in fact:

Oh... you must be his ex... oh my God, this is so awkward...

WHAT?

Of course that’s why you reacted as you did a moment ago, it makes perfect sense now.
I didn’t… I don’t… I never…

Look, I’m sorry if he was cruel to you, he sometimes forgets how brutal his brand of honesty can be... I’m sure he thought he was just being kind when he told you he wasn’t interes-

I did not, do not fancy that psychopath!

Well, if the World’s Most Observant Man thinks you have still have feelings him… you probably do…

That entire exchange still set Donovan’s teeth on edge. But it hadn’t been Miss Smith’s barbs retorts that needled her. No, it was the way she had looked at her, studying her. Donovan had already been on edge that day, the weight of her actions sitting heavily on her shoulders.Sharply and painfully aware that Anderson was risking his very life for her, the last thing she had wanted to see was The Freak come poncing in, showing off his latest pet.

But that little pet was no pampered lapdog. She was a barracuda. Donovan could not remember what Miss Smith had worn that day or how she had styled her chestnut hair. But she did remember those eyes. They reminded her of a nature show about tigers she had watched as a child. Miss Smith’s hazel eyes resembled the same greenish-gold as the tiger’s did and she had looked at Donovan as if she was prey.

Donovan knew, she just knew, that Miss Smith was not what she seemed.

After their second and last meeting, she knew for certain that Miss Smith was no mild-mannered ladylike office manager. Anderson’s efforts hadn’t been enough. Despite the massive fight she put up, Donovan had been dragged out of her own home and knocked out. She awoke hours later, finding herself zip-tied to a chair in a room full of explosives. She also wore a heavy suicide-bomb vest. Her chair was also rigged to blow. If she somehow freed herself from her bounds, if she got out of her seat… boom.

Then Donovan knew true fear. She tasted it, metallic and sharp.

She thought she was going to die.

Except, she didn’t… but Anderson did.

Miss Smith and Anderson had found her, tied up, helpless, terrified. Anderson had tried to console her, but Miss Smith took control of the situation, made a call to the Met and got in touch with the bomb squad. Someone called Collins who talked her through defusing the bomb.

They had thought they were safe. But there had been a double-denotation. When Miss Smith defused one bomb, she triggered another one.

They ran. They had nearly outrun the explosion.

Nearly.

Donovan would never forget waking up next to Anderson, covered in dust and debris. How she had screamed and screamed when she saw him lying motionless, his head caved in like a smashed jack-o-lantern.

He had hung there for a while, Anderson. But he never really regained consciousness. Machines had kept him alive. Even if he had woken up, he would have the mental capacity of a toddler. He would need constant care. Need to be fed, bathed. Need help using the toilet then cleaned up afterwards.
Anderson’s wife had decided to do the merciful thing and remove the life support.

After that, Donovan quit London for good.

She had tried to get onboard at another police station at first. Her reputation preceded her. She received polite “Thank you for your interest” letters from every single station she had applied at.

When the crappy private investigation agency made her a job offer, she accepted it, knowing she really had no other options. She knew she was lucky not to be in prison for the role she played in the human trafficking.

She felt fully responsible for Phillip’s death.

The coffee had perked but Donovan hadn’t moved. She was still thinking.

Miss Smith and her dog had become a fixture of The Freak’s life until last January. Then she had simply vanished around the same time Dr. Watson had been abducted. Dr. Watson returned. Miss Smith did not.

Donovan did not believe this was a coincidence either.

Obviously, Miss Smith was more than met the eye.

And there was something so damnably familiar about her voice.

The press had hounded The Freak about the disappearance of Miss Smith but received no answers. Dr. Watson hadn’t even addressed her absence on his blog. But then, he really hadn’t posted much on his blog other than to thank the readers for their good wishes and hopes for his speedy recovery. And that had been last February. The media drew their own conclusions then moved on to more scandalous stories.

Holmes himself hadn’t been mentioned in the media since last January, after Dr. Watson had been found after his latest horrifying ordeal caused by his friendship with The Freak.

Donovan wondered how much more shit Dr. Watson would take from Holmes.

She had a feeling Miss Smith had decided she had her fill of his codswallop.

She gnawed on her hangnail, forgetting about her coffee, her chocolate, her current unsatisfactory job.

She didn’t understand why she was the only one who saw Sherlock Holmes for what he was. Magnussen wasn’t the monster. Moriarty wasn’t the monster. Holmes was.

Remorseless, predatory, dangerous, Holmes was. He saw the world as a chessboard and people were only pawns to him, not actual human beings.

What was that asinine thing he had always said when a particularly vile case excited him?

_The game is on…_

“Games,” Donovan snorted. Then her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

_Games…_

Holmes’ chessboard was currently missing an important piece… the Queen.
Find the Queen, find the truth about Holmes.

The truth being that he’s a stone-cold murderer, of course.

She wondered if she’d find Miss Smith alive and well or if she’d find her decaying body.

Either way, she decided she would find her.

Chapter End Notes

Susan Cushing is a ACD canon character from the original Cardboard Box story.

Susanne Cushing is inspired by Susan Cushing from the original Cardboard Box story. I tweaked the name a little to changing the spelling to differentiate from Susan Dobney, a character from the original Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax. ACD really liked to repeat names… Mary, Violet, Susan… (*cough* lazy writer *cough*)

Sherlock's demand not to be mentioned in this new case is from the original Cardboard Box story. The full quote is actually: "I should prefer that you do not mention my name at all in connection with the case, as I choose to be only associated with those crimes which present some difficulty in their solution," .... because Holmes is an arrogant ass.... but we love him anyway :^(

Equality

Chapter Summary

Equality

When neither player has an advantage.

~*~or~*~

Feels and angst. #sorrynotsorry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ten: Equality

3 April 2016
West Norwood Cemetery
London, England
Sunday morning
10:31 AM

After a sleepless night, John had gotten out of bed at the God-forsaken hour of five o’clock, his usual time of waking. Warily, he trudged to the bath to shower and shave. After dressing, he then blundered downstairs, boiled a kettle and downed three cups of tea with his toast and eggs. He had sifted through emails, played a game or two of Minesweeper, read The Telegraph online until he heard Mary moving around upstairs at approximately quarter after nine.

After letting Sweetie out to have his morning wee, he scribbled a note to Mary asking her to meet him at eleven o’clock at the cemetery. But he came to the cemetery early, just to have a moment to himself.

Optimistic about the meteorologist’s promise of a fair day, John wore his light black jacket instead of his heavy winter coat. Realistic about London weather, he had also wrapped his warmest wool muffler around his throat and carried an umbrella. He also put on a thick pair of socks and a pair of boots instead of his favorite scuffed-up brown lace-ups. He had to be extra-mindful now about catching a chill. One could live without a spleen, but living without one made fighting disease off a bit more challenging.

Along with the umbrella, he carried three bouquets of daffodils and a Tesco bag. Inside the plastic bag were a roll of kitchen paper and a spray bottle of Flash Clean and Shine.

Too soon, he reached his destination. He stared numbly at the three humble gravestones, like dominoes lay side by side.

He closed his eyes, puffed out a breath, and got to work.
The first gravestone he tidied was his mother’s. He carefully set his umbrella and the flowers down then he knelt and sprayed the granite stone with the cleaner. He wiped away the accumulated dust, scum and bird shit that decorated the marker the best he could with his damaged hand and wrist. He did not weep as he cleaned. She did not have a happy life and towards the end of her said unhappy life, the cancer seemed to be hell-bent on devouring what was left of her miserable existence. When she finally passed away, it had been a mercy.

John briefly touched the words etched into the stone: “Anna McLaren Watson, Beloved Mother.” Sherlock had noted that it did not say “Beloved Mother and Wife.” There was a very good reason for that. His father had done a bunk when John was barely twelve years old. Got in over his head with a loan shark and fled. His mother had covered his debts with money that was meant for her retirement and John’s university education. John had never seen his father again nor did he have any desire to. Nor had he ever forgiven him for the misery he had caused his mother and sister.

My sister… John stood up, knowing there was bits of damp earth and blades of grass on the knees of his jeans. But since he’d be kneeling again, he didn’t even try to wipe it off, he merely walked around to his sister’s grave site and began cleaning her grave stone as he had his mother’s.

A bubble of hot anger swelled in his belly as he remembered how the stupid fucking vicar had kept calling her “Henrietta” instead of “Harriet.” Granted, the man had been a substitute called in after the regular minister succumbed to a stomach virus. But still, it infuriated John to this day. How difficult would it have been for the muppet to jot down a memo on a Post-It note and stick it somewhere so he would remember that the deceased was called “Harriet Ceit Watson?”

John tried to ignore the fact that Harry’s middle name had been mis-spelt on her marker as well. At least they got the “Harriet” bit right, but they spelt her middle name as “Kate” instead of using the proper Scottish Gaelic spelling.

Then the bubble of rage popped and John’s gut flopped over and over, reacting to his guilty conscience as he remembered his last conversation with his sister, the last fucking thing he’d ever said to her during their last attempt at an intervention for her drinking:

Harry, we share DNA. That’s it. I have bigger problems than your self-inflicted drama. My daughter is missing, not dead. Did you know that? Do you even care? I needed you when we lost Maisie and all I got was a bleeding text? Where the hell were you? At the track? At the pub? Well… you… you can just sod off. Piss away all your money. Drink until you die. I don’t care. I don’t want anything to do with you ever again, understand?

And she had died defending him, pleading with her murderer not to hurt her little brother.

John stopped cleaning. He let go of the kitchen paper and Flash Clean and Shine. He closed his eyes and sank back onto his haunches, hanging his head while trying to think of an endearing memory of his big sister. A time when she had been supportive, a time when she had been funny or sweet or kind…

But the only memories that came were the unhappy ones. Of all the times she fell off the wagon. The massive rows she had with her mother. How their father all but threw her out when she came out of the closet. How she had teased him ruthlessly about his friendship with an effeminate boy cruelly nicknamed “Gary the Fairy.” How her drinking and gambling had cost her everything: her career, her home and her wife.

How she was just such a goddamned drama queen and how everything was always about her.

“Right,” John mumbled, opening his eyes as he ran his fingertips over the cool stone, touching the
offensive “Kate,” then tracing his pointer finger over the engraved K over and over. “I’ll get this fixed, first off. If I have to be stuck with a stupid Scottish middle name, so do you,” he tried to chuckle but immediately stopped because it sounded so forced, so fake. He pressed his fingertips to her middle name again, wincing a little. Even though his wrist and fingers were healing nicely, sometimes they still twinged a bit. “Then I’ll kill the bastard that…” he closed his eyes again, letting his arm drop. His belly jumped again as he recalled Holy Peters’ leering face, the face of the man who had murdered his sister, who had tried to murder him. “I’ll make it right, Harry,” he whispered. “I swear to God, I’ll make it right.”

Biting his lip now, he resumed cleaning up her marker then stood up again with a wobble since he really couldn’t use his left arm to push himself up off the ground. Leaving the cleaning products behind, he walked back to the flowers. He carefully placed one bouquet of the cheery daffodils on his mother’s grave. “You always loved yellow, Mum,” John said with an affectionate pat on the gravestone. Then he repeated the gesture on Harry’s stone, only he said, “And I know you hated the colour yellow. Consider it payback for all the times you called me ‘midget.’”

Then he stood up, clutching the third bouquet in his hands.

For the first time that morning, tears blurred his vision.

Harry had been buried next to her mother, in their father’s plot. The grave site next to Anna Watson had been vacant but paid for future occupancy. John wasn’t sure which Holmes brother pulled what strings, but the previous owner gave up that spot for John and Mary.

John flecked tears out of his eyes and forced himself to look down at the stone:

_Hamish Alexei Watson_  
Cherished Son  
Miscarried  
December 2015

The engravers had asked if they wanted a picture etched into the stone, an angel or a teddy bear perhaps but both John and Mary vetoed that notion immediately. Bad enough they were burying a child that never even lived. A tacky etching of a child’s toy or religious symbol was not going to make that wound hurt any less.

John had balked at Mary’s choice of a first name and had been confused by her choice for the second. Mary had explained that her father had been called Alexei and she rather liked Hamish, even if he didn’t. But she wanted to honor the baby’s Scottish and Ukrainian roots. “We’ll call him Alex, it’ll be fine,” she had crooned when John had half-heartedly argued.

He found he did like how Alex Watson sounded.

He realized he still wanted kids.

Just… _not with her_…

“John?”

John startled a little at Mary’s voice. “Hey,” he dabbed at his eyes before turning around.

Mary wore her long red coat, jeans and white trainers. She carried three bouquets as well, a mixture of springtime blooms, all bright, cheerful colours.

“Sorry, I just wanted a moment to…”
“It’s alright,” she walked around to leave the first bunch of flowers on Harry’s grave, placing them
next to the yellow daffodils. “I’ve come out here by myself at times too. Just to have a quiet moment
to myself,” she placed the second bunch on his mother’s grave. She stood up and looked down at the
lillest gravesite. She blew out a shaky little breath.

John didn’t say anything. Just knelt down and started wiping off the gravestone as he had for his
mother and sister. Then he gently placed the daffodils on top of the stone. Mary followed suit then
reached for his hand.

John took it without any guilt. This wasn’t about affection or flirting. This was two people suffering
the greatest loss imaginable. No matter what happened between him and Mary, he knew Mary was
the only person in the world who understood his utter desolation regarding his children. They didn’t
even need to talk about it. They could give each other a glance and have a silent conversation only
grieving parents could have.

“Did they ever find the owner of the second ear?” Mary finally asked.

“No,” John said softly, “But Sherlock couldn’t find one of his Network contacts yesterday, a street
artist called Raz so... we’re not optimistic.”

“Oh God,” Mary closed her eyes. Then opened them again as she said, “I know I’m supposed to be
‘retired’ and I’m not talking about picking up my gun again. I don’t ever want to kill another again,
unless I absolutely have to, unless someone else will die if I don’t. But I want to help, so if there is
anything I can do.”

“There is,” John thanked God for this perfect opening. “The girl I went to check on yesterday at
221B. She’s only fourteen years old and she has nowhere to go. She’s not Network material, she’s
not. She’s bright but not brilliant and she’s sweet. Sherlock thought-”

“Thought we’d just take her in?” Mary dropped John’s hand. “Replace Maisie with a teenage girl as
if we’ve lost a goldfish instead of a child? Two children?”

“No,” John held up his hands as a sign of peace. “Not a replacement. Mary, wait, please,” he called
as Mary turned to walk away.

“I was talking about being useful,” Mary spat, whirling around. “Investigating, researching. Not
being a bloody baby-sitter.”

“You would be useful. You’d be helping a girl in desperate need of a safe place to stay.”

“Then Sherlock should bring her to social services so she can be placed into foster care,” Mary
turned to leave again.

“So she can be lost in the system? Mary, people don’t want to foster teenagers,” he scoffed. As Mary
continued to walk away, he called after her. “You know what happens to kids like her in the streets.”
Mary froze but didn’t turn around. “There’s a berk running around cutting ears off of Network
members. What do you think he’d do to a girl who’s been on the street for less than a week?
Assuming she doesn’t starve to death first. Or becomes even more ill, or maybe she gets tricked by a
pimp with promises of a safe place to stay and instead ends up sitting in the laps of dirty old men
who just want to fu-”

“Alright, stop,” Mary’s shoulders slumped. Wearily she turned around and repeated herself, “Stop.
Fine, she can stay for a bit. But it’s not an open-end invitation. We need to find relatives of hers. She
should be with her family.”
“I agree, but that will take time. Her parents threw her out with only the clothes on her back. She can’t stay at Baker Street.”

“Oh God no,” Mary shuddered. “She’d starve to death at 221B faster than on the streets.”

“Once Violet is back, safe and sound, then we’ll find someone in Susan’s family who will take her in. Violet can help, she can use that profiler’s brain of hers to determine if the relative will take proper care of Susan or not.”

John never told Mary his theory about Violet having ALS. Mostly because he was in denial, he wanted to be wrong.

“Well, I hope Sherlock brings Violet back soon,” Mary said stiffly.

She never told John her real motivation for wanting Violet back. They hadn’t been friends, but they had been allies. They had a common interest: staying off of Mycroft’s radar. She also had been helping Mary find Maisie.

She worried that Violet had turned her back on her, had gone to work for the devil in the three piece suit and planned on selling her out. With Violet back at Baker Street, it’d be easier to keep an eye on her. With her in the wind, there was no telling what she was capable of, especially if she was desperate.

Mary knew what desperate women were capable of doing.

Sometimes she wondered if she should have believed Sherlock that night at Magnussen’s office and let him help her.

Sometimes she wondered if she should have just killed him.

Her face twisted and she pressed her hand to her forehead, hating herself for thinking that. “John, I know you asked me to come out here because it’s unlikely it’s bugged. I’m glad you did because there’s something I want to discuss with you. No,” she dropped her hand. “I need to ask you, actually.”

“OK,” John’s heart started pound. **Maybe she’ll ask for a divorce…oh, please say yes….**

“We’re alright, aren’t we?”

**NO, WE’RE NOT YOU SELFISH COW,** John longed to scream at her. Instead he muttered, “‘Course we are.”

“Because… you see… I don’t. I don’t think we’re alright. At all.”

“Mary,” John rubbed his eyes, feeling a sleep-deprivation headache coming on. His calves burned from all the walking and he felt a deep twinge in his abdomen where his spleen used to be, a sure sign he had overexerted himself. “What more do you want from me, honestly? I am doing the best I can under the circumstances.”

“You’re leaving me.”

*I wish… “Only for two months.”*

“I don’t think you should go.”

John dropped his hand. “I don’t have a choice.”
“Yes, you do,” her face started to contort in anger.

“Not really. We don’t know what’s going to happen Tuesday. After Tuesday, I could be Mr. Watson instead of Dr. Watson,” he snapped. “This is a paid job, Mary and we need the money.”

“You’re not ready, you’re not strong enough.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You’re white as a sheet now.”

“I didn’t sleep last night, was thinking about the hearing. I’ll kip out a bit when we get home.”

Mary still looked mulish. “So you’re going to risk your life because Sherlock snapped his fing-”

“Enough,” John wearily interrupted her. “Just… enough, OK? I’m not risking anything. I get to faff around Europe, staying in nice hotels pretending to be on a case. He’s the one taking all the risks.” Shrewdly he added, “Just like he risked his life saving you from Magnussen.”

Mary crossed her arms tight against her waist again. Her eyes shone with tears as she looked up towards the sky, “Fuck you for throwing that back at me.”

“Well, fuck you for shooting him!”

The angry words flew out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

A tight, cold smile twisted Mary’s pink lips, “And you think we’re alright, eh?”

John ran his hand down his face. “No. Of course we’re not alright.”

The mean little smile slid off Mary’s face as her lips started to tremble again. “That’s all I wanted to hear,” she choked out. “I didn’t know if I was going mad or seeing things that weren’t there. But we’re not OK, are we?”

John shook his head. “We’re not,” he whispered. “I don’t know how to fix us, Mary.”

And I don’t want to…

Mary pressed her palms to her eyes to staunch tears. John honestly felt sorry for her then. She looked like a little girl who just watched the neighbor bully tear her dollhouse apart.

“This isn’t what I wanted, Mary,” he added, to soften the blow.

“I know, I know,” she struggled to control her shaking voice. “This trip… these two months, let’s… let’s just call it for what it really is, a break.” She laughed sharply, “Another fucking break. as if the six month break we took after our honeymoon wasn’t enough.”

John wisely held his tongue, opting not to point out that the “six month break” was the time he spent at Baker Street nursing Sherlock back to health after she fucking shot him.

Instead, he carefully replied: “If that’s what you think is best.”

“I do,” Mary nodded her head, looking as tired as John felt. “It will give us time to have a good think.” Before John could respond, she fixed him with a cold, hard look. “And think you better, John Watson. I still believe you and I can find Maisie. I’d rather that you and I find Maisie together. Once we do find our daughter, I think it would be best she have two loving parents raising her instead of
just her mum, don’t you think?” Coolly, she added, “So, yes, on second thought, I do want you to go. The sooner we bring Violet home, the sooner we can reunite the Great Detective with the Other Woman. Then the four of us can work together to find our daughter. Isn’t that what you want?” She challenged him now. “To see your best friend happy with the woman you loved as a sister and to have our daughter home, with us?”

*You manipulative bitch…* John hoped his anger didn’t show in his face, “‘Course.”

“You’re sweating,” Mary suddenly looked concerned. Worried that maybe she pushed him too far, she asked, “Are you alright?”

“Just… overdid it, I think,” he said faintly, too overwhelmed to deal with anything anymore.

Mary immediately looked contrite. “I’m sorry,” she whispered as she made her way back to him. She put her arm around him to support him. He let her. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I hate this, I hate all of this. I hate how Magnussen and Moriarty continue to rip us apart, even now…” she reached up to cup his face so he’d look at her. “I just want things to go back to the way they were. When we were happy, when you thought I was just an ordinary housewife and nurse.”

John couldn’t help but laugh a little. “You were never ordinary, even when you were ‘just’ a housewife and nurse.” Then he grimaced, pressed his hand against his abdomen.

“The scar?”

“Yeah,” he gasped. “It’s playing up.”

“Let’s go home,” Mary rubbed his back as they slowed walked towards Mary’s car.

John allowed himself to close his eyes during the drive home. He was getting stronger, but he knew it was also foolish to let himself exhaust himself. He begged off lunch and let Mary navigate him towards the sofa.

Mary fixed a hot water-bottle and placed it over his belly where his spleen used to be. She gave him ibuprofen and a glass of water to wash it down. She sincerely hoped his other scars wouldn’t act up. His shoulder where he had been shot… His arm and leg where he had been bitten by Jeptho Rucastle’s horribly abused and neglected dog… hell, at this point, she wouldn’t be surprised if his psychosomatic limp returned. The only reason his hand tremor wasn’t acting up was because that particular hand was currently in a cast.

“Have a sleep,” she kissed his brow. “I’m sorry we quarreled. Can we talk about it later? Actually talk, not fight?” she pleaded.

Eyes closed, John nodded. Soon, he was snoring lightly.

Mary sniffed. She knew they wouldn’t discuss the conversation at the cemetery.

She placed her hand over her belly, where a baby should still be growing.

She bit her lips hard, trying not to cry. She stealthily trod to her handbag and fished out her mobile. Then she silently tiptoed into the kitchen, to start cooking a late lunch for herself and her husband, who was obviously not as healthy as he purported to be.

Before she started her task though, she rang Sherlock.

“Mary,” his voice was rich, warm and inviting.
Mary didn’t buy it. “Well played, Sherlock.”

“Pardon?”

“The girl? Susan? Saddling me with her while John is off doing your bidding for two months.”

“I’m quite sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sherlock said airily.

“Cut the crap, Sherlock.”

“There is no crap to cut, my dear Mrs. Watson,” Sherlock sing-songed. “I explained the girl’s unfortunate predicament to John and how she utterly lacks the brain power and discipline to be a part of the Homeless Network.”

In the background, Mary heard a very young girl shout a very indignant “Oi!” at Sherlock.

Sherlock informed her, “No, no, no, I’m not insulting you, I’m describing you. Honestly, kids today are so sensitive.” To Mary, he continued: “As I was saying, the girl is simply not Network material. John said he would speak to you about fostering her.”

“Yes,” Mary said tersely, feeling like Sherlock was dancing circles around her.

“You’ve agreed then?”

“Yes,” she hissed, still not buying a word of his crap.

“Splendid. We’ll discuss the details at a later date. Mrs. Hudson just brought tea. I had no idea that teenagers insisted on being fed three times a day. I assume you’ll need some sort of stipend to feed and clothe the girl?”

“I.”

But Mary didn’t get any further than that syllable for in the background she could clearly hear the girl whining: “Mrs. Hudson, he’s being mean to me, again.”

Then Mrs. Hudson started scolding Sherlock, “For shame, Sherlock, you’re a grown man and she’s only fourteen. There’s no reason to-“

“Yes, we’ll talk later,” Mary hastily rang off.

She tossed the mobile on the kitchen table then put her hands on her hips and blew out a gusty breath, thoroughly annoyed because she knew Sherlock had outmaneuvered her.

Shaking her head, she went to rummage through the fridge to find the leftover vegetables from last night’s roast dinner (that she ate alone because John was On A Case with Sherlock.) As she pulled out the boiled cabbage and potatoes, she reminded herself that there was a small silver lining regarding this fucking mess.

At least John would not be with Sherlock for these two months.

“Maybe he’ll remember who he’s married to,” she griped to herself as she reached for the pot of concealed peas.

Chapter End Notes
So this is probably where the canon divergence is going to start being really noticeable, especially since they released another trailer for season four AND the name of Baby Girl Watson (be still my racing geeky heart!)

Thank you all for the continued kudos and comments! It's late and I need to go to bed.... so I can look at my phone for another three hours (insomnia is awesome... said no one ever.) Anyway, I will respond to comments this week :^)

XOXO

PS: I don't HATE the now-canon name for Baby Watson... but I confess, I don't love it either :^/
Chapter Eleven: *Isolated Pawn*

3 April 2016  
The Regiate Squire Pub  
Tottenham, London  
Sunday night  
7:58 PM

Just as his elder brother did not frequent cafés, Sherlock Holmes did not frequent pubs. He especially did not frequent pubs in Tottenham. Not because of the crime, Sherlock naturally delighted in the crime. Some of his more fascinating cases had come straight from Tottenham, courtesy of the Turkish mafia.

No, Sherlock avoided the pubs because of the football hooligans. Thick of body and mind, crude and loud, their very existence bored Sherlock nearly to tears. Especially when they thought they could get away with threatening the pasty-faced toff in a swishy coat who dared trespass on their hallowed grounds. Sherlock could see their haymaker punches coming a mile away. Last time he didn’t even bother putting up his fists, he just sidestepped at the last possible second and watched the lout face-plant on the filthy, sticky pub floor. The thick-necked idiot ended up breaking his own nose instead of Sherlock’s.

Incredibly dull indeed.

However, a Tottenham pub was the only secure location Sherlock could procure that he knew would not produce a blip on Mycroft’s radar. Dear little Miss Dobney had been an utter God-send. Her paranoia paid off in spades. She texted Sherlock whenever a stranger even so much as glanced at the building. Sherlock whenever a stranger even so much as glanced at the building. Sherlock finally was able to de-bug and de-camera his home, plus add a few silent alarms of his own as well as reinforcing the locks on his windows and doors. As he entered the dank, unfriendly-looking public house, he made a mental note to purchase his own surveillance cameras, ones that would link to his Smartphone and not Mycroft’s laptop.

He decided he might even miss her when she departed for the Watsons. Maybe….

She did have abysmal taste in television and music, after all. Just the idea of coming home to the flat tonight and hearing the whines and whinges that pop music bands tried to play off as music was enough to give him a headache. And so help him God if she used up all the milk again…

Sherlock ruffled his hair as if shooing young Miss Dobney out of his head then stuffed his hands into
his coat pockets, having a good look-around.

No football tonight, the pub was nearly deserted; just a few chronic alcoholics bellied up to the bar that had no hope or desire for rehabilitation. The barman, a large and surly-looking man who was only known as “Abrahams***”, turned his head when Sherlock entered, but upon recognizing him, resumed washing pint glasses. “A’right, Holmes?” he grunted as Sherlock walked past.

“Very well, thank you,” Sherlock stood in front of the bar man, who was a half a foot taller than he and three times heavier, but had not an ounce of superfluous flesh. Abrahams was larger than even American footballers and many of those brutes looked terrifying, even out of their ridiculous padding and helmets. He also had a variety of tattoos on his neck, face and knuckles, none of which indicated that he was a cheerful chap who liked kittens and warm hugs.

Abrahams most definitely did not like kittens or warm hugs. He also did not like prison and the pasty-faced toff in the swishy coat had saved him from a life sentence. “Drink? My shout?”

Sherlock smiled gamely, knowing that Abrahams was just trying to be polite in his own brusque way, seeing that he had saved his life and all. Drinks would always be on the house for him. But Sherlock did not really enjoy alcohol, although he did imbibe once in a while. He hated how muddled alcohol made him feel. He hated the hangovers even more, especially as he grew older; he had discovered it took him longer to recover.

“Thank you, no. Working,” he gave Abrahams the only reply he knew would not offend him. Also, it was the truth.

“Oh, yeah, ’course,” the bar man gave himself a little shake. “Not like you’re having a party up there, is you? Maybe afterwards.”

“Mm,” Sherlock hummed noncommittally. “I’ll ask my guests. Are they…”

“Yeah. Upstairs.”

“Right, best get on it.” Sherlock nodded cordially, “Good evening.”

“Cheers, mate,” Abrahams didn’t even look up from his washing up.

Sherlock cringed at the “mate.” Again he felt completely mystified about why the people whom he had cleared of any wrong-doing assumed that they were now his friends. The men acted stupid, the women behaved worse. One silly girl had emailed a three-page love-letter to Sherlock after he had proven she most certainly had nothing to do with the theft of hundreds of diamond engagement rings while she had been employed at Links of London.

Violet had howled with malicious glee while reading that lovelorn missive out loud, tears running down her face. When Sherlock sourly told her she was being rude, she told him to be nice to her or else she was going to show the love letter to John and “You know it will end up on the blog.” Then she looked back down at the laptop, her lower lip trembling with suppressed laughter. “Oh, she also says that she’s ‘totes OK’ if Dr. Watson wants to join in on a threesome.” Then she started another laughing fit that lasted so long, Sherlock had actually bolted out of his chair, snatched up his coat and took Gladstone out for a very, very long walk.

Sherlock’s heart twisted a little bit as he rounded the corner, passed the Gents and trotted up the extremely narrow staircase.

He missed hearing her laughter in his flat, even when it was at his expense. She had a wonderful laugh, loud and hearty, joyous in fact.
He paused in the stairwell and allowed himself to slip into his Mind Palace for a moment, wander down its halls to find the purple door. He cracked it open and saw Violet watching telly while lying on the sofa, with Gladstone’s head in her lap. He knew exactly where this memory came from. It occurred shortly after The Copper Beaches Massacre, while she was recuperating from being poisoned by Mrs. Toller. The sunlight glinted off her long, chestnut curls. She had no plans on leaving the flat, so she hadn’t bothered with the “Miss Smith” disguise. She wore one of his white dress shirts over a periwinkle camisole top and black yoga pants. She looked tired, but she didn’t look ill, not like she had in December. She leaned down to snuggle Gladstone and he licked her cheek with his long, pink tongue. She wiped the drool away with the back of her hand before scratching his black, cropped ears. As she did so, she laughed at whatever she was watching. Probably a stupid American film or program; she had tended to seek out American films or programs when she felt nostalgic.

Sherlock closed the door on that memory and opened his eyes, present and aware. Living in the moment was difficult for him to do sometimes, with a mind like his that could leap forwards and backwards all at the same time.

Be like the water…

Sherlock opened the door and saw his mentor, C. Auguste Dupin, rising from the rickety old card table to greet him.

The tall, powerfully-built man still looked like an aging rock star with salt-and-peppered eyebrows and stubble. He still wore his black knit skull-cap and the diamond stud in his left ear as well as his usual black jeans and motorcycle boots. But his long, black leather coat and heather grey scarf were neatly draped over the chair he had been sitting in. His ever-present Ray-bans were hooked into the neck of his navy blue jumper so his vivid summer-green eyes were visible for once. His deeply lined face lit up as Sherlock walked into the room. He held his arms out and boomed, “Monsieur Holmes!”

Sherlock noted that silver rings no longer adorned almost all of his fingers. He only wore two rings stacked on top of each other on his left ring finger, a man’s wedding band and a woman’s, both of them white-gold.

Baby-steps… Sherlock reminded himself. Dupin’s obsessive need to cling to objects would not disappear overnight, just like how he had to fight every day not to say The hell with it and pick up the needle.

“Dupin,” Sherlock rumbled with as much affection as someone like him could muster. He had been at odds at first with Dupin, scoffing at his investigative tactics. He still believed that the science of deduction trumped Dupin’s silly theory of ratiocination. But he couldn’t deny the man’s wisdom and experience in the field of investigation. As much as it hurt his pride to admit it, he had learnt quite a bit from Dupin.

He also trusted Dupin implicitly. He trusted Dupin as much as he trusted John, Molly, Violet and the slender, doll-like woman with the jet-black hair and pierced nose and eyebrow still seated at the dodgy card table, nursing the remains of a caffè latte purchased from Costa Coffee.

Sherlock endured Dupin’s faire la bise without a peep of complaint (John would be proud…) even though he would have preferred a handshake. However he deduced that since he was the petit frère of Dupin’s dearest friend Ford Holmes, Sherlock would have to endure the more familial gesture of a kiss. But it was mercifully quick. Barely even a peck then Dupin followed up with a manly clap on the back of Sherlock’s shoulder that nearly knocked him over. Sherlock was strong, but wiry. Dupin could have played as a quarterback for an American football team.
The tiny woman still sipping her cold caffè latte was positively dwarfed by the two tall men. But her dark, flashing eyes warned the world that she was just as formidable as the largest and strongest of men. Many men, primarily men who hated women, learnt this lesson the hard way.

When she had casually mentioned to Sherlock she liked to box, he hadn’t laughed at her.

Declining to rub his stinging shoulder, Sherlock turned and gave her a warm smile, one of his rare, genuine smiles, ‘‘‘Froken Salander,’’ he said formally.

The girl with the dragon tattoo smiled back, one of her infamous crooked half-smiles, ‘‘Bambi.’’

Sherlock smirked, recalling how they had first met. It had been during one of his inevitable and dull stints in rehab when he had been playing around with computer hacking. He found he was proficient, but hadn’t really found the task of hacking all that challenging. He did, however, enjoy chatting with people online. He could be social without actually being social.

His roommate in rehab, a blond who preferred to be called ‘‘Trinity,’’ told him about Hackers Republic when he realized that Sherlock was as brilliant and antisocial as most of the Republic’s members. On a whim, he picked ‘‘Bambi***’’ as his handle. To his surprise and hidden delight, they had accepted him. He hadn’t known what anyone looked like, where they lived or even their gender. He enjoyed that anonymity; it was refreshing to judge and be judged solely for one’s intelligence. No idiots permitted in Hackers Republic.

Through the Republic, he had met Lisbeth, only he knew her then as ‘‘Wasp.’’ She had gotten into some dreadful trouble with the Swedish government. While she was under arrest, she had managed to get a Palm Pilot and essentially hack her way out of her misfortune, with the help of the Republic and some friends she had in Real Life.

A few years later, he met her in person during his Great Hiatus. He had liked her instantly. She learned to like him eventually.

To his dismay, once she liked him, she offered to have sex with him. Just like that, no preface, no foreplay, no artifice. As she started striping off her clothing in a methodical and direct manner, she had coolly informed him that she found him brilliant and attractive and therefore wanted to sleep with him.

Disconcerted because he had not observed her lust for him (her pupils hadn’t even dilated for God’s sake…), he lost his usual veneer of cool. He babbled like an utter prat that while he appreciated the offer, sex really wasn’t his area and besides he was far too old for her and even though he had dallied with women here and there, he really preferred men plus it’s just Not Good to have sex with your friends, it muddled everything up and when things were muddled, it was hard for him to think and when he couldn’t think, he couldn’t work and he needed to work, The Work was all he had left since he had abandoned his life in London…

‘‘Alright, forget it,’’ she had rolled her eyes and returned her attention to her sleek little laptop. Sherlock could have sworn he heard her mutter under her breath ‘‘Practical pig, just like Kalle Fucking Blomkvist’’ as she started typing away, clad only in her bra and knickers.

Since she had spoken in Swedish not English he wasn’t entirely certain what she said. He had never gotten around learning Swedish fluently, just enough to scrape by.

But he knew enough to compliment the elaborate dragon tattoo on her back, which he had seen in its entirety for the first time as she moped in front of her computer in her under-things.
Fortunately, despite that awkward moment (or perhaps because of it,) they became good friends in Real Life as well as online. They sensed they were kindred spirits: brilliant and unloved. Plus they also appreciated how the other could enjoy simply sitting in silence, thinking their own thoughts, instead of prattling on about nothing. Both agreed small talk was loathsome.

Even now, she got straight to the point, “‘Rose Spender’ just arrived in Lausanne,” she informed him in English with just the tiniest bit of a pout in her voice. She had initially wanted to impersonate Violet Hunter, to travel ahead of John and Dupin, let CCTV cameras film her, use ‘Rose Spender’s’ bank cards and credit cards to create the fake money trail. She had even emailed a photograph of herself dressed as “Miss Smith.” The likeness had been quite good, unsettling, actually.

Lisbeth somehow found a very convincing chestnut wig as well as a pair of coloured contact lenses that eerily matched Violet’s hazel irises. With a deft hand, she had layered on the foundation and blush like Miss Smith, hiding all flaws and blemishes and had plumped out her lips with a pale pink hue. Regrettably Sherlock told her that while she resembled ‘Miss Smith’ greatly, it wouldn’t work for one simple reason. Lisbeth was short. Violet was tall. While not as tall as Sherlock, Violet had been taller than John even when she was barefoot. Lisbeth on the other hand, was most definitely shorter than John. Not even with the highest of heels would Lisbeth match Violet’s height convincingly. She would look like a child playing dress-up with Mummy’s pumps.

Lisbeth had sulked, but rallied when Sherlock told her he had a bigger, more important job for her than sashaying around Europe in a chestnut wig.

While Lisbeth was a marvelous chameleon, the woman Sherlock needed to impersonate Violet Hunter needed to be more than a good actress. She needed to be a professional criminal.

He needed a pretty little thief.

“Has Noelie studied up on American accents?” Sherlock now demanded of Dupin. That had been his only concern. When he had first met the pretty little pickpocket with the big chocolate brown eyes and long, silky brown locks, she spoke English but with a heavy Parisian accent.

“Oui,” Dupin nodded. “She has aspirations to move to Hollywood, remember? Has all these grand plans to be une grande actrice,” he rolled his eyes in paternal disapproval. His adult daughter had come back into his life fairly recently, but her arrival had not been unwelcomed. His only regret was he hadn’t been able to be a part of her life sooner, if only to dissuade her from continuing her little hobby of pick-pocketing gullible tourists.

“I don’t care about her plans. I care if she can do the job properly.”

“She doesn’t need to be perfect, just convincing,” Lisbeth reminded Sherlock, switching to a perfectly bland, perfectly dry middle-American accent.

“She has been taking diction classes as well as watching American television programmes and films. If speaking English is necessary, she will pass as an American.”

“She texted shortly before you arrived,” Lisbeth took the lid off her coffee cup, stared at the dregs, crinkled her nose then pushed the cup aside. “She’s safe in her hotel room, ordering room service, trying to decide where ‘Miss Smith’ or rather, ‘Rose Spender’ will go shopping tomorrow. Nowhere overt,” he held his hand up just as Sherlock opened his mouth to protest, “Nothing that will catch MI-6’s attention early. Just spend enough to create the fake money trail.”

“Who is with her?”
“Hollywood,” Dupin said promptly, only he wasn’t talking about the American city where dreams of stardom were usually obliterated. He was talking about the young black British man who was a member of his Montmartre Milices, the Parisian equivalent of the Homeless Network.

“Perfect,” Sherlock purred, “The idiots will assume he’s John Mitton.”

“Not assume,” Dupin now held up one finger. “Believe. He’s been practicing.”

“How?”

“Hacked into MI-6, pulled his records, forwarded them to Noелиe to give to Hollywood,” Lisbeth said blandly, still in English but reverting back to her Swedish accent. “MI-6 desperately needs a firewall upgrade. Wasn’t even a challenge,” she sniffed.

“Are you going to inform MI-6 of this fact?”

Lisbeth snorted, “No.”

Sherlock’s smirk widened.

“When is Dr. Watson’s inquiry regarding his medical license?” Dupin’s face became creased with worry. Like most people, he had immediately and genuinely liked John right away.

“Tuesday,” Sherlock started to reach up to rub his chest, the old bullet wound, as he had unconsciously done in the past when he worried about Mary. Since John had informed him that it was a tell of his, Sherlock had worked on ridding himself of that habit. Resolutely, he jerked his hand down. “There’s been a change in plans. Instead of a fortnight, I need you and John to leave for Lausanne immediately. Friday… Saturday at the latest.”

Lisbeth crinkled her nose. “Why the rush?”

Sherlock hesitated, not because he didn’t trust Lisbeth or Dupin. But because the reason was painful to talk about, think about… even thinking about the very painful reality of the situation made it hurt to breathe, as if he had been kicked in the solar plexus by a mule. “Her health is compromised,” he said shortly.

“How?”

Sherlock smiled despite himself. Her sparseness with words reminded him of Alexis Macdonald at times. But when he opened his mouth, he found that his throat had closed up. He closed his mouth, felt foolish, cleared his throat and tried again, “ALS.”

Dupin made a moue of sympathy. However Lisbeth’s brow crinkled deeper, not fully understanding. While she had a firm command of languages that would have made Violet, the multi-linguist, drool in envy, Lisbeth still encountered language barriers from time to time. “Sorry?”

“Google it,” Sherlock snapped, in no mood to discuss the horrors of the illness. Before he could continue, his mobile hummed.

Frowning, he pulled it out then his brows flew up as he read the message:

PLZ COME HOME.
SOMEONE’S LOOKING IN
THRU SKYLIGHT – SD
“I have to go,” Sherlock’s thumbs flew as he texted:

Call 999 now  
Where are you? – SH

“What’s wrong?” Dupin demanded as Lisbeth bolted from her seat upon seeing his pale cheeks whiten even more.

“Someone is breaking into my flat. There’s a girl there, she’s fourteen. She’s alone…”

Lisbeth yanked on her leather jacket and pulled her rucksack over her shoulders, “We’re coming with you,” she informed him.

“No,” Sherlock shook his head. “You two can’t be seen at Baker Street.”

“I can disable CCTV from my mobile, no one will see us,” Lisbeth scowled.

“She’s right,” Dupin reached for his coat. “Also, I have a rental car. We’ll get there faster than any cab.”

“Fine,” Sherlock finally huffed, in agony since there hadn’t been a response from Susan yet. “But I’m driving.”

Outside the pub, Dupin pointed out his rental car then tossed the keys to Sherlock. In a move so smooth and elegant, it almost seemed choreographed Sherlock caught the keys with one hand as he tossed his mobile to Dupin with the other. “Text what I tell you,” he informed Dupin as he hit the Unlock button on the key fob. “Lisbeth?”

“CCTV will unexpectedly crash by the time we get to your place,” she kept her eyes glued to her Smartphone, fumbling for the door handle. Dupin deftly opened it for her then slammed the door after her. He barely had gotten into the rental, a tidy little Honda Civic, when Sherlock turned the ignition on and floored it. Lisbeth grunted in annoyance as she slid around the backseat when Sherlock performed an illegal U-turn and made his way back to Westminster.

Sherlock’s mobile whirred. While fumbling with his seat belt, Dupin read Susan’s desperate message aloud:

CANT CALL  
HES INSIDE  
IM HIDING  
PLZ HURRY. SCARED – SD

Sherlock gnawed on his upper lip, desperately thinking as he plowed through a red light. “Text John,” he spat out as he passed a vehicle that was irritatingly driving the speed limit.

Finally getting his seat belt properly buckled, Dupin found John’s number in Sherlock’s contacts. He texted “Where are you?” per Sherlock’s dictate. Minutes later, John’s response came back:

Sunday dinner  
at Greg and Molly’s.  
What’s up? – JW

“Oh thank God,” Sherlock exhaled loudly even though he was a self-proclaimed atheist. However, this was a fantastic stroke of good luck. The Lestrades did not live that terribly far from Baker Street. Plus Lestrade could call in the Met for backup, if necessary.
He barked at Dupin to dial John’s number then put the mobile on speaker. “Is Mary with you?”

At times like this, Sherlock was profoundly glad Mary was an assassin. Her skill set may come in use yet tonight.

“Yes, of course, Mary is with me,” John at first had felt annoyed at Sherlock’s rude intrusion. Not even so much as a hello, the git… Then it dawned on him that Sherlock had actually called him. Sherlock never called people. He preferred to text. “What is it, what’s wrong?”

“Someone is breaking into Baker Street, right now. I’m in Tottenham. Susan is alone, hiding in the flat but is afraid to call in case the perpetrat-”

“Say no more, we’ll go at once,” John said tersely and hung up. “Molly, sorry, we’ve got to go and need to borrow Greg as well,” he rattled off as he bolted up from the sofa to gather their coats and scarves.

“What’s going on?” Molly paled, the teapot lid starting to rattle as she clutched it.

As John hastily explained, Mary was already on her feet, holding her hands out. John tossed her red coat and striped scarf at her the best he could right-handed. Mary helped John tug the sleeve of his good black coat over his bad arm as Greg quickly kissed Molly good-bye. “I’m sorry, lov-”

“Oh, don’t be stupid, go!” Molly gave Greg a slight push, her left hand splayed out on his chest while her other hand clutched the teapot handle. “But why can’t Mrs. Hudson call 999?”

“It’s after seven-thirty on a Sunday,” John groaned as Mary zipped him up.

“Oh yeah, the ‘herbal soothers’ I’m not supposed to know about,” Lestrade rolled his eyes as he fished his mobile out of his back jeans pocket as he strode towards the pretty decorative hooks where his own coat and scarf hung.

“She doesn’t take her herbal soothers until after nine, I thought?” Molly put the pretty floral teapot down in fear she might drop it.

“She’s been taking them earlier after she broke her ribs last winter,” Mary explained to Molly as Lestrade dialed 999.

As the three of them stampeded out the door, Molly called after them, “Good luck! Be careful!” Lestrade slammed the door behind him. Immediately the baby began to wail in the nursery.

Molly closed her eyes. Damn…

Henry still didn’t like to sleep that much. Now it was because he found the world endlessly fascinating and sleep was a waste of time.

Or so it felt like to Molly. “Mummy’s coming, darling,” she sighed as she pushed a lock of auburn hair out of her eyes then toed off her shoes since her company had departed for the night.

Molly found Henry sitting up in his cot, fussing. He had mastered sitting up and rolling over two months ago, two months earlier than most babies. He also had learned the fine art of pouting and sniffling and looking utterly pathetic. Upon seeing Mummy, he lifted his little arms, grizzling and whining.

“What’s all noise about, darling?” Molly crooned, leaning over the cot. Then she wrinkled her nose,
smelling urine. When she scooped him up, the bottom of his striped pyjamas was soaked. “Oh, well, no wonder you’re out of sorts. Good thing Daddy woke you with his door slamming or else you might have woken up with a sore bottom tomorrow. And we need to remind Daddy to pick up the Mamia Ultra Dry nappies and not Huggies, don’t we?” Humming a soothing lullaby under her breath, she carried him to the changing table. “You always wee through the Huggies, don’t you, my little love?” she continued to croon as she unsnapped his soggy onesie.

For his age, Henry was still quite small, dainty even. His enormous head and tiny body always made Molly think of a baby bird. While his wavy hair still remained scant, what was there was most definitely and positively auburn. *My little ginger*, she thought as she gave his little belly a tickle just to make him giggle, to see those expressive eyes of his squeeze tightly shut with glee.

And he had such lovely eyes, almond-shaped and such a dark blue they were often mistaken for deep brown in certain lights...

Sometimes Molly wondered if her own eyes were playing tricks on her because sometimes it seemed like his irises changed color with his moods...

*Echoes of his father…*

Her pediatrician always expressed concern about Henry’s slight build. Molly had to explain over and over that when Henry wasn’t sleeping properly, he was too tired to nurse properly. When she and Greg figured out Henry had hyperacusity and hyperascusis (thanks to Sherlock’s mother), they started running an electric fan in his nursery at naptime and at night. Once there was white noise, Henry could sleep. Once Henry started sleeping on a regular schedule instead of screaming in fear, Henry also started nursing on a regular schedule.

“He’s like a little vampire, he’s sucking me dry!” she had cried out in frustration. The pediatrician had still looked doubtful and clucked over Henry’s low weight. Then had looked dumbfounded when he saw where Henry was at with his monthly milestones. He wasn’t just meeting them, he was exceeding them. He sat up at the four month mark instead of six. Also at four months, he had started babbling “mama, baba” as well as laughing and cooing, which Molly found delightful. She never thought she would ever find something as charming as watching a child grow and progress…

*But he’s learning faster than most babies…* his latest trick was lying on his tummy and trying to scoot forward. He was obviously desperate to learn how to crawl, as if rolling over wasn’t already the most fun in the world. Lestrade had already started baby-proofing drawers and cupboard doors, preparing for the inevitable. “Once he’s mobile, there will be no stopping him,” Lestrade had predicted.

*Echoes of his father, indeed…*

Still, he didn’t look like Sherlock, not really. His hair was red, not black, his eyes a dark blue, not a strange combination of blue-green-gold. He did have the same Cupid’s bow mouth and fair, porcelain complexion as Sherlock, but he had Molly’s nose and ears and eyebrows.

Most importantly, he had a sweeter deposition than Sherlock, except when he was angry. Then he had no problem letting the world he was unhappy.

*Carbon-copy of his father then…*

Now he was clad in a fresh nappy and dry, fuzzy, footed pyjamas, and all was well in Henry’s
world. Of course, he had no desire to sleep. He was wide awake. Time to play.

“Oh, you’re going to be a grouch in the morning when it’s time to get up,” Molly groaned as she cuddled him while sitting down in the lovely white rocking chair Sherlock’s mother, of all people, had delivered to them on Christmas morning. The note attached said that “William” had always fallen asleep while being rocked while either she or Mr. Holmes talked to him. “Shall I tell you a story or shall we just have a little chat? Your dad’s better at getting you back to sleep than I am, though. But your dad is helping your other dad,” Molly explained then sighed. “Oh, this is going to be confusing when you get older.”

She decided to read him a Winnie-the-Pooh story instead of chatting.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Whatever-Winter-Holiday-You-Care-to-Celebrate-this-Time-of-Year! :^)

** "Rose Spender" and "Abrahams" are both mentioned in the ACD canon

Sherlock's unfortunate hacker's handler is inspired by a member of "The Hacker's Republic" in "The Girl who kicked the Hornet's Nest.


Bind

Chapter Summary

Bind:

A strong grip or stranglehold on a position that is difficult for the opponent to break.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twelve: Bind

3 April 2016
221 Baker Street
Sunday night
8:58 PM

In end though, all the panic and consternation was for naught. When Sherlock, Dupin and Lisbeth arrived, they parked behind the block of flats and entered through Mrs. Hudson’s back door. When Dupin questioned the politeness of this, Sherlock sharply explained that on Sundays, Mrs. Hudson enjoyed a nip of brandy and a pot brownie before retiring for the night.

With that terse statement, the three of them bolted through Mrs. Hudson’s flat and out her door, only to find John, Mary and Lestrade lounging on the stairs leading up to 221B. Even with the heavy old door to the flat closed, Gladstone’s frenzied snarling and barking could be clearly heard. A man’s frightened screams could barely be heard over the growls and barks.

“We, ah, figured it might be best to wait for you,” John grinned.

“Although we did shout through the door that we were waiting outside for you,” Mary added helpfully. “Just so no one got any silly ideas about trying to run or go after the girl.”

“Oh, and we also said cops’ll be here in,” Lestrade checked his watch. “Ten minutes.”

“Good old Gladstone,” Sherlock chuckled as he fished his keys out. “Oh, Lestrade, Mary, John,” he flapped his hands behind him. “This is Dupin and Salander. You two probably know them,” he now fluttered his hands at the DI, doctor and nurse. “From John’s blog.”

“Hello,” Lestrade gave the powerful bear of a man and the slip of a girl a once over. “Nice to meet you…?” he eyes fixed on Lisbeth’s piercings.

“Pleasure,” Dupin said warmly but Lisbeth merely glowered at Lestrade.

Sherlock pushed the door open.

The lounge looked like an abattoir. How the intruder managed to escape Gladstone’s powerful jaws was a mystery but he left a mess doing so. Sherlock clasped his hands behind his back, surveying the scene, making his deductions, solving the mystery…
Susan fled down the stairs from John’s room, neglecting to close the door behind her in her panic. Her trainers are by the door. Those are the only shoes she has as her feet are too small to wear the ones Violet left behind. So she was barefoot, which was why she did not run outside, but rather ran and hid so she could text me.

The intruder followed her and was spotted by Gladstone, who had been sleeping on the sofa as usual, obvious by the amount of dog hair on the sofa cushions. He did not chase after Susan because he knows Susan is not a threat. He also did not bark because he is trained not to bark unless he perceives an immediate threat. When the intruder burst through the door, Gladstone did not take kindly to this stranger in his home. He leapt from the sofa, jumping on the intruder’s back and bit down on his shoulder... Sherlock’s quicksilver eyes flicked over to one of his favorite pictures, the cheerful skull, now lying on the floor, the glass of the picture frame shattered. Blood smears now decorated the wall where the skull picture once hung. Near the picture, a black rucksack lay open, some of its contents spilling out, such as a glass cutter and a pick-lock kit. That bag saved his life. If it hadn’t been on his back, Gladstone would have reached his jugular. The intruder slammed into the wall, thinking to dislodge the dog. When that didn’t work, he wriggled out of his rucksack... Sherlock’s eyes followed the smudges of blood on the floor and tufts of tan and black fur floating in the air.

Noticing how the newspapers and scientific journals were disturbed on the coffee table, Sherlock deduced, Gladstone fell but rebounded quickly, leaping onto the coffee table then jumping the man again. This time the intruder was ready for him. He tried to block Gladstone but... Sherlock’s eyes moved back down to the floor, seeing black scuff marks. He collapsed under the dog’s weight. So he rolled over, thinking to crush Gladstone under his weight. But Gladstone let go, squirmed out from underneath him and bit him multiple times as he crawled away from him. Calf. Thigh. Arse. Arm. Shoulder again. Ripping. Shredding.

Good boy.

Sherlock’s eyes flitted up to the man currently treed on top of Violet’s piano by the frothing and snarling Alsatian. Gladstone stood with all four legs splayed out. He had stopped barking when Sherlock entered, but growl after growl rumbled in his throat. His black ears were flat against his head. Not only were his hackles up, but every hair on his powerful body stood on end. His black lips were pulled back, exposing canines. Gladstone was merely biding his time until he received the next command: to stand down or to kill.

Good good boy.


“Yes, yes!” The intruder whimpered. His face had become liquid-paper white from fear and blood loss. “Call him off, please call him off!”

“You’re bleeding all over a very expensive piano,” Sherlock said lightly, softly. “Who sent you?”

“I’m just doing a smash-and-grab. Was just gonna nick your telly! Honest!”

But Sherlock scanned the man from head to toe, observing the injured thief’s clothing, the quality of the black spandex, the thinness of the boot soles. Footwear meant for stealth and silence. He glanced at the very expensive black leather gloves, military-grade, obviously.

“My television set is over seven years old,” Sherlock smoothly informed the bleeding thief. “Don’t
watch much television, so I never saw the need for an upgrade. So I highly doubt you are here to
purloin an out-of-date television set.”

The man had one gloved hand pressed down on his ravaged thigh and the other over his shoulder.
“Please, gov, I’m in a lot of pain.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are,” Sherlock hummed. “They can be painful, dog bites. Right John?”

“Mm, yeah,” John nodded, his face serious, “I was bitten last summer. Hurt like hell.”

“Wonder what it would be like to die by dog bite?” Sherlock mused.

“Mm, slow,” John nodded and hummed again, “Horribly painful, I would guess.”

“Quite,” Sherlock concluded. “Also, you’d be aware as you bled out how you’re being ripped to
shreds. Not to mention that if you happened to survive the bites, you’d probably still die of infection
as dogs’ mouths are positively filthy. This naughty boy was rooting around in the bin in the
bathroom while I was taking a shower this morning. Who knows what bacteria is lurking his saliva
now?”

“Your brother said you were a pain in the arse,” the intruder finally conceded.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Sherlock proclaimed. Then blithely, he commanded Gladstone:
“Stillen.”

Gladstone immediately stopped growling. He plopped down in a sit, his tail wagging, his head
cocked up at Sherlock, as if to say: See what a good boy I am?

“I’d stay put if I were you,” Sherlock said as everyone else started filtering into the lounge, each one
of them uttering exclamations and expletives all at once:

“Bonne mère …”

“Oh, this is not my division!”

“Sherlock… John… oh my God!”

“Jävlar!”

“Mary, if you could be so kind as to check on Miss Dobney?” Sherlock asked her coolly.

“Where is she?”

“Bedroom, wardrobe,” Dupin held up Sherlock’s mobile. He tossed it at Sherlock, who caught it
without looking. He sent a text to Susan to let her know she was safe then tucked his mobile absently
in his Belstaff pocket. Then he clasped his hands behind his back while continuing to study
Mycroft’s minion, his head cocked to the side like an inquisitive beagle.

As Mary departed, Lisbeth knelt down to examine the contents of the black rucksack. “Lots of
“Ooh, a laptop, fancy,” she nodded approvingly as she pulled out a thin, sleek Macbook, obviously
top of the line. “My guess is they were going to clone all your devices so they could control them
remotely…”

“So my darrrrrrrrrrrrlling brother could turn on the cameras on my mobile and laptop when I was
unaware,” Sherlock drawled.
“Your telly too, if you’ve had a SmartTV,” Lisbeth ran her hands over the laptop longingly.

“Keep it,” Sherlock didn’t even have to look to see how Lisbeth craved the computer.

“Wait, no, she can’t!” the inept MI-6 agent howled.

“She can, she will,” Sherlock snarled. “Consider it compensation for the damage you caused.”

“I caused? Your damn dog did this!”

“Oh?” Sherlock arched an eyebrow. “So it was my dog who ogled a fourteen year old girl then cut through the glass of my skylight window?”

“I didn’t ogle her! I didn’t ogle her!”

“Good luck convincing the Met of that,” Lestrade sneered, pulling handcuffs out of his coat pocket as sirens wailed in the distance.

“I wasn’t after the fucking girl!” the MI-6 agent positively howled now. “I was sent here to bug the flat, that’s it, that’s all!”

“Why does my brother insist on keeping tabs on me?”

“Dunno, maybe because you’re clinically insane?” the MI-6 agent spat but immediately recoiled when Sherlock placed his hand on top of Gladstone’s head. “He’s worried about you. Afraid that Jim Moriarty’s grandfather is after you, seeking revenge. You won’t talk to him. So he’s checking up on you. That’s all."

“All that trouble for fraternal concern,” Sherlock cooed. “John, what do you think?”

“I think that’s complete bollocks.”

“I concur,” Sherlock nodded then gave the agent an evil smile. “All that fuss and all you accomplished was terrifying a young girl.”

“I thought she’d be asleep!”

“But you forgot about the dog,” Sherlock said silkily.

“And how stupid do you have to be to forget this beast,” Lestrade said, half-praising, half-worriedly as he inched around the Alsatian. Gladstone, meanwhile, sat perfectly still. Good as gold, as if he didn’t have blood on his muzzle.

John and Dupin watched the entire scene with great amusement. “Never boring with Monsieur Holmes, n’est-ce pas?”

John chuckled affectionately, “Never boring.”

“Hey, you,” the MI-6 agent addressed John as he cringed away from Lestrade’s handcuffs. “You’re the doctor, right? Can’t you fix me up? Please? I’m bleeding like a stuck pig!”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” John fluttered his golden lashes. “But my medical license has been suspended. It is currently illegal for me to practice medicine.” He smiled angelically, knowing full well the man was in no danger of dying. He just didn’t feel like patching up Mycroft’s minion.

While the rest of the Baker Street Irregulars had their fun at the expense of Mycroft’s incompetent
minion, Mary had made her way to the back bedroom. She tried to turn the doorknob but found it was locked. She rapped on the door and called Susan’s name, but there was no answer. Sighing, she pulled a kirby pin from her curly platinum hair. A heavy curl tumbled down and she tucked it behind her ear. She knelt down and picked the lock, no difficult feat as the lock was old-fashioned. She pushed the door open and crept into the room.

“Susan? My name is Mary Watson. I’m Dr. Watson’s wife,” Her snowy-white trainers squeaked on the polished wood floor. “You’re safe now. Sherlock’s home, the bad man is going to gaol, all is well. There is nothing to be afraid of now.”

The wardrobe door squeaked open just a bit and a wobbly voice asked, “You’re the lady Sherlock said I’m going to stay with for a bit?”

“Yes that’s right,” Mary sat on the edge of Sherlock’s bed. Against her will, she could feel her heart already melting for the girl; just as it had for poor Josie Tey, the aspiring actress who had almost been abducted by that witch Mrs. Toller. But Josie had just enough the wits at the time to try and leap out of the car at a red light. Mary had seen her struggle and ran to her aid.

She had pitied Josie, wanted to take her home, give her tea and a safe place to rest. She felt the same desire now for Susan just upon hearing her trembling voice…

You’re weak, Anya, weak! Weakness killed your parents and it will kill you. Compassion has no place in our world. It is Us against Them, there are no casualties, no victims. Kill or be killed…

Mary shook the awful memories of her KGB training out of her head. I am not that person anymore, I am not that frightened girl, that child brainwashed into thinking murder is a solution. I am Mary Watson and that is good enough…

Then wryly she thought: Damn you, Sherlock. You knew I’d fall in love with the girl before I even saw her, didn’t you?

In the same trembling voice, Susan called out, “Could you, err, come help me? My legs went numb and I feel weird, all shaky and…” her voice trailed off.

Mary got up and crossed over to the wardrobe. She slowly opened the wardrobe and found a pair of pink toenails peeking out from behind a row of neatly pressed trousers hung on the clothes rack with almost military precision.

Mary parted the trousers like curtains. She smiled down at the wan-faced teenager who held her knees to her chest. “I think you’ve had a bit of a shock, my dear,” Mary reached down to cup the girl’s face, frowning to feel how clammy it was. “Let’s get you out of here,” she said practically, helping the girl out of the wardrobe. But the girl wobbled on her feet so Mary guided her to the bed. Spying Sherlock’s third-best dressing gown, she scooped it up and draped it over Susan. “The lounge is a bit of a wreck at the moment,” she rubbed the girl’s back, partially to warm her up and partially to calm her down. “How would you like to stay with John and me tonight? We can come for your things tomorrow and have you move in properly then, yeah?”

“I don’t have anything,” Susan whispered as her eyes welled up, partially from fear, partially from humiliation. She twisted the hem of the hoodie. “These all belonged to the lady who used to live here with Sherlock before she…err… went away or died or something, dunno, he wouldn’t tell me what happened to her.” She sniffed, still trying not to burst into tears, “Just said she wouldn’t mind.”

Only then did Mary recognize the track suit the girl wore, one of Violet’s favorites for when she went running. “And he’s absolutely right. She wouldn’t mind one bit if you continued to borrow her
clothes,” Mary said firmly as she smoothed the girl’s hair from her sweaty brow. “I think a cuppa and sleep is the best thing for you now, especially since you’ve been ill, John told me?”

All the while as she cuddled and crooned the abandoned fourteen-year-old girl, Mary thought, 

*Damn, damn, damn, damn… I don’t want to get attached. I don’t want to fall in love only to have my heart broken…* 

Again.

**

4 April 2016
Greg and Molly Lestrade’s residence
Monday morning
12:01 AM

It had taken longer than anyone had anticipated, sorting out the burglar at Baker Street. Susan had to give a statement, which terrified her even more. Then concern was raised about Gladstone, that if he was indeed a vicious dog, perhaps LACC needed to be called…

Sherlock had immediately become belligerent, shouting at the copper who had suggested that. Sherlock astringently informed him that Gladstone was a former police dog that had been perfectly trained and tonight he did exactly what he had been trained to do. “He wouldn’t have killed anyone unless I gave him the exact command to do so, you imbecile. Shame you’re not as well-trained or as intelligent as a *dog.*” John had also strenuously protested against the dog being taken away, explaining in his crisp, military voice that Gladstone was well-behaved and obeyed Sherlock absolutely.

Sensing the agitation amongst the humans, Gladstone pressed himself against Sherlock’s thigh and began to whine piteously.

As for Sherlock’s “friends”, the older man and the young woman had slipped out before the police came inside. Presumably they hid out in Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen; snacking on her scones while avoiding the police. Lestrade had sinking feeling that Sherlock was up to something since he didn’t want his two new “friends” involved with the break-in.

Worse of all, the bungling burglar clammed up. Wouldn’t say a damn word, wouldn’t even ask for a lawyer. Since Sherlock had made him confess he was with MI-6, Lestrade had nightmares about the paperwork about to be dumped onto his desk.

Annoyed, tired and longing to get home to his wife and baby, Lestrade pulled rank. He assured Sherlock (and John) that Gladstone would not be removed from Baker Street. When the concerned cop opened his mouth to protest, Lestrade told him to shut the bloody hell up. He ordered the senior officer on duty to place the idiot burglar under arrest then take him to the nearest hospital to get stitched up, but make damn sure he’s handcuffed to the bed afterwards. Then he asked Mary if she could be so kind to bring Susan to New Scotland Yard tomorrow to get her statement. “Let the girl have a cuppa and a sleep before continuing this ordeal, yeah?”

“Sensible idea,” she agreed. “She’s so rattled you wouldn’t get much from her now.”

Once the cops and would-be robber departed, Sherlock mumbled something to Lestrade that sounded like a Thank You for helping him keep Gladstone. Lestrade rubbed the back of his neck and mumbled, “Yeah, well least I could do. Was Violet’s dog after all so…” he had trailed off then cleared his throat. “I’m knackered, shall we?” He had jerked his head towards the door.
After Mary promised to come back tomorrow to help Sherlock mop up the blood, John and Mary took Lestrade home. Susan tried not to nod off in the back seat, still wrapped up in Sherlock’s dressing gown. But she fell asleep anyway, right on Lestrade’s shoulder.

Poor kid, Lestrade put a paternal arm around her shoulders so she wouldn’t flop over like a rag doll. Then he smiled affectionately at the back of the Watsons’ heads, John’s silvery-sandy one and Mary’s bright platinum one. The girl was in good hands.

During the drive back to his flat, Lestrade had trouble staying awake as well. He toyed with the idea of calling in ill. He so rarely took sick leave. As he turned the key in the lock, he also contemplated kipping out on the sofa, so not to disturb Molly. Sometimes he felt like his wife was spread out much too thin, between her job as a pathologist, her unofficial job as being Sherlock’s mortuary consultant and being a mother to a busy, precocious six-month-old who still hated sleep but had just figured out how to roll over a few weeks ago. He wanted to make sure his wife got as much sleep as possible.

My wife…

Lestrade never thought he’d enjoy saying those words again. He never thought he’d genuinely fall in love again, not after what his money-grubbing slag of an ex had put him through. And he certainly never thought he’d catch the eye of bright, pretty Molly Hooper.

He hadn’t really realized he was attracted to her until the night of that spectacularly awful Christmas party at Baker Street, when she took off her coat, revealing her little black dress. After Sherlock had completely humiliated her, cruelly and mockingly deducing her Christmas present to him, Lestrade wanted to do more than just punch him in the face. He wanted to body-slam him to the ground… a couple of times… just until he was unconscious.

That’s when he realized his attraction to Molly wasn’t superficial, wasn’t a fleeting thing because she wore a skin-tight frock.

He liked Molly, not the dress.

But he had kept his feelings to himself until her engagement with Tom the Twat (as everyone had called him behind his and Molly’s back) had ended. Plus he had been trying to reconcile with his wife, but since the dirty bitch continued sleeping around on him, Lestrade really felt no guilt when he moved out, started seeing Molly, finalized his divorce and married the pert and clever auburn-haired pathologist.

There was just one hiccup with their happily-ever-after… a hiccup who was six-months-old now.

A hiccup who wasn’t biologically his...

Lestrade let himself in and was surprised to see Molly sitting on the sofa, eating the strawberry shortcake she had meant to serve with tea after dinner tonight. She had been watching some black-and-white film but turned her head to smile at him. “Hi sweetheart, everything OK?”

Lestrade couldn’t help but smile back. She’d changed from the nice polka dot dress she had been wearing when the Watsons came for dinner into a pair of comfy scrubs she had nicked from Bart’s that she wore as pyjamas. Her hair was also pulled into a messy knot on top of her head. What little cosmetics she wore she had scrubbed off. There was a little spot of Chantilly cream on her lip and a glob of strawberry sauce on the front of her scrub top.

Lestrade thought she was the most beautiful thing in the world.

“Bloody pissing match between the Holmes brothers,” Lestrade toed off his shoes then shrugged out
of his coat. When Molly furrowed her slender brows in confusion, he explained, “Sherlock and Mycroft aren’t speaking again. So Mycroft, instead of being an adult and picking up a phone, sent a rookie agent to bug Sherlock’s flat. Scared the piss out of that street kid that’s been staying with him, poor mite,” Lestrade plopped onto the sofa with a satisfied grunt and put his arm loosely around Molly’s shoulders. “John and Mary took her home tonight. The lounge is a bloodbath, after Gladstone got through with that sorry excuse of an intruder.”

Molly stared at him blankly. “You know,” she said slowly, “Five years ago, if you would have told me that story, I would have thought you were bonkers.”

“I would have thought I was mental myself,” he kissed her temple then asked, “Give me a bite.”

Molly scooped up a generous spoonful and navigated it towards Lestrade’s mouth. “Alright?”

“ Heavenly,” he thumbed the bit of cream off of her lip then bent down for a proper kiss. “Does it make me a bad friend to be glad pudding was interrupted so there’s more cake for me?”

“Yes… but I feel the same way,” Molly giggled as she leaned her head against Lestrade’s shoulder. Then she sobered, “You know, I adore my brothers, even when they are being completely overbearing. You and your brother are practically best friends. Why can’t Sherlock and Mycroft get on?”

“Too much baggage, Moll,” he sighed. “Remember, I knew them both before you started at Bart’s, back when Sherlock was still using. Mycroft was a condescending, unsupportive prick, but at the same time, Sherlock is an unrepentant addict when using and an arrogant sod when he’s not. They’ve always had a strained relationship as long as I’ve known them.”

“Speaking of strained, was it just me or did things feel… off between John and Mary tonight?”

Lestrade exhaled, “Not just you. Glad you said it, ‘cause I was definitely thinking it.” He stuck his finger into Molly’s bowl and helped himself to more Chantilly cream and strawberry sauce, even though she playfully slapped his hand with her spoon. “It felt like they were faking it, the Happy Couple Bit, didn’t it?”

“I like Mary, I really do. I even encouraged John to go out with her after he had met her. He was so gone on her, it was endearing, adorable really. More importantly, she finally pulled John out of his funk after he thought Sherlock was dead,” her cheeks reddened, as they always did when she talked about the Fall. Whenever she talked about it, she thought about her role in it. “But when John told me he was going to propose and asked for my opinion on rings… I dunno, I just thought he was going too fast.”

“We moved fast,” Lestrade pointed out.

“Yes and no. We moved fast on the romance bit and the moving-in bit and the marrying bit. But we had been friends for a long time before that and work colleagues before that. We knew each other, we liked each other and we respected each other. John and Mary barely knew each other before he popped the question. They had dated less than four months before Mary asked him to move in with her and six months when John asked her to marry him.” She studied her strawberry shortcake ruefully, having made the entire thing from scratch, using her Granny’s recipe. It hadn’t tasted the same as Granny Hooper’s, but it still tasted pretty good. “It just makes me sad, that’s all. They’re both such nice people and have been good friends, to us as well as Sherlock. I hate seeing them unhappy, you know?”

“They’ve had a rough go of it,” Lestrade reminded her. “We still don’t know what happened during
those six months when they had separated. All John would tell me was it was bad and Sherlock told me to mind my own business. Plus the baby they lost last winter…”

“I remember,” now Molly paled. She had been there the day Jim Moriarty had plunged his knife into Mary’s pregnant belly. She had been desperately trying to keep Mary from bleeding out while watching helplessly as Jim trained a gun on her mother while taking her son.

If Violet hadn’t been with us, I don’t know what might have happened… she quailed to herself, thinking about all the horrible places her son could have ended up, instead of sleeping peacefully in his cot in the next room.

She wondered where Violet was. She didn’t believe the official story about a plane crash.

After all, she had helped Sherlock fake his death.

Lestrade cuddled her closer to him, knowing what she was thinking about. “And then there’s the crap about MI-6 separating John and Mary from their daughter instead of bringing her back to them after they rescued her from that bastard Moriarty.” He never minced words when it came to Jim Moriarty. “No, actually, I understand perfectly why Sherlock has a strained relationship with Mycroft. He’s stone-cold, heartless, an utter machine. I knew that much before I knew he was high-up in MI-6. When I first met Mr. Holmes,” he said with a mocking sneer, “I thought he was some lowly bureaucrat who had just enough pull to keep his junkie brother out of gaol after he had gotten arrested again and again on drug busts.” Lestrade leaned his head against the sofa. “No wonder Sherlock never wanted Mycroft to know abo-”

“Stop! Shut up!” Molly stood up, toppling over her bowl, stopping Lestrade from finishing his thought. Cake and cream and strawberry sauce splashed everywhere.

“Molly?”

“If Mycroft’s bugging Sherlock’s flat, what makes you think he hasn’t bugged ours?” she hissed as angry tears stood out in her eyes. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hands then gave a nervous glance down the hall, towards the nursery.

Oh… Lestrade felt like a fool.

He suddenly remembered Violet’s angry warning to him that terrible, terrible December night, after Mary had lost the baby and Moriarty had danced away from them like the devil he was. But they had managed to apprehend Julia Stoner, the viperses twin sister of the Lady Trelawney-Hope (née Honorable Helen Hilda Stoner.) Julia had thrown her lot in with Jim Moriarty and created an international incident over some silly Letter. After Sherlock, Lestrade and Violet had captured Julia, MI-6 had stepped in and whisked her away to one their off-the-grid facilities. Sherlock, Violet and Lestrade had also been “invited” to “join” MI-6 at this location.

Prior to getting into the SUV that took them to the MI-6 facility, Violet had pulled him aside and hissed into his ear, “Listen, Sherlock’s brother doesn’t know about Henry and trust me, you don’t want him to find out.”

His belly twisted hard, as if someone had reached down his gullet and plaited his intestines together.

It hadn’t been easy for Lestrade to reconcile himself to the fact that while he and Molly had been on the outs, not only had she had a fling, but she had had one with him. She had been pissed, he had been high. There had been no condom but she had been on The Pill. She at first thought the resulting pregnancy was her irresponsibility, as she had skipped a pill or two. Turns out, thousands of tainted
birth control pills had flooded the English market, courtesy of Jim Moriarty’s meddling. The birth control pills were as effective against pregnancy as breath mints. Molly’s Henry was part of the baby boom that followed.

Lestrade knew it was hypocritical to be angry at Molly for seeking comfort from someone else after they had briefly broken up. He had technically still been married to his miserable first wife at the time. Molly was not a woman who committed adultery. She had not taken kindly to that news when he finally confessed he was still legally married to his heinous first wife. Not at all.

When he learned the truth, he wasn’t angry. But he had been deeply hurt… and jealous as hell.

*Why him, why couldn’t it have been anyone else but him?*

He stayed furious at Sherlock for ages afterwards. It had taken a crisis, no… it had taken Jim Moriarty for Lestrade to patch things up with Sherlock.

Sherlock had graciously and willfully stepped aside after Molly told him she didn’t want him actively involved in the baby’s life. As far as anyone was concerned, Greg Lestrade was Henry’s father. More importantly, as far as he was concerned, the minute the nurse put the squirming, skinny, mewling newborn in his hands, he was Henry’s father. He had never felt such joy or such terror in his entire life while simultaneously experiencing a surge of fierce protectiveness he had never felt about anyone before.

Lestrade had assumed Sherlock had felt mostly relieved when Molly told him how things were going to go. However, during Sherlock’s fortieth birthday party, Sherlock held his son for the first time. Watching the detective falling in love with the child, both Greg and Molly had agreed it wasn’t right, cutting Sherlock out of Henry’s life, especially since Jim Moriarty was dead. Properly dead and buried and God rot his soul.

But maybe the devil hadn’t been Jim Moriarty. Maybe it was Henry’s biological uncle.

So he nodded and mouthed “OK,” to Molly then cheerfully boomed, “Oh, why would Mycroft waste time bugging us, Molly? We’re dull. Besides Mycroft would have never wanted to go to Sherlock’s birthday party had he known about it, right?”

He knew it was a pathetic cover, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances. Tomorrow, he’d borrow a rookie from Surveillance and have him scour the flat, making sure there really weren’t any bugs or hidden cameras in their flat.

There had been, of course, but Mycroft and MI-6 was faster than Lestrade and the Met. The minute the MI-6 agents heard Molly squawk, “*Stop! Shut up!*” they knew they had been made. Hours later, after a sleepy Lestrade left for New Scotland Yard and a bleary-eyed Molly left to drop off Henry at Nana Lestrade’s before heading to St. Bart’s, agents stealthily slipped into their flat. Quickly, they removed all listening devices and video camera then wiped down all surfaces, leaving no fingerprints. They were in and out before anyone was the wiser. Greg and Molly would be blissfully unaware someone had been in their home that morning.

The agents had emailed the recording to Mycroft immediately. They stood in front of his desk after they had “cleaned” the Lestrades’ flat, at parade rest, giving their findings in person.

“Never mind, it couldn’t be helped,” Mycroft had sighed, shaking his head. “Dr. Hoop- ah, I mean, Dr. Lestrade is far craftier than she was given credit for,” he reached for his mobile, appearing to lose interest in the agents. “After all, she was instrumental in the success of The Fall. Without her, my brother wouldn’t have had freedom of movement for two years, crippling Moriarty’s cult. Continue
visual surveillance, maintain a reasonable distance. Dr. Lestrade is still a target as she is still considered a close confidant of my brother. When the Lestrades lower their guard, we’ll reinstall the cameras and bugs,” He nodded at the agents, a dismissal.

Mycroft stood up, neatly pushed his expensive leather chair against his desk and sauntered to the massive windows. Hands behind his back, he studied London below, all the cars and lorries and buses and bicycles zipping around the precarious streets. Little people, moving like tiny ants to and fro, leading their little lives. Oblivious to the dangers that Mycroft and his agents thwarted on a daily basis, bless them.

He frowned, mulling over the last recording of the Lestrades’ conversation.

No wonder Sherlock never wanted Mycroft to know abo-

“What don’t you want me to know, Little Brother?” he murmured. “And I wonder who that was, breaking into your flat. None of my agents would be that incompetent. Hmm…”

After a moment or two of contemplation, he meandered back to his desk and buzzed his secretary, asking to have a pot of tea to be sent up.

A long think like this required copious amounts of tea.

Chapter End Notes

Happy post-Christmas!

And ahhhhhhhhhhh 6 more days until the season premiere! *twirls like a crazy lady*
Rook Lift

Chapter Summary

Chapter Thirteen: Rook Lift

A maneuver that places a rook in front of its own pawns, often on the third or fourth rank.

Chapter Notes

OK... so... I know I have thoughts and feelings about the Series Four premiere! :^O

I'm going to try really hard not to post spoilers so not to ruin it for anyone who hasn't seen it yet.

But I do have to say that while I always planned on diverging from Series Four... I didn't think it would be THAT big of a divergence. I thought the Violet-verse break from canon Series Four would be a tiny crack, not a giant chasm!

ANYWAY...

This chapter is somewhat light-hearted... I hope it is anyway.

Happy New Year!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirteen: Rook Lift

5 April 2016
The Offices of the General Medical Council
Manchester, England
Tuesday afternoon
4:50 PM

John had been so nervous about his hearing he’d opted to take the train the previous night to Manchester. Selfishly, he’d also had wanted to be alone. He wanted quiet, he needed quiet to prepare for the battle ahead of him. Now that he was unexpectedly a foster father to a fourteen-year-old girl, there was no way in hell there would be any quiet in his house now.

It wasn’t as if he wasn’t glad to give Susan a safe place to live; she seemed to be pleasant enough. But once she got over her fright about the break-in at Baker Street, she chattered incessantly. Everything was aces or cool or awesomesauce or one ridiculously long run-on sentence such as OmigawdyouhaveadogSherlockidn'tsayyouhadadogcanIpethim?

Honestly, the girl never shut up.
Predictably, Mary’s maternal instincts had kicked in and soon the two of them became thick as thieves. John made his apologies, already calling them “my girls” but told them he wanted to leave for Manchester that night so he wasn’t late for his hearing the next day. With his luck the trains would break down or something…

… but mostly, he wanted to be away from Mary. She still wanted to talk about their marriage.

He acutely missed Sherlock’s long stretches of silence. He hadn’t been kidding when he said he could go for days without speaking. Sometimes… it had been nice. Sitting in the lounge in companionable stillness, John reading the newspapers, Sherlock thinking.

The only people who had accompanied him now were his solicitor and his old therapist, Ella. John hadn’t much faith in either one, honestly. His solicitor was more of a paper-pusher than a litigator. There would be no thundering oratory from him, proclaiming John’s fitness to practice medicine. Ella would do as a good character witness, until the chairperson started grilling her about his PTSD.

He hadn’t wanted Sherlock along either. He had been too afraid Sherlock would find a way to insult the people determining whether or not John could legally practice medicine in the UK. Sherlock could insult someone just by looking at them.

Oddly, he found himself wishing for Harry. As obstinate as she was, not to mention a bloody, fall-down drunk, she also had been one of the best damn lawyers John had known. If Sherlock would outlive God to have the last word, then Harry should have outlived Sherlock.

He had imagined Sherlock and Harry meeting. Then he imagined the debates between them and shuddered. Then he decided that Sherlock and Harry should never meet.

Sadly, Harry and Sherlock would never meet now, at least not in this world.

Everyone had offered to come to the hearing, even Mrs. Hudson, who was supposed to be taking things easy after breaking a rib last winter.

Everyone offered save Sherlock. But he had sent a text before John walked in the building:

Everything will be alright – SH.

John had smiled and looked around, wondering if his best friend had left the security of London to lurk in the shadows of Manchester. But he only had time to text back:

I know – JW

The hearing started on the dot at ten o’clock. Not only did it drag on slowly, but it was also dreadfully informal, which John found insulting. *This is my life they are deciding on and they can’t even do me the decency of holding it in a nicer room? Or even act like this is a serious case? We’re sitting around as if it’s Christmas dinner for God’s sake.*

There had been a fifteen-minute break in the morning with refreshments served. Everyone was on their own for lunch, but John was too jittery to eat very much. He managed a half a sandwich and some crisps. He ignored every single text that flooded into the phone, asking how it was going. He didn’t even answer Sherlock’s, even though he had been shocked that Sherlock made the effort to be supportive, twice in one day even.

When John didn’t immediately answer, another text appeared:

No response. Of course.
You’re nervous.
And it’s difficult for you to
text with your right hand.
Come to Baker Street
tomorrow if convenient.
We’ll either celebrate or
commiserate then – SH

John had grinned then binned the remaining sandwich-half and crisps. He gathered his wits and
courage and headed back towards the conference room where the hearing was being held.

In the afternoon, the panel grilled John mercilessly. John answered their questions, keeping his voice
low and respectful, as if speaking to a superior officer. However, this did not mean he let them bully
him. He corrected their thinking when necessary, but only with the calm and patience borne from
living with the World’s Biggest Drama Queen for two years.

Another fifteen-minute break, more coffee, tea and biscuits served. Then the panel members retired
to a separate room to make a decision.

During the deliberation process, John had fidgeted dreadfully in his chair. Ella finally suggested he
play a game on his mobile to distract him. Just when John opened the Games app on his mobile, the
panel members filtered in, led by the chairperson, Dr. Horsom, a bald, walrus-like man, complete
with bushy moustaches that resembled tusks.

John stuffed his mobile into his suit jacket pocket. Mary had gotten his best suit dry-cleaned for the
occasion. She also had buffed his shoes to a military shine and bought him a new tie. He had combed
his hair the best he could with his right hand. He hoped he looked like a sober, competent physician,
ot one addled by drug and alcohol abuse or PTSD.

He sat ramrod still in his chair, as if in front of the highest ranked generals, waiting his fate. He
schooled his face to be expressionless, difficult for him to do. Sherlock and Mary often said reading
his face was like reading a book. He also focused on not licking his lips out of nerves. His heart
thudded in his chest as he tried not to think of the hours he had spent, studying, dissecting,
memorizing, reviewing, practicing, hoping, praying… working his bloody arse off just so he could
add two little initials before his Christian name.

He earned that Dr, dammit.

He thought about all the lives he had saved, including Sherlock’s… against his will, he remembered
Sherlock bleeding out on the floor of Magnussen’s office, his already pale face turning greyish-blue
as the bright red blood flowed out of him…

The chairman started speaking. John snapped to attention.

“We have carefully reviewed the information presented to us today,” Dr. Horsom put on out-of-
fashion wire-rimmed glasses and dove right in with no preamble. Worse yet, he hadn’t addressed
John at all. No Dr. Watson or Mr. Watson, which would have indicated which way the wind blew.
“We confess to having grave concerns regarding your fitness to practice medicine, not only because
of your lapse of judgment on the night of December 18, 2015 but also because of your hobby
concerning the antics of one Mr. Sherlock Holmes, a self-described Consulting Detective who
regularly risks his life as well the lives of others, including yourself, as evident during the day of
January 13, 2016 when you were abducted and had been injured to the point where you required
surgery and still are recovering physically.”
Fury flared in John’s chest… *It’s not a hobby…* but he held his tongue. Barely.

*You don’t know what he saved the lot of you from. Arseholes…*

“However, based on the glowing recommendations of your peers, former patients, colleagues from the medical field and the military as well as the affirmation from your therapist Dr. Thompson,” Dr. Horsom nodded at Ella. “Not to mention a,” Dr. Horsom sucked in an irritated breath then slowly exhaled, “Ten-page, front and back, handwritten letter from said mentioned Mr. Holmes who extolled your many virtues…” Dr. Horsom looked miserable, apparently having been the one who had to read the very long letter.

**Sherlock, you wonderful, amazing, fantastic lunatic,** John fought a smile as a warm glow replaced the hot fury.

“And stated quite succinctly how very stupid we would all be not to reinstate you…”

**Sherlock, you fucking idiot,** John inwardly groaned as despair replaced the warm glow.

“And we quite agree.”

“What?” John blurted.

Dr. Horsom smiled, for the first time all day. His long, white drooping mustaches actually moved when he smiled. He ignored John’s surprised outburst. “This panel has decided to reinstate your medical license without delay, provided you continue with your excellent progress on your treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder. Hopefully this will draw inspiration to other walking wounded of the medical profession as you confronted your trauma face-on whereas lesser men would have crumpled to their knees. Not only are you an exceptionally skilled physician, but a moral one as well. More importantly,” Dr. Horsom took off his silly glasses. “You are human. You had suffered the worst personal setback imaginable. No need to believe the events of December 18th are an indication that there will be a repeat occurrence. So it is my pleasure to say to you congratulations…” he paused, purposely drawing the moment out. “Dr. Watson.”

John leaned back in his chair, stunned. His solicitor clapped him on the back as Ella murmured, “Well done, John.”

There was the round of back-patting and handshaking to be endured. John couldn’t stop himself from smiling now even if he tried. His solicitor asked him if he wanted to have a celebratory dinner, his treat. Ella offered to drive him back to London. John declined them both. “Thanks, I mean that, really. For… everything, I really mean that. But perhaps dinner another time?” he begged off. “I really want to get home and I already bought a return ticket.”

“How about telling the wife the good news?”

John blinked. “Yes, of course,” he said hollowly.

For some ridiculous moment, he had honestly thought he was going to Baker Street.

The joy fizzling out of his victory, John plodded out of the office buildings. He was in the process of texting Mary the good news when a silky voice whispered, “Congratulations, doctor.”

John startled and whipped around. “Oh, of course,” he groaned when he saw Mycroft, in a smart pinstriped three-piece suit, umbrella neatly hooked over his arm, leaning against the building. “Was this you? Did you pull strings so I would win?”
Mycroft actually looked slightly wounded. “Of course not,” he sniffed. “You won this all on your own merit and hard work. I did, however, submit a letter of recommendation. While it was not as personal,” he smirked. “As a ten-page handwritten letter, but I also praised your skills and high moral fiber. I also stated I owe you a personal debt for without you, my brother would have died of a perilous gunshot wound.” He pushed himself off the wall and strolled towards John. “If my brother had been in the hands of a lesser physician, he surely would have perished.” He dropped his voice to a stage whisper. “But never fear, I did not disclose who put that bullet into my beloved brother.”


“Where is Violet Hunter, Dr. Watson?”

John blinked, stalling. “I believe… you were going to keep her safe until she reached America but she was incinerated instead when her jet exploded?”

Mycroft gave John one of his patented tight little smiles. “And who told you that little fairytale? The same man who let you believe for two years that he was dead?”

“Yeah, the same bloke you had me lie to about Irene Adler being in Witness Protection when in reality she got her head chopped off,” John felt his temper rising, as it always did around Mycroft. “The only thing I know for sure is that he’s distraught, but of course he won’t actually tell me. He doesn’t tell me anything, you know that,” John felt the lies fly out of him with ease for once. “He’s writing sad music. He’s not eating, he’s not sleeping.”

For once, Mycroft looked confused, “He… did all of that already.”

“Well, he’s sadly writing sad music and sadly not eating and sleeping instead of his normal writing sad music and not eating and sleeping.”

“How else would one write sad music? While dancing a merry jig?” Mycroft narrowed his black, lizard eyes at John. “You’re deliberately obfuscating rather than providing me clarification.”

“What do you need clarifying?” John’s right hand automatically curled into a fist while his left fingers instinctively started curling as well but stopped when a small jolt of pain radiated from his fingers up his arm. He still had a lot of nerve damage to contend with. He would have to figure out how to do physiotherapy while traveling, once the stupid cast came off. “What do you need clarification about? She was his friend, he trusted you to keep her safe and you failed him.” John paused then coldly added, “Again.”

“What does Sherlock know that he doesn’t want me to know, John?” Mycroft said coolly.

The first thing to pop into John’s head was, Henry, and he licked his lips out of nerves. Mycroft zeroed in on John’s tell and smiled.

John gave himself a mental shake. He doesn’t know about little Raffles, John thought, mentally calling him the unfortunate nickname that Molly’s mother had bestowed upon him. He wants to find Violet, of course. He thinks I’m the weak link, naturally. Since Sherlock didn’t tell me about the Fall and that everyone tells me what a rotten liar I am…

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” John made his voice as chilly as Mycroft’s. “No, actually, what I should be asking you is: where is my daughter?”

“I have told you and told you that the matter of your daughter is out of my han-”
“You took Maisie from me, you took two years of his life away from Sherlock and you have the gall to ask me where Violet is?” John laughed harshly. He wanted to loosen his tie, but he had already shown Mycroft he had gotten underneath his skin by licking his lips. “Even if I knew where she was, I wouldn’t help you.”

“She’s still considered a criminal.”

“That’s exactly why I wouldn’t help you,” John snapped. “You know she’s not a criminal. You were supposed to clear her name so she could go home and resume her life in America. But thanks, by the way.”

“For what?”

John’s midnight-blue eyes danced. “For confirming that Violet is alive. You said she’s a criminal, you used the present tense.” He turned away from Mycroft but called over his shoulder, “I’ve picked up a thing for two, working with Sherlock.”

As John walked away, Mycroft quietly muttered, “Yes, you have, John Watson, yes you have.”

He reached into the pocket of his expensive and beautifully tailored suit and drew out his mobile. He hit the speed-dial button for Anthea. When she answered, he said smoothly, “Increase the surveillance level to Dr. Watson to Level Five. Eyes on him at all times. Pull mobile usage records and Internet searches and for God’s sake, try to plant a bug or web-camera in their house somehow. I know Mary is former CIA,” he hissed into the mobile after Anthea protested. “If you can’t get one in the house, try Mrs. Watson’s car. It’s a hideous Ford Fiesta, you can’t miss it. Also, if someone could accidentally steal John’s laptop, that would be magnificent. My brother is up to his usual mischief and he’s recruited the good doctor to aid him.”

Mycroft crossed his arms and kept his eyes on John’s retreating figure growing smaller and smaller. Only then did he close his eyes and recall John’s face when he asked him what Sherlock was keeping from him. Remembered every micro-expression, every unconscious action, the slightest movement of his fingertips, the briefest catch of his breath.

*Violet Hunter was not the first thing to come to my mind when I asked him what Sherlock was keeping from me, Mycroft realized.*

“What are you up to, Brother Mine?” Mycroft seethed, watching John walk away until the short, sturdy man had disappeared from his sight.

**

6 April 2016
Bill Wiggins’ flat
Tower Hamlets, London
Wednesday afternoon
3:50 PM

“Again.”

Bill Wiggins glowered at the tall, thin man sitting in his wingchair as if it were bloody King Edward’s Chair. “Shez, my roommates are gonna be back any minute. They can’t see me like…” Bill used the bow and violin as pointers as he gestured towards himself. “Like this.”

Sherlock crooked his lip. “I thought that when I died, you got all my things?”
“You wear your clothes too fucking tight!” Bill twirled around, in one of Sherlock’s black suits and the infamous Purple Shirt of Sex. “No wonder the girls are mad for you.”

“Shame they lust for my clothes instead of my mind.”

“Hell, Shezza, if they saw what’s inside your head, they’d run screaming.”

“That would be the sensible response,” Sherlock said dryly, steepling his fingers. “Again.”

“Sherlock,” Bill was good and irritated now. “I told you. I can’t fucking learn how to play the violin in less than two weeks.”

“You don’t actually have to play, Billy,” Sherlock reminded him. “Just pose in front of the window where I like to play and mime the actions with the violin and bow I gave you.” Because you are bloody not going to saw away on my violin, Sherlock mentally added.

Bill started shaking his head back and forth. “I dunno, mate. I mean, I look like a fool. I’m the bleeding silk purse made from a sow’s ear.”

“Nonsense, you look fine,” Sherlock said through his teeth, wishing for John. John was good at shoring up people’s confidences. Sherlock was… not. However, he needed Bill just as he needed John and Dupin and Lisbeth. In his game of sans voir chess, if John and Dupin were Sherlock’s knights going out to do battle, Bill was his rook. He needed Bill to hold down the fortress, or in this case, 221B Baker Street.

“I don’t look like you, though,” Bill said forlornly, “Even tricked out in one of your posh suits.”

“You don’t have to look like my twin,” Sherlock found himself longing for a cigarette. “You just need to resemble me enough to make people believe I haven’t left Baker Street.”

Bill wasn’t an idiot. He knew it wasn’t people who he had to convince. “What if your brother comes by for a cuppa?”

“He won’t,” Sherlock said bluntly. “He’ll be distracted by the hunt for Violet.”

“Wha’?”

“Once he takes the bait, once he believes that John and Dupin are really on Violet’s trail, he’ll want to oversee the operation personally.”

“Ohhh… so once Mycroft’s out of the country, then you’ll leave to go get Miss Smi- err, I mean, Miss Hunter.”

“Precisely.”

“And when you go,” Billy nodded, cottoning on now. “Then I move into Baker Street. I don’t have to trick Mycroft. Just any passer-bys and Mickey’s spies.”

“Your prose is just as purple and poetic as John’s sometimes,” Sherlock rolled his eyes.

Bill ignored him. “What about Hudders? Is she in the know or do I got to trick her too?”

“Mrs. Hudson in the know?” Sherlock visibly shuddered, “God no. The mission would be over before it began. She just figured out how to use Facebook and has been communicating with her son in Florida and her daughter in Colorado.”
“Ah, so that’s how she’s getting her weed,” Bill grinned. “Her shit’s so much better than mine. Was,” Bill quickly corrected himself. “Better than mine was, back when I used. But I don’t use no more. Or sell.”

“You will stay sober while I’m gone.”

Now Bill shivered, as if the air dropped twenty degrees. “I didn’t know she made pot brownies until I scarfed down two of ‘em and she squawked at me,” he grumbled. “I talked to my sponsor and he said that don’t count for falling off the wagon but I had to do more meetings and ask Mrs. H before eating anything of hers.” He grinned nervously, “You might want to talk to her, like… intervention-style? The shit she had baked? I was seeing sounds, Shez.”

“Don’t worry, Billy, you shan’t be alone,” Sherlock gave Bill a merciful smile. “A fellow recovered addict will be staying with you. A colleague of mine, in a roundabout fashion, anyway, I think you will enjoy his company. He’s a computer hacker, nice fellow.”

Sherlock considered Lisbeth and Trinity his bishops. Just as bishops had no restrictions of distance on the chessboard, Lisbeth and Trinity knew no limitations on the Internet. They knew things about cyberspace that made even Sherlock’s head spin. With their laptops, they could travel to far-off destinations without ever leaving the sofa.

“Oh,” Bill looked relieved then nervous. “What about the dog?”

“All tidied up, as well as the question regarding Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock’s eyes twinkled. “You see, I already plan on having a discussion with Mrs. Hudson regarding her dependency on ‘herbal soothers’. Now I can use the kerfluffle in my flat last night as well as how terrified young Miss Dobney was and how utterly useless Mrs. Hudson had been that night. Then I shall send Mrs. Hudson on a guilt trip, a literal guilt trip.”

“You’re shipping her off to rehab?” Bill frowned, sticking out his lower lip a bit. “That’s cold.”

“It’s a very nice rehabilitation facility,” Sherlock sniped. “I should know. I’m a bit of a connoisseur. Mrs. Hudson might make a friend with a celebrity or two while getting a massage while discussing the twelve-step program over glasses of ginger ale.”

Bill scrunched up his face, “You sure?”

Sherlock nodded, “The one (and last time) I was there, there was this American socialite there, deleted her name, but she was blonde, wealthy, idiotic and too much time on her hands, a deadly combination. They let her bring her miserable little Chihuahuas. She carried them around in a massive purse. When I saw that, I worried that I was still be high. I thought she had brought rats into the facility.” When Bill laughed, Sherlock added with a roll of his eyes, “Mrs. Hudson will be fine. She’ll bore us all with tittle-tattle about the film stars she met while in Recovery.”

“Am I minding the dog while you’re gone?”

Noticing that Bill had turned slightly pale, Sherlock shook his head. “That’s handled.” He inclined his head regally, “Again, Bill.”

Bill sighed but didn’t fight it. He stood tall, squared his shoulders and put the violin on his right shoulder. Theatrically he whipped out the bow and posed it over the violin, as if to draw it across the strings. “OK?”

“You off? Gonna order Thai when my mates get back. You’re welcome to join us.”

“Thank you, no. I have a prior engagement. A celebratory dinner,” Sherlock looked crestfallen. “With *people*.”

“Ah, Dr. Watson’s celebration party,” Bill lowered his arms. “Tell him I said congrats.”

“I will,” Sherlock lied, bending down for the Tesco bag at his feet. “One final thing you’ll need to do before you need to move into 221B.”

“Wha’?” Bill put the violin and bow on the scratched up coffee table he and his flat-mates had found while dumpster diving one day.

Sherlock tossed him the box of black hair dye.

“Oh, c’mon man!”

Sherlock scooped up his coat.

“This won’t wash out of my hair, Shezza!”

Sherlock flounced out of the flat.

“I’m gonna have to *shave my head* afterwards!”

The door slammed shut behind the Great Detective.

“Bollocks,” Billy grizzled.

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Dr. Horsom is inspired from a character in the original "Lady Frances Carfax" ACD story:

Hiraeth

Chapter Summary

Hiraeth:

A Welsh word with no direct English translation. Loosely defined as "a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return which maybe never was; the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for the lost places of your past."

Chapter Notes

So... I'm assuming I'm not the only one freaking the hell out over last night's "The Lying Detective"? Just... oh my God. I think this ep might have even bumped HoB out of the #1 spot for my favorite eps. Again, trying not to post spoilers but I have thoughts and feelings... I'll try to be vague:

1.) I thought Magnussen gave me the heebie-jeebies but Culverton Smith literally made my skin crawl, seriously, I had goosebumps. I can't believe he was played by the same guy who voiced DOBBY in the Harry Potter movies. :^O

Just... give Toby Jones the BAFTA now and be done with it. No one else needs to bother showing up.

2.) I don't think I've hated and loved John Watson so much at the same time as I did in this ep.

3.) Mrs. Hudson is the best. Period. I want her to be my grandma.

4.) Needed more Molly and Lestrade though...

5.) The last five minutes... OH MY GOD OH MY GOD OH MY GOD!!

And slight spoiler...

... but I do have to also low-key-gloat about TOTALLY CALLING the Mycroft-Lady Smallwood ship! #justsayin' :^)

Next week is the finale... I don't think I'm emotionally prepared... for the finale OR hiatus.

Thank you all for your kudos and comments! xoxo

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Chapter Fourteen: Hiraeth

6 April 2016
O’Hare International Airport
Chicago, Illinois
Wednesday
1:15 PM Central time (7:15 London time)

His passport read: “Shlessinger, Fredrick.”

His business card read: Rev. Dr. Shlessinger**, motivational speaker and spiritual counselor.

A tongue-in-cheek joke regarding being nicknamed Holy… but as Irene Adler once had observed about disguises, However hard you try, it’s always a self-portrait.

And Henry Peters had attended the Holy Spirit Seminary in Brisbane. Briefly.

Me, a fucking priest, he reflected as the immigrations officer reviewed his passport.

He didn’t look like the man Violet had met in Les Deux Magots while in Paris. Nor did he look like the man who nearly beat John to death. Granted, he still was a gigantic mountain of hard flesh and sinewy muscle. There was no hiding that. However, he wore an off-the-rack charcoal coloured suit that a minister of modest means would wear. His shoes were slightly scuffed. He had grown a beard and wore a pair of tortoise-shell spectacles. His carry-on bag contained a laptop and an old worn Bible with verses highlighted.

He didn’t bother to try to smuggle in any guns. It was ridiculously easy to purchase guns in the United States. God bless America… he smugly thought as the immigrations officer stamped his passport.

“Enjoy your stay in Chicago, Reverend.”

“Thanks. Have a good day,” Peters let his native Australian accent fly. He had tamed it when he moved to England and mostly spoke the King’s English. However, circumstances like this, his old accent came in handy.

Very few people knew he had grown up in Australia. He wanted it kept that way.

He meandered towards the baggage claim, but he wasn’t thinking about his suitcases. He was thinking about his quarry.

He had been a little disappointed in his mission. Professor Moriarty had insisted that Violet Hunter be brought back alive.

Peters toyed with the idea of having a little mishap and Hunter accidentally ending up dead… but he knew that would not be in his best interest. One did not cross the old lion…especially now, with both of his beloved grandsons dead.

And God help the poor sot who fucks with his granddaughter, Peters actually had to repress a shudder.

He spied his suitcase on the luggage carousel but he did not rush towards it. One of the reasons why he was such a proficient assassin was that he was infinitely patient. While the kill was satisfying, the hunt was the best part.
Except… he couldn’t kill her, the little bitch.

He frowned, once again thinking about the last time he saw her in Mont-Saint-Michel. Unconscious, handcuffed to a lamp-post in a car park notorious for flooding. The tides had just begun to rise when he left her…

_That’s where I fucked up, I shouldn’t have left her, should have seen the kill all the way through…_ he seethed as he swept up his suitcase with his enormous hands.

_No…_ he thought as he politely pushed his way through the busy crowd towards the escalator so he could catch the monorail that would take him to the car rentals. _No, I fucked up by leaving Jim. I was his bodyguard. I was supposed to stay with him. If I hadn’t deserted my post…_

Peters knew this job was punishment.

He also knew he was getting off lightly… especially since he committed another fuck-up right on the heels of the Violet Hunter fuck-up, which was that John-fucking-Watson didn’t die. If the bloody doctor would have just bit it like he was supposed to, then Holmes would have self-destructed and all would be right with the world again.

Peters sighed and reminded himself that he was getting off easy. Technically he wasn’t getting paid for this gig, but at least he was getting a stipend for car rentals, a place to live for the time being and life essentials, food, clothing, weapons so on and so forth. But he wouldn’t be living in the lap of luxury and he wouldn’t be making money, which grated him.

But Peters had personally witnessed Jim literally skinning a man alive for botching a job (and he had been the _sane_ Moriarty twin.) Knowing that Jim had been personally trained by the Professor, Peters knew better than to complain about his latest mission.

He deserved this punishment. He made a mess. He had to clean it up.

Besides, he had some questions for _Agent Hunter_.

Like, where did Miss Adler scamper off to, for starters?

He doubted Hunter would enjoy being on the receiving end of an interrogation. Especially his style of interrogation, after all… the old lion said she just had to be _alive_. He never specified what condition she had to be in.

_But speaking of interrogations,_ Peters pulled out his iPhone as he waited for the monorail to arrive. He thumbed an app and MapQuest opened. He quickly tapped out the address, typing as fast as an adolescent texting. A cold, cruel smile appeared on his lips when he saw that St. Louis was only four hours away from Chicago. _I need to pay my darling ex-wife a visit first… the traitorous bitch_.

He plugged in his ear-buds into his iPhone, hit the music app and started humming along to Prince’s _When Doves Cry_.

He really wasn’t sure what it sounded like when doves cried, but he knew what Marie sounded like when she screamed.

What he didn’t know was that he was unwittingly leaving a digital trail.

What he and the Professor and what was left of the _La Ligue des Roux_ didn’t realize that Sherlock quite purposely had fallen off the media’s radar. He publically declined high-profile cases when the Met called him. The reality was that most of those cases he solved on the sly and emailed the results
to Lestrade. He turned down the majority of the personal requests for his expertise, using John’s recuperation as an excuse. “I am simply lost without my blogger,” was the reason he gave for saying no when pressed.

The majority of the Met had heaved a collective sigh of relief, thinking that the Freak was finally backing off, letting them do their jobs. The public assumed that he was emotionally bereft and distraught regarding the loss of “Miss Smith” and the near-loss of Dr. Watson and therefore, not able to work. The media had simply lost interest in him, especially with the Queen’s 90th birthday approaching as well as the usual speculation whether or not the Duchess of Cambridge was expecting yet another little prince or princess.

Little did anyone know it was all part of Sherlock’s game of *sans voir* chess.

He had not been idle.

He wasn’t only looking for Violet either.

Together with Trinity and Lisbeth, the three of them used the Moriarty Code to find Peters’ many aliases. There had been many sleepless nights of too much coffee and take-away as they stalked their prey in the darkest corners of the Internet. Once Peters’ aliases had been located, Lisbeth did what she did best. She hacked into the bank accounts and credit cards she found. She set up alerts to be texted and emailed to her whenever any of those accounts were accessed.

So when “Rev. Dr. Shlessinger” used his bank card at the Enterprise kiosk at O’Hare in Chicago, fifteen minutes later and inside a modest London hotel room 3,945 miles away, Lisbeth’s mobile pinged.

She looked up from her laptop, still chasing the most elusive white rabbit of them all: Violet Hunter’s new bank account. Or to be more accurate, the new bank account where Violet Hunter had transferred all the assets washed by the money-laundering front Carruthers Brokerage Firm that she had initially transferred to Jack Woodley’s off-shore account, making it appear he alone had stolen nearly fifty million pounds from various criminal enterprises.

*This better be important,* she fumed, annoyed to be interrupted from her search again. She didn’t know whether to be impressed or irritated how well Violet Fucking Hunter hid all that stolen money. According to Sherlock, she was no master hacker.

“As she had explained it to me once,” Sherlock then quoted what Violet had said word for word: “‘Me and computers are about the same as me and a race car. I can’t build one, I can’t fix one and I don’t always understand the fine details about how they work. But give me the keys, tell me where to go and how fast and I can drive the hell out of it.’”

Sherlock and Lisbeth were also kindred spirits because of their photographic memories.

However, the longer her search for the missing blood money went on, the more and more Lisbeth irrationally disliked Violet Fucking Hunter. *An amateur, I’m being bested by a rank amateur,* she fumed as she thumbed in the password to her mobile.

“Oh!” she cried out in English. Her expletive had jolted Dupin out of his meditation. For the past hour and a half, he had been sitting quietly, barefoot, in *Agnistamb hasana* or the Firelog pose.

“What?”

“He’s in Chicago,” her voice quivered with just the tiniest bit of panic.

“You need to pack,” she was already ringing Sherlock. “You and Dr. Watson will be going to Lausanne sooner than any of us thought.” Holding the mobile to her ear with her thin shoulder, she opened a new tab and furiously started typing all while muttering “Shit, shit, shit,” in her native tongue. When he didn’t answer, she rang him again and again.

And again.

Sherlock’s mobile continued to ring, safely tucked in the pocket of his Belstaff hanging on a peg by the front door. Meanwhile, Sherlock languished at the celebratory dinner at the Watsons. For a while, he decided he must have actually died after all during the Fall and had actually been sent to hell.

Everything about it was just so sedentary and dull. First of all, Mary had greeted him at the door with a hug and a dire warning to be on his best behavior tonight. “This is John’s night, not yours,” she took his coat and scarf then informed him drinks and starters were in the lounge on the coffee table.

Then the guest list was comprised mostly of old work colleagues John and Mary had known from when they had worked together before they had gotten married. Some of them had recognized him from the Watsons’ wedding, a few others from the news. Most of them stared at him as if he was about to breath fire or sprout horns. Sherlock scanned the room with his eerie, omniscient eyes and deduced that they were all ordinary, decent people. Not a single one of them had the decency to be a murderer or at least a kidnapper.

Boring.

But they all monopolized John’s time. John saw him but was only able to give him a wave. Sherlock had been two steps away from John but then someone else budged in front of Sherlock, insisting on shaking his hand while proclaiming how glad he was to see how well John was doing, and oh yes, come meet my wife…

Sherlock had slunk off, already feeling claustrophobic and agitated.

I should have stayed home…

Not everyone had been from their old surgery. Mike Stamford showed up with a bottle of good scotch. So did John’s solicitor, also carrying a bottle of scotch, albeit an inferior brand. Harry’s ex-wife, Clara came as well, but with an expensive bottle of wine. His therapist Ella arrived with a bouquet of roses and peonies. Surprisingly, John’s ex-girlfriend Sarah came as well, with her new husband in tow and a prominent baby bump. The Lestrades had kindly picked up Mrs. Hudson, but she was too busy cooing over Henry to pay Sherlock much mind.

Sherlock had felt the familiar tightening in his throat when he saw the baby boy. If Molly thinks he doesn’t look like me, she is in denial… his chest started to tighten as well.

A soft voice had whispered in his ear, “This kind of sucks, doesn’t it, Mr. Holmes?”

Sherlock, relegated to a corner of the sofa, away from everyone, looked down and saw Susan perched next to him. Now wearing jeans and an orange-and-pink striped jumper with pink Converse trainers and her long blonde hair held back by a plastic orange headband, she definitely looked like a fourteen-year-old girl now.

“A bit,” he had allowed himself a small smile.
“Wanna skive off and play video games?” she had whispered, like the impish teenager she was instead of the scared, sick homeless girl she had been. “Dr. Watson has games on his laptop.”

Before Sherlock could answer in the affirmative, Mary stuck her head out of the kitchen and summoned Susan to come help her please. Susan had pouted but went to assist.

The worst bit was the dinner. Instead of whipping up one of her usual, hearty English feasts of roast lamb and boiled potatoes or beef Wellington, Mary had an Indian buffet catered in instead.

“I thought it would be fun!” she had chimed to one of her old work-chums.

Sherlock loathed Indian food. The overpowering scent of curry alone aggravated his hyperactive sense of smell. To add insult to injury, he was actually quite hungry and had actually been looking forward to eating. Mary, for all her faults, was an amazing cook.

So Sherlock had sat and sulked on the sofa while everyone else queued up to help themselves to chole bhature and tandoori chicken. John tried to make his way over to him, but again was interrupted by Ella. John threw Sherlock an apologetic look over his shoulder as Ella led him away to discuss continued therapy for his PTSD.

Finally Sherlock decided to sneak off like he had at John and Mary’s wedding dance. He had even pulled the Belstaff on when Molly appeared in front of him, holding a wiggling, drooling Henry. “A bit overwhelmed, aren’t you?” she asked in a low, gentle voice.

Sherlock let his tense shoulders droop a bit. She always had a bit of a sixth sense about him, Molly. If one believed in something as illogical as instincts, that is. Yet somehow, she always knew when he was sad, always managed to see him when no one else had been looking.

Giving him a sympathetic smile, she whispered as she held out Henry, “Do you mind?”

“Um… no,” he said just as his mobile rang again.

“Do you need to get that?”

“No,” Sherlock lied but felt desperation clawing at him as he greedily stared at the boy’s face.

He reached into his coat pocket for his mobile and sent the call to voice mail.

“OK,” Molly’s face brightened. “He’s a bit more squirmy than the last time you saw him,” she warned him as she deposited him into Sherlock’s hands.

“We’ll be alright,” Sherlock murmured as Molly went to get a plate of food.

Startled, crystalline eyes stared dismayed into unfamiliar blue-green-gold eyes. Sherlock immediately deduced that the infant had scanned his long, pale face and had quickly cataloged him as “Not Mum.”

Sherlock deduced that the boy would start screaming five seconds before his little face even puckered up.

Just then, his mobile started to ring again. Henry immediately began to howl over the ringtone.

“Hey, what’s all the racket, little man?” Lestrade crooned as he came to rescue. “Sorry, separation anxiety,” he told Sherlock as he scooped up the wailing baby from him. Cuddling a whimpering Henry to his chest, Lestrade added, “He just doesn’t know you. That’s all.”
Sherlock swallowed down how deeply that offhand comment cut him.

*But he’s mine…*

“Of course,” he said coolly. “Understandable.”

Lestrade looked over his shoulder as Henry tried to shove his entire fist into his mouth. “Listen, now that things have settled down with Moriarty and John and everything… maybe we can figure out some sort of visitation schedule. Let him get to know you?”

“Mm,” Sherlock looked at his shoes, wanting that more than ever but knowing that soon he would have to slip out of London.

He just didn’t know how soon he would be leaving London until his mobile rang.

“Excuse me,” he said brusquely, bolting from the sofa.

Lestrade sighed, used to Sherlock’s rudeness and got in queue, hoping there would be some *samosas* left. He loved Indian food.

Once on the front stoop, Sherlock snapped a harsh, “What?” into his mobile, ruder than usual.

“He’s in America, Chicago,” Lisbeth was immune to Sherlock’s discourtesy, as she herself was quite blunt and cold most of the time.

“*Now?”* Sherlock felt something akin to panic.

Since Sherlock had made no major, overt moves, neither had the Professor. However, Sherlock was not so foolish to think that the Professor wasn’t making small, subtle moves. Positioning his pawns while his rooks and knights went into battle just as Sherlock was.

“He rented a car from Enterprise,” Lisbeth explained as Dupin, now dressed in jeans and a black jumper (but still barefooted), took his clothes from the tiny wardrobe and deposited them into the suitcase on the bed. “I’m trying to get into the website, but I never thought a fucking car rental would have so many firewalls… ah-ha. Finally,” she sighed as her fingers flew over her keyboard. “Right, so he rented a Toyota RAV4.” Then she snorted in glee. “Idiot. He added on GPS. I can track that.”

“Of course he added GPS. He doesn’t think anyone is watching him and he doesn’t trust cellular service, meaning… he’s not going to stay in an urban setting. He’s not staying in Chicago. Can you tell where he’s goi-”

“He’s dropping the vehicle off at the St. Louis Airport,” Lisbeth interrupted him.

“When?”

“Two weeks from today.”

Sherlock groaned. *Billy won’t be ready by then.*

*Well, he’ll have to be.*

“Get your Irene Nesser passport and identity ready,” he instructed Lisbeth. “Where’s Dupin?”

“Packing.”

Sherlock heard a shuffling noise, then a burst of French from both the Parisian and the Swede. Then
Dupin’s voice boomed in his ear, “I will catch the first flight to Lausanne tonight. How soon can Dr. Watson join me?”

“Friday,” Sherlock decided for John. “Can Interpol rush the paperwork?”

“I will call my friend now.”

“Have the forms and permits sent to Lausanne instead of here. Mycroft’s people might intercept them here somehow,” Sherlock started pacing back and forth, his mind racing.

“Shall I tell Noelia to stop being subtle then? Should “Violet Hunter” be seen now in Lausanne?”

“Yes, tell her to really put on a show. Then on Friday, I want her and Hollywood out of Lausanne and to their next destination. Tell her to lay low in Baden until she hears directly from me.”

“Understood,” Dupin rang off without delay or good-bye.

Sherlock shoved his mobile back into his coat pocket and rubbed his temple, feeling a headache come on. Then he looked up and saw a nondescript, tan sedan parked crisscross from the Watsons.

Both hands in his trouser pockets now, Sherlock scrolled up to the vehicle, humming a few bars from the waltz he had composed for John and Mary’s wedding.

When he reached the sedan, he rapped on the window. “Andrea, pleasure,” he purred.

“Not really,” Anthea arched an eyebrow, ignoring how he had called her by her real name and not her alias. “Not having fun at the party?”

“Would you?”

“Probably not,” she replied coolly.

“You saw me coming, why didn’t you drive off?”

“Because I’m not part of the detail to spy on you or the Watsons,” she informed him. “This is more of a diplomatic mission.”

“Oh?”

“Let your brother help you find Agent Hunter,” she told him flatly.

“I know the measure of my brother’s help, Andrea.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

“Because that’s your real name,” Sherlock gave her a cold smile. “Or do you prefer Maud?” When Anthea didn’t reply but visibly paled, Sherlock cooed, “Or should I call you… Niece?”

“Second Cousin is more accurate,” she bravely rallied.

“Biologically, yes but legally my parents did adopt your father and I grew up with him as my brother, not cousin,” Sherlock drawled. “Oh yes, Maud, all the secrets about the Holmes family are coming out now. Wonder what else will crop up?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”
“It means I’m tired of hiding, I’m tired of lying,” he snapped at her. “Tell Mycroft that.”

“Mycroft has your best interests at heart, Sherlock!”

Sherlock actually laughed out loud at that. “Oh yes, of course. Silly me,” he bent forward and glared at Anthea, his eyes now gun-metal blue. “Ask your beloved Uncle Mickey about the Earl of Winchester. See what he has to say.”

He pivoted and saw John Watson standing in front of the front door, a frown crinkling his earnest face. He wore his black jacket as well as a sling for his bad arm. Obviously he had not been resting his broken wrist and hand like he should be and opted for the sling to give the broken bones a rest.

Sherlock stalked back towards the Watsons’ house, his lips tightly pursed.

“Who was that?”

“Anthea.”

“Following you now?”

“And you,” Sherlock’s eyes flicked down, saw that John held a cold bacon and cheese butty wrapped in a paper serviette in his unbroken hand. “What’s that?”

“This? Oh, well. I know you don’t like curry so…” he held it out to Sherlock. “Sorry, it’s the best I could do.”

“Fancy a walk?”

“Oh God, yes,” John groaned. “If one more tosser tells me how well I’m doing, I’m going to punch someone.”

Sherlock smiled for the first time that day.

“How do you feel like leaving for Lausanne on Friday?”

“Can I leave tomorrow?”

“Come along John,” Sherlock tilted his head towards the pavement. “Let’s walk. We can talk in private.” He paused then snatched the sandwich from John’s hands.

“Knew you were hungry,” John chuckled as he zipped up his coat.

So as the two friends escaped a mundane dinner party in England, Peters cruised down I-90 in pursuit of his estranged wife in his rented SUV.

Unaware of all of this, a woman with shoulder-length chocolate brown curls boarded the Red Line Northbound train that would take her back to the shitty studio apartment she subleased in Chinatown. She didn’t look out of place with the other train riders. She wore faded jeans, scuffed black motorcycle boots, an old, worn black leather jacket over a navy blue hoodie and aviator sunglasses. She had ear-buds in her ears and a backpack looped over her shoulder.

No one noticed the Ruger SR9 tucked into the waistband of her jeans. Or the knife in her boots: an illegal serrated knife.

No one really noticed her at all, the thin, dark-haired, pale woman tucked away in a rear seat as the El train rattled over the tracks, swaying slightly as it rose upon one of its famous elevated rails, the
wheels shrieking like a banshee.

Of course she wasn’t stupid enough to listen to music. The ear buds were just a decoy, so people would not talk to her and also think she wasn’t listening to their conversations.

Her eyelids however, despite the gallons of coffee she had sucked down earlier, continued drooping. She had to fight to stay awake, the rhythm of the train lulling her to sleep in a way the Tube never had.

It also didn’t help that she felt like shit all the time now.

The annoying icy sensation in her left hand hadn’t abated. In fact, it had gotten worse, despite the fact that the tremors had stopped. Only now she found it difficult to pick up small objects, like paper clips or coins with her left hand.

When she practiced yoga in the privacy of her shitty studio sublease, she discovered she had to focus and struggle to make her left pointer finger and thumb meet so she could make the simple gyan mudra sign.

Sometimes she felt the tips of her right hand start to tingle with that awful plunged-in-icy-water sensation. Lately, it had been radiating down her left leg. Most days, her left foot always felt like it had fallen asleep, the pins-and-needles sensation making it hard to sleep. She had nearly fallen down the stairs twice when her leg unexpectedly gave way.

How did I get here? She wondered as she watched the buildings whish by her.

Then she thought How do I get out of here?

She pursed her lips, her sharp hazel eyes narrowing behind her darkened aviator shades.

You need to focus, she ordered herself. You have a job to do here first. Then, you can worry about your exit strategy.

One thing was for certain. There was no way in hell she was going to Canada to be picked up by MI-6. When Senator Woodhouse took the coward’s way out and committed suicide, she decided she would never be Mycroft’s bitch again.

Besides, working with Mycroft placed her too close to…

She sighed, feeling that breathtaking ache in her chest again, a wave of homesickness for a place she could never return, for a home that was never really hers to begin with…

I want to come back here, to Baker Street, permanently. Is that OK?

Yes, he had replied, his voice barely a breath, Of course. This is your home…

She blinked back sudden tears, Hiraeth, she thought.

She sternly told herself not to cry, not to cry, not to cry…

People noticed when solitary women cried in public.
Rev. Dr Shlessinger is Holy Peters' alias in the original Frances Carfax story.

**Breakthrough**

Chapter Summary

Breakthrough

Destruction of a seemingly strong defense, often by means of a sacrifice.

Chapter Notes

*hands out shock blankets and tea for everyone who watched The Final Problem*

Thank God I caved and watched the ep on TV last night instead of waiting to see it in the theater tonight... we got hit with a massive ice storm so the roads are terrible right now. Good for writing, bad for driving!

But the finale.... (will do my best to stay spoiler free...)

Truly the end of an era. I hope there will be more episodes, but if TFP is a forever-finale, I am really OK with it. I thought everything came a full circle. Some lines in previous episodes that seemed like throwaway lines (like Mycroft saying Sherlock initially wanting to be a pirate or Sherlock trying to console Henry Knight by telling him he was only a little boy and he was not responsible for his father's death and of course, Lestrade's good man vs great man speech) suddenly became enormous.

I do have hope because I read an interview with Steven Moffat on ew.com that basically s1 - s4 were "Chapter One" of an ongoing story and he would love to do more series but that depends on BC and MF's schedules. However, since "Chapter One" should be considered an origins story, fans should expect any new series to show a more mature and wiser Sherlock and less of a spoiled man-child showing off, which I'm also OK with as well. Shows survive when characters are allowed to grow, imho.

BUT - I have a fic to post.

As I said before, going forward, this won't be compliant at all with Series 4, but I will do nods and winks here and there. There were some lines and dialogue in Series 4 too beautiful not to pay homage to them.

Finally, in case I haven't said it enough, thank you so much for reading and commenting and kudo'ing and recommending this series... especially when it was supposed to stop at 3 fics and the 3rd fic was only going to be 24 chapters long (ha.) Anyway, I get a big ol' stupid grin on my face when I see I have new messages from the archive, so thank you for that.

Last but not least, all the platonic-non-creepy love to my beta'er cadogan, who continues to slog through the messy first drafts I send her despite having a busy Real Life schedule. Not only does cadogan fix my embarrassing typos and grammar errors, but also takes the time to lend a ear (not literally because... gross) when I have Real Life Drama going on and have no one else to talk to...
I guess that's why this fandom is amazing... we all really do look out for each other :^)

ANYWAY - before I get too soppy and maudlin.... here's Chapter 15 XOXO

Chapter Fifteen: Breakthrough

7 April 2016
The Diogenes Club
Thursday morning
10:51 AM

“Anything else, Mr. Holmes?” the same somber young man who waited on him every Sunday asked him, gloved hands lightly clasped behind his back.

“No, thank you,” Mycroft said crisply. Once the liveried young man had bowed and backed out of the room, Mycroft leaned back in his comfortable leather chair and breathed in the tea. Delicate scents of citrus and jasmine wafted up into his nostrils, with undertones of ginger and lemongrass. Delightful. He had been looking forward to trying this tea for months now.

His mobile hummed.

Mycroft rolled his eyes. He already knew who it would be.

Only one person was rude enough to bother him during eleventhes on a Sunday.

Mycroft Holmes sighed and took a long, fortifying drink before putting his cup of tea down again. Once again, the delicate porcelain cup didn’t even make a sound as it settled neatly into the matching saucer. He always treated his tea sets with great care, especially the ones that were valuable antiques.

But he knew Sherlock couldn’t cut him out forever.

With a smirk, he answered smugly, “Ah, the Prodigal Brother calleth.”

“Mycroft?”

He paused, shocked to his core. The voice on the other end was not the normal bombastic, sarcastic vibrato. This voice was small, weak and exhausted.

A thousand deductions flew through Mycroft’s mind. Like his brother, he had total recall, but he did not require the method of loci to keep his memories straight. He could pluck a memory out of thin air with ease. He instantly remembered his brother’s normal voice, then his strung-out voice, his inebriated voice, then the unresolved timbre of his teenaged voice, then his soft child’s voice, a sweet, piping thing, like a bird…

.. except when he was frightened…. Or…

...Mickey, I don’t feel good… I frew up…

“Are you ill?” Mycroft asked seriously then added facetiously, “You must be if you’re ringing me.”

“Please…” Sherlock’s voice shook. “There’s no one else…”
Mycroft’s heart skipped a beat. “Sherlock…”

*Please don’t let there be a list, please don’t let there be a list, oh God please…*

“Thought it was food poisoning at first, from Mary’s terrible curry buffet she had at John’s celebration party,” Sherlock groaned and Mycroft’s tense shoulders relaxed. “I had terrible heartburn and felt queasy all night. But I was the only one who attended the party that had gotten ill and I’m not getting better.”

“Are you nauseated now?” When Sherlock didn’t answer, Mycroft pressed him, “Sherlock?”

“I was sick just before I rang,” his hoarse voice still shook. “There was blood…”

“What?” Mycroft gripped the arm of his chair, half-rising.

“Mycroft,” the desperation was obvious in his voice now. “Please… I don’t want Mrs. Hudson finding me like this or… anyone else. I… need your help.”

“Good God,” Mycroft leapt to his feet, his heart beating a frantic tattoo again. “I’m on my way.”

Mycroft ordered his driver to speed. He took the steps two at a time, until he got to the sixteenth stair… Steady on…

*Was this one of his tricks?*

*Why would he call me before John? Why wouldn’t he have Mrs. Hudson drive him to the A&E?*

Mycroft thinned his lips and proceeded cautiously.

He knocked, expecting to hear Gladstone frantically barking… or snarling as the dog despised him. When there was no canine answer, he let himself in.

“Sherlock?” he called, still expected that devilish hound to come trotting towards him.

Instead he only heard a feeble, “In here,” from the bathroom.

As he got closer, he cocked his head, hearing water running.

Mycroft pushed the door open and emitted a soft, “*Oh,*” before he could help himself.

Sherlock sat on the floor, in front of the bathtub. It was obviously as far as he had gotten. He clutched his belly. He always looked pale, but his eyes looked red and watery, as if he hadn’t slept. His hair was tousled, uncombed and he clearly hadn’t shaved. He still wore his pyjamas, the blue striped sleep trousers and the old worn T-shirt, both garments inside out.

Mycroft’s sharp eyes zeroed in on the flicks of sick on the T-shirt. Droplets of reddish-brown.

Mycroft’s eyes flicked towards the sink and saw water streaming from the tap. Then his cold lizard eyes flicked down and saw the toothbrush and toothpaste tube on the tiled floor. Bits of foam were splattered here and there. He saw the rumpled bath mat then he lifted his head and saw how the shower curtain hung crookedly.

He saw Sherlock’s shirt, trousers, pants and socks, still neatly folded on top of the clothes hamper next to the tub. The towels still hung pristinely on the rank, undisturbed.

He craned his head and peered into the toilet. The contents looked like reddish coffee grounds.
In a flash, Mycroft saw the whole scene… after another miserable night of no sleep caused by gastritis and nausea, Sherlock hobbled his way into the master bath, intending to shower and change, hoping a nice shower and fresh clothes would help him feel better. When he cleaned his teeth, he triggered his gag reflex. His stomach began to churn and burn, he doubled over in pain then realized he was going to be sick. He dropped his toothbrush as he collapsed, thus disturbing the bath mat. He had grabbed the sink in an effort to pull himself up, but only knocked the toothpaste off instead. Then the nausea overtook him and he crawled to the toilet. Afterwards, he tried to pull himself up, grabbing the shower curtain, but only managed to tear it from two of the curtain rings instead…

Realizing that he was stuck, he had no choice but to ring… me?

Hardly. He’d call John first.

What are you up to, Little Brother?

“Fortuitous of you to have your mobile with you in the bath,” Mycroft purred as he turned off the tap. “I usually don’t bring my expensive mobile into a room with lots of running water.”

The look Sherlock gave him was pure loathing. “Was waiting for a text Lestrade about a case I’m consulting on. I knew I should have just rang 99-“he tried to get up, but gasped and sank back down, squeezing his eyes tightly shut.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I’ve been out of the spotlight for nearly three months now, I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I thought you’d call the newly reinstated Doctor Watson?”

“I knew this was a mistake,” Sherlock said bitterly. “Clearly you’ve observed that…” he screwed up his face as he pressed his hand to his belly. “I am most likely suffering from a peptic stomach ulcer. Uncle Rudy had one, remember?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Well, if you recall, the theory that stress causes ulcers has mostly been debunked, although stress,” he paused to catch his breath. He reached for the toilet bowl and puffed out his cheeks.

“Sherlock?”

He ran his hand over his face. “Sorry, I’m fine… I just… needed to wait for that to pass, the nausea… what was I saying?”

“Stress?” Mycroft leaned on his umbrella, watching Sherlock like a hawk.

“Yes, stress can aggravate ulcers. However, most are caused by H. pylori bacterium…” Sherlock paused again to fight against another wave of nausea.

“And in your sentimental stupidity, you didn’t want to expose John since his immune system is still suppressed after losing his spleen… which probably means he should never come back here, ever. When was the last time you scrubbed your tub? It has the most disgusting ring around it.”

“It’s from the koi fish I had last summer,” Sherlock reached over and flushed the toilet.

“The what? Oh, never mind, I do not want to know,” Mycroft waved that all away. “You shouldn’t
have flushed that, brother. The doctors may have wanted to examine it.”

“The smell,” Sherlock said meekly.

“Right,” Mycroft sighed, forgetting his brother’s hyperactive nose. “Oh, and you’re not fooling me, brother dearest.” When Sherlock stared at him like a startled owl, he purred, “The likelihood of John Watson being infected by H. pylori is highly improbable. You didn’t want him to see you at your weakest.” Silkily, he added, “You hate it when John sees you as less than the Great Consulting Detective.”

“As I said, this was a mistake, go home,” Sherlock tried to get up again but Mycroft finally put his suspicions aside, softening at last.

“Do stop being an idiot, you rang me for a reason,” he leaned his brolly next to the sink. He knelt next to Sherlock and gently wrapped one around his waist and the other around his shoulder. “Ready?” When Sherlock nodded, Mycroft said, “On three… one… two… three…”

He hauled Sherlock to his feet. Sherlock started to groan but stopped himself. Mycroft made the appropriate shushing and soothing sounds as he helped Sherlock limp to the lounge and deposited him to the sofa. “I’ll fetch your coat and shoes,” he added solicitously, already walking towards the peg where his coat hung. “Then I’ll take you to my personal physic—”

“No,” Sherlock breathed.

“Sherlock, don’t be stupid.”

“I’m not,” Sherlock allowed Mycroft to drape the Belstaff over his shoulders like a cape. “I have my own doctor, had to, after being shot, that is. He knows my full medical history, including the unsavory bits,” he muttered, referring to his drug addictions.

“Sherlock, I really do insist.”

“My doctor is closer. Yours works in a posh surgery clear across the other side of Lo-” Sherlock suddenly clutched his stomach again. “Oh God,” he whimpered, unable to help himself.

“Right,” Mycroft’s voice was clipped. “We’ll hurry.”

Mycroft soon realized that Sherlock’s “regular” physician worked the A&E at Bart’s. But, once Mycroft thought about it, it made sense. Sherlock often was injured more often than he was ill.

“We’ll take it from here, Mr. Holmes,” a cheery faced nurse squeaked as an orderly helped a nearly doubled-over Sherlock into a wheelchair. “We’ll need you to stay here, in the waiting room. There’s coffee and tea.”

“I would really like to stay with my brother.”

“I know, love, you’re a good big brother, aren’t you?” The cheery nurse beamed but there was surprising steel in her voice. “But unless you possess a medical degree, you not going to be a single bit of help to your brother, are you now, pet?”

Mycroft ignored the condescending “pet” and anxiously watched the orderly wheel Sherlock away. His legs unexpectedly felt like jelly. He decided to sit down on one of the uncomfortable sofas and drink unpalatable coffee while Sherlock was being examined.

Sherlock stayed doubled-over until he was wheeled into an examining room. The orderly helped him
up onto the paper-covered examining table. He stayed curled up in the fetal position until the doctor entered the room and closed the door. “Mr. Holmes?”

“Ah, yes, Dr. Ferguson,” Sherlock sprang up and sat up straight. He crossed his legs neatly. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. How is the family?”

“Very well, thanks. Now that we’ve finished our move from Sussex to London, that is. No place like London.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Sherlock nodded approvingly. “How is your eldest son, Jack?”

“Much better, the therapy and medication is really sorting him out.”

“Excellent news,” Sherlock boomed. “Now, shall we start with the physical? I have work to do and need to be assured my transport is in order. It’s…” he rubbed the bullet-hole scar. “Taken quite a bit of abuse over the past few years as apparently falling off a building and being shot can be detrimental to one’s health.”

“Not to mention that nasty case of bronchitis last summer,” Dr. Ferguson scolded him as he fetched a tongue depressor. “Still off the cigs, yeah?”

“Haven’t smoked since last July.”

“Well done,” Dr. Ferguson beamed. “Alright, open up and say ‘Ahhh’…”

Sherlock endured the physical with minimal complaint and actually answered the doctor’s queries honestly. But he did beg off the prostrate exam. “When I return…”

“You’re forty now, Mr. Holmes,” Dr. Ferguson mildly scolded him.

“It’s a trigger,” Sherlock said so softly the doctor barely heard him.

Dr. Ferguson blinked then glanced at his charts. Skimming, he found the words extensive abuse, possible torture in the 2014 notes. “Right, well, we’ll sort that out after your business trip.” Then he cleared his throat, “Also, we still need to do a blood draw, of course, check cholesterol. You’re underweight for someone your height, as usual. Other than that, you’ve healed quite nicely from your various injuries. Your heart is strong, your lungs are clear. You’re looking quite well, all and all.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock drawled.

Dr. Ferguson cleared his throat. “You do realize, what you’re asking me to do next is extremely illegal. Could cost me my job, my medical license, everything I’ve worked all my life for.”

“I do. It’s not too late to back out.”

Dr. Ferguson smiled, “Mr. Holmes, if not for you, my wife Ayudi would be in prison. The tabloids called her a vampire, the worst bit being that people actually believed the tabloids. They thought that sweet, lovely woman was actually sucking blood from our infant son!”

“People are stupid,” Sherlock said genially.

“If it wasn’t for you, my wife would be in prison, our baby dead and my Jack’s schizophrenia undiagnosed. I owe everything to you, Mr. Holmes. Helping you is an honor.”

Again, Sherlock felt slightly disconcerted. Having one’s work praised and appreciated is always
nice, but Dr. Ferguson gazed at him now as if he was the Second Coming of Christ. “The pleasure was all mine, it was a fascinating case…”

His internal John murmured, *Not good, focus on his family, not the Work.*

“… but saving your children and wife were top priority, naturally,” Sherlock awkwardly added.

Dr. Ferguson actually became dewy-eyed. He clasped Sherlock’s hand. “*Thank you.*”

Oh God… Sherlock inwardly cringed. “Well, yes, err,” Sherlock slid his fingers from the doctor’s firm grip. “No point in delaying, if you’ve decided to stay the course.”

Dr. Ferguson immediately rearranged his face into a somber expression, “To battle then.”

“Good luck,” Sherlock immediately flopped back down on the table and curled back up into a tight ball. “Remember, my brother is very observant.”

“Noed,” Dr. Ferguson nodded. “No worries, I’ll treat him like any other toff who thinks he knows more than me because he read an article on WebMD.”

“Excellent.”

Mycroft did in fact arch an eyebrow when Dr. Ferguson informed him that they were admitting Sherlock for observation. When Mycroft silkily asked if the urea test had been administered to confirm whether or not it was an H. pylori infection, Dr. Ferguson immediately and loudly snapped at Mycroft, reminding him that his brother had indeed vomited blood and this was a worrisome symptom. “I’m not going to risk waiting around to schedule a gastroscopy either. I want to have a look as soon as possible. Had it ever crossed your mind that it may not be an ulcer? Your brother was a heavy smoker we can’t rule out stomach cancer.”

“Of course, of course” Mycroft demurred, paling as he sank back down into his uncomfortable seat. Hours later, the cheery-face nurse told him which room had been assigned to Sherlock. However, when Mycroft was walking towards Sherlock’s room, he nearly ran straight into, of all people, John Watson.

“What are you doing here?” both men said at the same time.

Under other circumstances, it would have been funny.

“I’m listed as his emergency contact,” John explained, his face scrunching up into a scowl, as it always did whenever he saw Mycroft.

“Well, he rang *me.***

Now John looked perplexed, “Why would he do that?”

“Perhaps it’s because I’m his brother?”

“No, that’s not why,” John’s scowl deepened. “He’s up to something.”

“John, normally I would agree with you, but this time,” Mycroft actually licked his lips. “I think he’s actually seriously ill.” He tightened his grip on the umbrella handle. “I think he’s finally overextended himself.”

“Let me talk to him first,” John insisted. “No, listen, maybe he did reach out to you to help him get to the hospital, but he won’t *talk* to you. He won’t confide in you. Let me find out exactly what’s going
on. For all we know, it was sort of stupid experiment. Maybe he drank bleach to see if it’s true that you can cheat a drug test by chugging a gallon of Domestos before pissing in a jar or something idiotic like that.”

That seemed more plausible. However, if that was true… “Do you think he’s using again?”

John gave him a one-shoulder shrug. “How the hell should I know? I’ve had my own battles to fight,” he lifted up his broken wrist.

“Right, of course,” Mycroft took a gentlemanly step back and gestured towards the door.

John tapped on the door then poked his head in, “Sherlock?”

When there was no response, he let himself in and closed the door behind him. Sherlock was curled up under the thin hospital duvet, IVs inserted, cardiac monitor beeping in rhythm with his heart. John pulled up a chair as close as possible to the bed then whispered, “Sherlock?”

One aquamarine eye opened, twinkling mischievously. “How is he?”

John had to slam his hand over his mouth to stifle a giggle, “Trying to hide how worried he is and failing miserably. If it wasn’t Mycroft, I’d feel sorry for the bugger.”

Both eyes open now, Sherlock’s shoulders shook with the effort of not laughing out loud. “I always believed that revenge was a waste of time and energy however, I cannot help but enjoy my brother’s misery just a tiny bit.”

“Enjoy it, you deserve it,” John softly snickered as he reached into his coat pocket, cursing as he always did whenever he had to use his right hand. “Here,” he slipped a damp sponge underneath the covers. “Use a glass of water to re-wet it if necessary. But dab your face with it and your hands so it looks like you broke out in a sweat.”

“Brilliant, thank you,” Sherlock immediately pressed the sponge to his face. “Devil is in the details. How do I look?”

“Dreadful.”

“Perfect.”

“How did you make yourself look so shitty?”

“Simple, I stayed up all night and didn’t shave this morning.”

“Sherlock…”

“I didn’t do anything strenuous,” Sherlock insisted. “I simply stayed on the sofa, drinking coffee and watching documentaries on Netflix.”

“And you dyed the coffee grounds red so it looked like bloody emesis?”

“The toilet bowl looked like a crime scene. Good thing Mycroft doesn’t have a nose like mine. He’s always suffered from allergies,” Sherlock purred. “Is everything on your end arranged?”

“Taking the Chunnel to Paris tomorrow morning, then Dupin and I are leaving for Lausanne in the afternoon.” John felt a sudden lump in his throat, realizing he wouldn’t see his best friend and love of his life for weeks, perhaps months, not to mention the danger. “Please promise me that you’re not going alone.”
“John,” Sherlock sounded slightly annoyed now. “I’ve already told you I’m not.”

“Just remember what I said,” John growled. “If I don’t hear from you on a regular basis, I’m going to hunt you down and drag you back to London.”

“Everything will be fine, John.”

“I know.” John stood up, sucking in a breath. “So… this is it.”

“It is.”

“Right,” John swallowed the lump down. “Bring our girl home, yeah?”

“Of course,” Sherlock sounded subdued as well. “Don’t forget to fetch Gl-”

“Gladstone, yeah, I know. Mrs. Hudson is probably having kittens by now,” John checked his watch. He knew that Sherlock had conned Mrs. Hudson into taking Gladstone for his morning walk, therefore ensuring that the slightly-homicidal dog was not in the flat when Mycroft arrived. “OK, I better go before Mycroft gets suspicious. How should we do this…?”

“A row, of course,” Sherlock immediately supplied. “You pried it out of me that this had been an ongoing issue and I didn’t seek immediate medical attention when I first had stomach pangs.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” John couldn’t stand it any longer. He swooped down and kissed Sherlock, full on the mouth while cradling his face. “Be careful,” he breathed.

“You as well,” Sherlock sounded a little bewildered but not at all cross.

“Tell Violet I said hello,” John brushed Sherlock’s fringe off his brow. “And she’s a bloody idiot for running off like that.”


“Oh yeah, right,” John straightened up, took a deep breath, then bellowed, “YOU COCK! YOU BLOODY IRRESPONSIBLE MORON! HOW CAN A GENIUS BE SO FUCKING STUPID?”

“You don’t have shout that much,” Sherlock pouted and pulled the duvet over his curly head.

But Mycroft had indeed been growing suspicious. His hand actually had been on the door handle when he heard John yelling. Mycroft actually quailed as he heard John reel off invective after invective and fairly scampered from the door just in time. John threw the door open, slammed it shut and started marching towards the lifts.

“John?” Mycroft trotted after him. “John, what is it?”

“It’s Dr. Watson,” John furiously reminded him that they were not on first name terms. “And your idiot of a brother has been having stomach pains for months. Months! He never fucking said anything, never fucking did anything, just ate antacids like they were sweets and keep doing The Work, the Christ-Almighty Fucking Work.”

John found himself enjoying working himself up into a temper.

“You mean to tell me this was preventable?”

“Yes, of course it was preventable. It was completely preventable. He drinks coffee like its water, he
gobbles ibuprofen and other NSAIDs like they’re breath mints plus his diet is altogether abhorrent. Not to mention the levels of stress he’s been living with for the past few years,” he glared at Mycroft pointedly, clearly insinuating that Sherlock’s stress was his fault. “It’s actually shocking that he hadn’t started vomiting up blood sooner. He has no stomach lining, basically. He’s looking at weeks of bed rest and bland foods.”

“What does that mean?” Mycroft paled as John jabbed the lift button.

“What do you think that means? No. Work.”

Mycroft blinked. “He’ll go mad.”

“He’s got books and he’s got Netflix and he’s got his music,” John said shortly. “He’ll be fine.”

“John, you know how he gets when he’s bored.”

“Yes, I bloody well do know what he’s like when he’s bored!” John snapped. “I also know what an ulcerated stomach looks like, what the surgery entails, how risky it is and how long it takes to heal from that, especially if they can’t do it laparoscopic and have to completely open him up.” Seeing Mycroft’s ashen face, John softened his voice. “Look, there’s a seventy-five percent chance that the ulcer will heal on its own, if he rests and follows doctor’s orders exactly. Since Mrs. Hudson is leaving for her, ah… extended holiday” John flushed, still bemused at how Sherlock had convinced his elderly landlady to go to rehab for her marijuana addiction. “Mary and Molly will mother him, make sure he eats right and doesn’t over-exert himself. Lestrade can send him cold cases like he did when Sherlock was recovering from his gunshot wound. That will keep his enormous brain busy.”

“He said he’s in the middle of a case for Lestrade now,” Mycroft looked troubled.

“I know,” John made himself grumble, “I bloody well know, I’m working the same case. That’s where I get to step in, lucky, lucky me.”

“What does that mean?”

“That means,” John groused, “I get to try and fill the Great Detective’s shoes, doesn’t it?”

Mycroft arched an eyebrow, “What does that mean?”

“That means I’ll do what’s necessary to keep Sherlock from damaging himself further. Even if that means I have to take my laptop to crime scenes and Skype with Sherlock so he doesn’t move his bony arse off the sofa.” The lift doors slid open and John got on. “Going down?”

“No,” Mycroft said primly as he hooked his umbrella on his elbow. “I want to check on Sherlock.”

“Try to impress on him how important it is for him to stay put especially since he’s sending me off t-” the lift door slid shut, cutting off John’s last words.

John leaned against the lift walls, grinning like a fool and feeling a tiny bit smug.

Who says I can’t lie?

Mycroft stared at the closed lift doors, frowning while thinking: If I didn’t know better, I would believe that John Watson has become such a good liar?

“But I do know better,” he muttered, tightening his grip on his brolly…

I do know better… don’t I?
Mycroft closed his eyes and threw his head back in exasperation, listening to the cervical bones pop and click as he rotated his stiff neck.

*Doubt is such a hateful thing...*
En Prise

Chapter Summary

En Prise

En prise describes a piece or pawn exposed to a material-winning capture by the opponent. This is either a hanging piece, an undefended pawn, a piece attacked by a less valuable attacker, or a piece or pawn defended insufficiently.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

11 April 2016
Hastings, Sussex
Saturday morning
7:52 AM

Leaving London was the best decision she had ever made.

Of course, leaving was easy when the tabloids paid her ridiculous sums of money for her salacious and completely fabricated stories about “Shag-a lot Holmes.”

When she bragged to the incapacitated Sherlock about purchasing a cottage in Sussex, she didn’t mention how dilapidated it was. It needed to be shingled, the downstairs floors were in a sorry state and all the appliances were from the 1980’s. But it had an enormous front and back garden and was within walking distance to the beach.

She had planned on using the Sussex cottage as a fun holiday home once she got it fixed up. A place to drive down to during the summer for a long weekend, enjoy drinks and the sea breeze with friends. Slowly, she realized she didn’t have any friends.

She had thought Mary Watson was her friend. She had met her at church, shortly after Bonfire Night. Mary was great fun, always upbeat and optimistic plus funny as hell. A few months later, she was surprised and delighted when Mary asked her to be a bridesmaid.

She had been shocked when the wedding was not held at a Catholic church, but a Protestant one. When she pressed Mary about it, she had sighed and explained that John’s family were all C of E. Since she was an orphan, she was the only Catholic so it was just easier to hold the services in the Anglican Church than the Catholic one.

That seemed like an acceptable answer until the actual day of the wedding, when she one of John’s cousins openly grumbled that “Auntie Anna” must be rolling in her grave since her son did not have a Catholic wedding. Since this was also the bitchy cousin who got seated next to the bogs, Janine didn’t pay much mind. She thought it was just a case of sour grapes. But when Janine needed to actually visit the bogs herself, she met two of John’s elderly Scottish aunts. As they fluffed their blue-grey pin-curls, they were more than happy to moan to Janine about the ceremony. As Janine fussed with her long, brunette hair, the two real-life Agony Aunts complained that while it was a nice ceremony, it wasn’t a proper Catholic wedding Mass. Janine heard the whole sordid story about
Anna McLaren running off with that wastrel Jack Watson, who wouldn’t let her baptize her children in the True Faith. Capital T, capital F.

She thought people only spoke like that in period dramas.

Janine had been thoroughly confused. The old biddies made it sound like it actually would have been easier to hold the wedding in a Catholic church than an Anglican one. Wondering if Mary had lied to her and if so, why, she had made her way back to the head table, feeling quite annoyed. She planned on taking Mary to task about that later. If there was one thing she hated more than anything in the world, it was liars.

Before she got a chance to have a word with Mary, the best man had stood up and made a speech that rendered the entire wedding party as well as the guests to tears.

She couldn’t help it… there was definitely something… endearing about that odd, pale man.

If only he hadn’t lied to her… it was stupid, but it still hurt, being led on by him like that. Believing that she could have a happily-ever-after with him, because, yes he was strange but he was also fun. Not to mention brilliant, well-dressed and well-to-do plus those eyes and that arse (especially since she had gotten an eyeful of that lush backside as he vaulted over the head-table…) and of yes, he could dance.

Their first date had been to a bloody, fucking ballroom, where he taught her how to waltz.

How the hell was she not supposed to fall in love with him after that?

Revenge had been sweet, but it had left a bitter aftertaste.

By giving Sherlock his just desserts, she had lost Mary in the process.

After the tab-sheets published the story, Mary rang her. Her voice shook in rage, “Why?”

“Mary…”

“Sherlock was shot and you sell a packet of lies to the media? How could you?”

“He lied to me!”

“So this was the mature way to handle it? By making a bit of money off of a load of codswallop while he is in pain? Shame on you, Janine Hawkins.”

“Mary, he told me he was going to marry me.”

“You’ve been dating for less than two months and you believed him? If you two were close enough to discuss marriage, did he disclose his raging cocaine habit? Really, you should be grateful that you dodged a bullet.”

“No pun intended?” Janine had tried to joke but had thought wildly Cocaine habit???

“He is my husband’s best friend.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry, I… wasn’t thinking. I was angry and hurt and…”

“Therefore, I know that everything you said to the press was a lie.”

“We didn’t exactly hold hands and read the Bible, Mary!” she snapped.
“But you two haven’t been to bed properly either, have you?”

Janine opened her mouth and closed it, feeling ridiculous.

“John once told me that Mycroft blurted out Sherlock was still a virgin in order to embarrass him in front of John and their clients. You were going to say yes to a wedding proposal from a coke-addicted virgin. You didn’t sell those stories because he hurt you. You sold them because you don’t want people to know what a bloody idiot you are. You covered your own arse.”

“That’s not true,” a tear had slipped from Janine’s eye by now.

“I don’t think you and I should speak anymore.”

“Mary, wait. Don’t, please…”

But the line went dead and Janine never heard from Mary again.

Mary had been her only non-work friend. Her childhood friends were back in Ireland. Her uni friends had scattered across the globe, leading fabulous lives according to their Facebook profiles. So when she had time to socialize, when she could crawl out from the pile of work Magnussen constantly dumped on her, she had socialized with people at work.

Once Magnussen was dead, most of her colleagues jumped ship to other publishing companies, especially when word got out that Magnussen had been up to his neck in alligators with Denmark clamoring for the back-taxes he owed them while England screamed for theirs.

She had found it difficult to carry on at what was left of Magnussen’s empire. She had found it even more difficult to find new employment. No one wanted to hire the former PA of that “creepy fucking Dane.” She couldn’t figure out why until one of her former colleagues finally showed mercy and shared what was being said about her behind her back. Since she had admitted she fucked the Freak Holmes, it was being assumed she fucked the Monster Magnussen as well. “They think you like ‘em freaky and pale,” her colleague explained with just a bit of smugness.

Janine had to struggle not to slap the superior little smirk off of her moony, spotted face.

Instead, she started drinking. A lot. Not quite as much as an alcoholic, but more than what was considered healthy. She lived off the rest of the money from her tabloid stories and the trust fund her grandparents set up for her after her mother had died and her father had taken off for God-knows-where. She bought things she didn’t need. She cruised dating websites, not really interested in love, really just wanting company but sometimes settling for a good shag.

Then last summer, she met a bloke she had actually been interested in. She even slowed down her drinking a bit and started hitting the gym. He had been out of the country last summer so he knew nothing about Shag-a-lot Holmes or Magnussen or anything. He was an international lawyer who worked for the United Nations. He was lovely. He was rich. He was kind.

He had taken her to a new restaurant, one celebrities and royalty frequented because of a strictly enforced No Mobiles, No Photographs rule. She got her hair done, treated herself to a mani-pedi and squeezed into a slinky strapless black dress.

The night had started out lovely. Her date had made her laugh while they indulged in a very good Pinot Noir. She needed the loo and so, pleasantly tipsy, had gotten up and started making her way to the Ladies…

… then she saw him.
He wore one of his usual black suits paired with a crisp white shirt. He sat next to a chestnut-haired tart, wearing a skin-tight electric-blue dress with her tits all but hanging out and she was holding his fucking hand.

“Sherly?” she had slurred out and the night promptly went downhill from there… especially when Janine saw the ginger slag wearing her fucking engagement ring.

She lost her shit, to put it inelegantly. She started screaming at the pair of them in the restaurant. She didn’t care one bit that some of the most famous people in the world watched her make an utter fool of herself.

The worst part was that neither one of them had been phased. Even though she looked like an utter whore, the little cow sounded like a prim schoolteacher when she scolded her for her bad manners. Sherlock had actually seemed bored by her raging. Then the bastard made one of his rude yet apt deductions: that technically she was a bastard because her father didn’t acknowledge her. She surged forward, intending to slap him right across those beautiful cheekbones.

But the Other Woman had lunged out of her seat to seize Janine’s wrist before her hand even made contact with Sherlock’s face, even knocking her chair over in the process. She had dug her sharp nails into Janine’s tender flesh and icily asked her: Do you recall the text messages I had sent you when you whined to Mr. Holmes about why you didn’t receive as much publicity as I did?

Then without so much as raising her voice above a murmur, she gave her a dressing-down that shamed Janine to her very core. When Janine tried to salvage her pride, taunted her by asking if she was alright with wearing another man’s wedding ring, Miss Fucking Smith dismissed her with a withering look while informing her Oh please, it was never yours to begin with. He never gave it to you.

Janine realized Miss Smith was right. She had allowed a fantasy ruin her life.

Then Sherlock pointed out her date had ditched her.

As tempting as it was to drink herself into a stupor, she didn’t. Instead Janine allowed herself to have a good cry while eating a pint of chocolate ice-cream, using shortbread biscuits as a spoon. The next morning, she threw away all her junk food, except for her Emergency That Time of the Month chocolate biscuits. Then she made a list, starting her mission to Pull Her Shit Together and Get Her Life Back on Track.

She sold things she didn’t need. She bought things she would need for her cottage, like a new cooker and refrigerator and microwave. She sold her car and bought a bicycle. She visited the gym twice daily. She got a job as a sale clerk at an independent book store just so she’d get out of the house. She stopped cruising dating sites. She started going to Mass again on a regular basis. She rescued a mutt from a London Animal Centre and named him Alby.

She stopped cyber-stalking The Science of Deduction website and Dr. Watson’s blog.

She planned on moving to Sussex in May, over the long bank holiday. Her plans changed after another lonely Christmas, Mam and both brothers dead, Dad God only knew where and Nan and Grand’Da’ too busy to make time for her as usual.

So it was December, not May, when she hired movers to help move what was left of her belongings down to Sussex. On New Year’s Eve, she treated herself to a mug of tea and packet of Rolos while Alby gnawed on a dog biscuit as she sat on her grotty kitchen floor that needed new tiles, surrounded by cardboard boxes.
She discovered she liked Hastings. Very much.

She still didn’t have many friends yet, but had recently joined a book club and most of the women were quite friendly. She also joined the Cottage Garden Society on a whim so she could learn what was best to plant in her vast gardens. She became active at St. Mary Star of the Sea church, but she always begged off whenever she was asked to teach a catechism class.

She was never good with kids. Didn’t like them much, honestly.

She got a job as a PA to the gallery owner of one of the local art galleries. The pay was shit of course, but the hours decent and job itself was peaceful. She liked her job and more importantly, she liked her boss.

Her new boss did not flick her in the eyeball to see she would flinch, for starters.

Or threaten to tell the world who her biological father was.

She didn’t think about Magnussen much anymore. When she did think about him, she only felt a vague unease, like trying to remember a fading bad dream.

She kept her mind occupied with her work, her church, her dog and her hobbies, most of them centering on her cottage. Most of the work on her cottage she was proud to say she did herself. True, she had to hire out some of the bigger jobs to contractors, such as the roof and the kitchen floor.

However, she sanded the shitty olive-green paint off the woodwork herself and planned to stain it a rich walnut colour once the sanding was done. She also mended and painted the white picket fence that followed the stone path to the sea. She did her own digging and weeding in her gardens. Her hands were rough and calloused now and she loved it. She never did her nails anymore.

She also discovered she had a green thumb. What was once overgrown grass and thistles now was an explosion of bergamot, columbine, snapdragons, purple tansies and hollyhocks. Later that summer, the sunflowers would bloom and ivy was already weaving its way through the picket fence. The bright cheerful colours made Janine think of fireworks. On her sagging porch and cracked stone steps, she had set out several pots of geraniums and lavender. Butterflies fluttered and bees hummed lazily around the pots. Poor old Alby got stung when he thought he could eat one.

Behind her house, she made her first stab to cultivate a vegetable garden. She was also quite proud of the clothesline she installed herself, although one of the poles leaned slightly to the left. However it would have to do until she saved enough money for a new clothes dryer as the one that came with the cottage had given up the ghost.

She was in no rush. Living by the sea had slowed her mind down, helped her learn to breathe. It was spring, soon to be summer. Clothes smelt better dried in sunshine and salt air rather than spun around in an old metal dryer anyway.

She liked doing her errands early on Saturday mornings, before everyone was up and about. As she indulged in a second cup of tea, she smiled dreamily to herself, admiring her little galley kitchen, with its new appliances and new tile floor along with the cupboards and walls she had painted herself and the windows she had scrubbed herself and the shelves she had installed herself… and needed to mend because they were a tiny bit crooked.

She laughed a little, suddenly wondering what her old London colleagues would think of her now, if they saw her like this. Wearing grubby dungarees, a faded Hastings United FC sweatshirt, dingy trainers and her long, umber-brown hair pulled back into a ponytail like a schoolgirl. If she would tell them that, yes she planned on going to town dressed as she was; they all would have died from the
shock.

*Sod them,* she immediately thought and laughed.

It had been a long miserable journey, but she was *here.* And she was happy.

She called her dog, gathered up her rucksack, her handbag, her mobile and her overdue library books. Mentally, she reviewed what she needed to get done as she made her way from her kitchen, through her perennially messy living room, with buckets of stain, sandpaper and paint brushes everywhere... *right, drop off the books first, the fines are going to be dreadful, will pay those later. Stop at the garden centre, shame that the weeds got my onions but never mind, I’ll plant a lot of potatoes instead, that will be good for the ground. Then I need to get spray for the aphids before they completely devour my tomatoes. I must ask someone about deterrents for rabbits before the damn bunnies eat what’s left of my lettuce, but they’re so cute, I don’t want to kill them. Then to the grocer, I’m out of everything except tea... what the hell?*

Janine’s thoughts stuttered to a halt when she saw Sally Donovan leaning up against the dented Ford Transit Connect she bought used when she arrived in Hastings. In London, one could go without a car. In Hastings, she discovered, she couldn’t. She also discovered a van was more practical for her, since all of her home repair materials and gardening supplies wouldn’t fit in the boot of a regular car.

“What the hell?” she said out loud.

“You’re hard to find,” Sally drawled with that thick London accent of hers.

“Maybe there’s a reason for that,” Janine’s Irish voice cut through the morning air like a knife.

“Polite thing to do would be to invite me in for a cuppa,” Sally continued to lean very deliberately against the driver’s side door.

“No, it wouldn’t, seeing you’re not going to around long enough to drink it.” Janine dug in her handbag for her keys.

“Why’d you leave London, Miss Hawkins?”

“Piss off, would you?” Janine clutched her keys, wondering if she dared jab the cool, composed dark-skinned woman in the eyes with them.

“Did you leave London because of Sherlock Holmes?”

Janine dropped her keys.

“That’s not a No,” Donovan eyed the fallen car keys.

“It’s not a Yes either,” Janine scooped up her keys.

“Did he threaten you?”


“Really?” Donovan arched one slender, inky eyebrow.

“No, Mikey was the one who liked to issue the threats. Sherly would just make you feel stupid, but really wouldn’t threaten you.”

“Mikey...?”
“Mycroft, his big brother, elder brother that is.”

“Right,” Donovan said faintly then asked, “If Sherly never threatened you then how did he coerce you into the sexual perversions you disclosed to The Mail, The Sun and the other rags?”

“Well, uh,” Janine could feel her cheeks start to turn scarlet.

“Because if he forced you to do things in the bedroom you didn’t consent to under your own free will, that’s rape, Miss Hawkins. You should have gone to the police, not the tabloids.” In a softer, more compassionate voice, she added, “It’s still not too late, actually, if you want t—”

“No!” Janine burst out so violently that Alby yipped in fright. “I don’t want to press charges.”

“Did the elder Mr. Holmes threaten you? Tell you leave in order to protect his younger brother from additional scandal and prosecution?”

“No! I never spoke to Mikey personally but I overheard him tell some people off once.”

“Then why don’t you want to file a police report?”

“Because there’s nothing to file,” Janine snapped. “It was supposed to be a funny story, a laugh at Sherly’s expense because he had been such a bastard to me. The tab-sheets blew the story all out of proportion. Nothing illegal happened.”

“The rags gave you quite a tidy sum for one silly story, enough to buy all of this,” Donovan eyed the cottage and the blooming front garden. “Those rags were owned by Magnussen, weren’t they?” When Janine didn’t answer, Donovan added coolly, “Maybe your boss wanted to humiliate Holmes further, since Holmes had been hired to investigate him.” When Janine still didn’t answer, Donovan tilted her head to one side. “Now your boss is dead.”

“I knew it,” Janine narrowed her eyes at Donovan, “This again. I already told you once, don’t go poking around Magnussen. You’ll bring nothing but misery on your head. Now, get out of my way, I’ve got things to do.” She clutched the car keys in her hand, feeling the grooves of the keys digging into her flesh, “And for the record, no. I didn’t sell any of the stories to papers owned by Magnussen.”

Unfazed, Donovan crossed her arms. “Did you ever meet Miss Violet Smith?”

Janine opened her mouth then closed it again. “Why are you here, if not about Magnussen?”

“Miss Smith is missing.”

“She is?”

“You didn’t know?”

“I don’t read John’s blog anymore,” she said truthfully.

“So you didn’t know that they’re claiming she died?”

“They? You mean Sherly and John?” When Sally nodded, Janine squeaked, “You think otherwise then, yeah?”

“No body? No funeral service? No grave marker? Only an entry posted on Dr. Watson’s blog asking fans to respect their privacy during a very difficult time?”
“Go on out of that,” Janine retorted scornfully.

“So you didn’t know that Dr. Watson had been abducted and brutally beaten, nearly died?”

“What? Oh God, no,” Janine knelt down and held her dog closer to her. “I didn’t.”

“The day that John Watson was abducted was the last time anyone saw Violet Smith.”

“Oh God,” Janine pressed her cheek against Alby’s furry head.

“Sherlock Holmes starts seeing you then only a few months later your boss is dead, shot through the head. Not even three months after that he starts seeing Violet Smith. Then her boss is found dead, shot through the head and her entire office was blown up by terrorists. Now, Violet Smith is missing and you’ve gone to ground here in East-Bloody-Nowhere-Sussex.”

“Hastings is not the middle of nowhere,” Janine muttered.

“Can you deny that there’s a pattern though?”

“You think… Miss Smith is missing because of Sherly?”

“I think it’s a possibility we can’t rule out.”

“I see,” Janine gave Alby’s silky, mismatched ears (one brown, one black-and-white) one more good scratch. Then she stood up, “C’mon then.” When Donovan gave her a bemused look, she sighed, “As you said, it’s rude not to offer you a cuppa. I was on my way to do food shopping though. I don’t have a crumb of cake or bite of biscuit to offer you. I’m out of milk too.”

“Tea’s fine,” Donovan pushed herself off the van and followed Janine into the cottage.

As the kettle boiled, they made stilted, awkward small talk… *Did you do all this yourself? Yeah, except for the big jobs, the tiles, the roof... Nice garden... Thanks... blasted bunnies got all my cabbages and cauliflower... Pity... Yeah...* After Janine served her a cup of milk-free, sugar-free, boring old Twinnings Breakfast Tea and sat down herself, Donovan thanked her then said, “Well, no sense putting it off much longer. As you said, you've got things to do today and I've got a long drive back to Cardiff.”

“You must really hate Sherly to keep coming after him like this.”

Thinking of Philip, thinking about his mashed-in head, she produced a thin, bitter smile, “I just want justice served.” She pulled out a small pen and pad of paper, similar to what John carried around. “Don’t suppose you’ll let me record this on my iPhone, will you?”

“No,” Janine said flatly.

Donovan waved her No away, as if to say, *Not a problem. You never answered my original question. Did you ever meet Miss Smith?*

“Once.”

“Where?”

“At a posh restaurant, grand opening, can’t remember the name of it right now, but there were loads of photogs, because of all the celebrities. I think Robert Downey Jr. was there. Or was it Tom Hiddleston? Dunno, one of those Marvel superhero actors.” Noticing that Donovan looked bored,
“And when was this?”

“Last summer, beginning of August. Right before the big Copper Beaches Massacre.”

Donovan continued to take notes, “How did you meet her? Did you run into her in the loo?”

“Err, no…”

“No?”

Bit by bit, Janine found herself confessing the entire, embarrassing story. “I had a bit too much to drink so when I saw my former fiancé sitting with his new girlfriend and she was wearing the diamond ring meant for me, I came unglued and made a complete idiot of myself.”

“How did Miss Smith react?”

“She ate my head off,” Janine felt the old humiliation washing over her again. “I mean, she was nice at first… but not a wishy-washy limp-rag sort of nice. She was no milksop. Was really polite, like you could tell she was brought up to have good manners. When I started yelling at Sherly for being such a can of piss, she kind of covered her face like this,” Janine hunched her shoulders and covered her face with both her hands. Then she straightened up, “But when I went to give Sherly a good smack across his snooty face, she was having none of it.”

“Oh?”

“She stood right up and grabbed my wrist.”

“That surprised you.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because it hurt,” unconsciously, she rubbed her wrist.

Donovan stopped writing. Both her eyebrows were lifted up in surprise. “It hurt?”

“Oh yeah, I thought she was going to break my wrist. Her nails dug into my skin, I had little crescent-moon shaped scratches for about a week or so.”

“So, she’s strong?”

“Oh, yeah, like a horse. Her dress showed a lot of skin, guess I should have noticed she was pretty much all muscle, but…” she trailed off, thinking about that sparkling diamond ring. “I was distracted, I guess.”

“She wasn’t frightened?”

“No. Not that I could tell.”

“You said her dress showed a lot of skin.”

“Nothing left to the imagination in that frock. The décolleté almost went all the way down to her
belly button. Bikinis covered more than that gown.”

“Did you notice any bruises or strange marks, scratches, cuts?”

“No but… she wore an awful lot of make-up. Really spackled it on, like she had loads of spots she was trying to hide.” When Donovan gave her another quizzical look, she explained, “My degree is in journalism, funny enough. My first gigs were freelance articles about beauty and fashion. I got a full-time job at one of Magnussen’s fashion mags. It didn’t do very well, couldn’t compete against *Vogue* and the like. When it went under, he hired me on as his PA.”

“I see,” Donovan eyed the faded sweatshirt and dungarees.

“Party frocks have no use in a garden,” Janine said hotly. “Another thing, whoever coloured her hair did a smashing job. If I hadn’t started my career writing about hair and make-up, I wouldn’t have noticed it was a dye job.”

“So… not ginger?”

“No. Probably dishwater blonde, but not sure, she even dyed her eyebrows.”

“How did she act around Holmes?”

Janine shrugged. “Like a proper girlfriend, I suppose. They were holding hands when I saw them so…” her throat worked as a bit of loneliness gnawed at her.

She couldn’t remember the last time a bloke just held her hand.

“How?”

“What?”

“How did he hold her hand?”

“Uh, well, like… OK, you be her…” Janine reached over and lifted Donovan’s hand gently, then held it up, as if showing off a new sparkly engagement ring. She gently held Donovan’s fingers as if they were made of glass. Then she let go, “Like that. Do you want another cuppa?”

Donovan shook her head. “What happened after the row in the restaurant?” “My date ditched me so I went home and had a good cry,” she said flatly.

“You never saw Miss Smith again?”

She shook her head.

“You never spoke to Holmes again?”

“No,” she whispered in a tiny voice, “Thought it was best to get a move on with my life.”

“I see,” Donovan bit the inside of her lower lip. Then snapped her notebook shut and slipped it into the back pocket of her jeans. “Right, well, thank you for your time.”

“Not sure how I helped,” Janine rose as Donovan did.

“You gave me a lot to think about,” Donovan assured her.

“Are you sure this isn’t about revenge?” Janine asked as she escorted her to the door. “He did kind
of fuck you over a time or two, coming back from the dead and all.”

“I just want to find Miss Smith safe and sound,” Donovan promised her. On the porch, she held out her hand, “Thank you for your time.”

“Can’t say it was a pleasure,” Janine said grimly as she shook Donovan’s proffered hand. Donovan nodded, not offended. She walked down the cracked stone steps then Janine called out to her, “Sally?”

“Yeah?”

“You still think Sherlock shot Magnussen, don’t you?”

“I’ve known him longer than you, Janine. You dodged a bullet with that one.”

*That’s the second time I’ve heard that*, Janine thought. Still, she soldiered on, knowing she owed Sherly this, after what she did. “The thing of it is, Sally, I hope he did. I hope he was the one who sent Magnussen to hell.” She walked down the stairs now and stood in front of Donovan, the sea breeze ruffling her ponytail. “You also still think Sherly molested me, don’t you, because of those stupid tabloid stories. Even though I just told you he didn’t. Well,” she lowered her voice. “I know what kind of man Sherly was… is and he was never into… that.” Her eyes watered but her voice shook in fury. “He was a monster, Magnussen. He had leverage over me, just like he had on everyone else. So I danced to his tune, just like everyone else. I was his trusted PA who did what she was told to do, no matter how degrading,” Her face crumpled in disgust. “Sometimes it wasn’t always sexual things either. Sometimes he couldn’t get it up, so he’d come up with other ways to… entertain himself,” she spat out in a brittle voice.

“Why on earth didn’t you report it?” Donovan held out her hands, as if she was going to embrace her. “We would have helped you.”

“Are you mad? He wasn’t called the “Napoleon of Blackmail” for nothing. With what that monster had on me, the Met wouldn’t have been able to help me. So, yeah, I laughed with joy and I thanked the Holy Mother when I heard he was dead.”

“I see,” Donovan sounded nonplussed, dropping her hands.

“Why?” Donovan took a step closer to Janine so they were nearly nose-to-nose. “You keep telling me he’s dangerous but you won’t tell me why.”

“Because he surrounded himself with dangerous people and those people have stepped into his place now that he’s dead.”

“What people?”

Janine nervously looked over her shoulder as if she expected to see someone sneaking up behind her. Then she whispered fiercely, “Moriarty’s people.” When Donovan didn’t reply, only stood stock-still, utterly gobsmacked, Janine ordered her, “You better go now. Don’t ever come back.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Then she re-opened them and calmly told her, “Yeah, I left London because of Sherlock Holmes, but also for loads of other reasons. My life is here now. It’s quiet, it’s boring and I like it that way. So please, go home.”
“Will you call me if you think of any other information that can help find Miss Smith?”

“I will, yeah,” Janine said sarcastically. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve lost an hour and a half of my morning,” she pushed Donovan aside as she made her way towards her van. Alby chased after her, trotting fast to catch up.

Donovan watched the dented van trundle off, towards town. Absently, she undid her tightly wound bun and sighed with relief as her hair puffed out like a cumulus cloud, framing her thin, tired face.

She didn’t walk back to her leased car right away. Instead, she followed the stone path to the sea. She removed her trainers and socks and rolled up her trousers. Despite the biting cold of the sea, she waded in up over her ankles.

She stood in the chilly sea for as long as she could bear it, admiring the variety of blues surrounding her, from the faintest almost arctic blue of the sky to the deep azure blue of the sea still untouched by the early morning light. She tilted her head back and breathed the salty tang of the sea into her lungs. Felt the warm kiss of spring sunlight on her face.

Once her mind calmed, she walked back to her vehicle, barefoot. She used her sock to brush the crusted on salt and sand from her feet then slipped her feet into sandals instead.

She drove into Hastings and found a café and ordered an egg-white omelet, wheat toast with plum jam and a pot of tea. Earl Grey this time, with lemon slices.

While she ate, she thought. The things she had learned at Janine’s cottage were consistent what she believed about Miss Smith. She was not an abuse victim. Nothing in Janine’s recitation indicated that Holmes mistreated her. He didn’t act possessive or controlling. No bruises or cuts on her body but…

She wore an awful lot of make-up…

“You’re definitely hiding something, Miss Smith,” Donovan murmured, as she studied the blurry pictures of her that had flooded Twitter and Tumblr over a year ago, when she fell off the Wobbly Bridge and Holmes jumped into the Thames after her.

When she finished her breakfast, she knew there was only one thing she could do.

She had to return to London.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not going to lie, I was disappointed that we didn't see Janine or Sally in Series 4. Even though she gets the shaft in this alternative universe, I really do adore the Janine character in Series 3. As for Sally... I REALLY wanted her to get called out for her role in The Fall... BUT... le sigh. We don't always get what we want.

I was really happy about the lack of Anderson though. I'm sure the actor is a very nice person in real life, but his voice just grates on my nerves. I recognized his voice in Rogue One and I was like "OMG it's Anderson!" And my Star Wars friends were like "Who?" So I explained "The one who lowers everyone's IQ in Sherlock" and they were like "Ah..." lol #whenfandomsunite

Have a great week everyone! :^)
Bad Bishop

Chapter Summary

Bad Bishop:

A bishop that is hemmed in by the player's own pawns.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventeen: Bad Bishop

13 April 2016
Newham, London
Monday afternoon
3:45 PM

Mary parked her ancient Fiesta a block away from where Susan’s parents lived. Or were supposed to live, since Susan had confided they moved around a lot.

“We lived in nice flats when Mum and Dad had jobs and shitty ones when they’re on the dole,” Susan had explained when Mary took her shopping for clothes appropriate for a young girl. Violet’s old things were too far formal for a fourteen year old. “So… you know, we mostly lived in shitty flats or bedsits. Sometimes in spare rooms if one of their friends had the space and didn’t mind a kid,” she had turned red-faced as she stared at T-shirts with funny slogans on the front and brightly-coloured skirts without really seeing them.

Seeing her flushed cheeks and watering eyes, Mary had gently asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just…” she fingered the sleeve of a lavender and pink flannel shirt. Her thumb ran over the pearly button on the cuff. “Just wish I could have taken some of my things with me. None of it was as nice as this stuff, but at least it was mine.” Green eyes flashing angrily, she snarled at the flannel shirts, “Or at least my iPhone. It was mine, I bought it. With my own money I made babysitting. He was just pissed ‘cause I had a job and he didn’t.” Her shoulders shook and her lips turned white with her efforts not to cry in a nice store. “The bugger probably sold it anyway.”

Mary hoped “the bugger” (whom she assumed was Susan’s father) hadn’t sold the mobile. She couldn’t afford to buy the girl an iPhone. Sherlock had given her a generous sum to buy the girl necessities such as clothes and shoes as well as her school fees once she was re-enrolled. However, Sherlock was clueless to the little luxuries teenage girls adored… and the big ones. Like their mobiles. To a teenager, social media was just as vital to existence as food and water.

Tracking down the Dobneys had been easier than Mary thought it was going to be. As she walked down the cracked pavement, ignoring the litter lying about, she rehearsed in her head what she was going to say to the Dobneys. She expected a row. She hoped for a row.

Something dark and deadly flowed through her veins. It had been ever since her argument with John in the cemetery, as if a dam had been broken but instead of water, poison spilled out instead,
polluting everything.

Following the directions on Google Maps, Mary arrived at a greengrocers’ simply called “Meat, Veg, Cheese and Tea.”

“What more in life do you need?” Mary muttered, looking up at the torn awning and faded letters of the sign above it.

Susan had said her parents’ last known residence had been a flat above a greengrocer. Not a Tesco or Sainsbury, but a sad, floundering mom-and-pop shop. Mary peeked into the window and saw that there was nothing green in it, just loads of tins and boxes. Processed foods, sugary cereals, powdered milk, laundry soap and bog rolls. She looked around, searching for the door that led to the flats above the store. There also appeared to be not a living soul inside the store, not even at the till. Mary looked around again; painfully aware just how very out of place she looked, in her smart navy pea coat, dark-washed jeans with the cuffs turned up and her pristine white trainers.

She really wasn’t worried, not with the derringer she had tucked into her coat pocket. Small, discreet, 9 millimeter, a dainty weapon, it was almost a joke of a gun, really. In her hands however, it was something completely lethal.

She found the door leading up to the flats, so coated in rust it nearly blended into the rest of the tannish-orange brick building. She tried to pull it open but it wouldn’t budge. “Damn,” she muttered, then noticed the intercom. “Here goes nothing,” she sighed, hitting the button with her thumb. She winced when a loud BZZTT crackled from the speakers.

After the buzzer, came a soft, feminine voice crackled over the intercom, “Yeah?”

Mary blinked, surprised. She had not expected a gentle voice. She hit the intercom button again, waited for the BZZTT then called loudly, “Hello? I’m looking for Mrs. Dobney?” When there was no response, she hit the intercom button again, cringed at the buzzer again and added, “Susan’s mum?”

Then there was a loud click. Mary tugged on the door handle and it opened with ease.

Mary let herself in and walked up the narrow staircase with trepidation. The walls had been recently whitewashed, but Mary could still see the faint outlines of gang symbols.

She wished she would have brought her Beretta or John’s Army Browning.

There was no friendly Mrs. Hudson type hovering around with tea and cakes. The concrete stairs lead straight up to the landing, covered with thinning carpet so dirty Mary wasn’t sure if it really was grey or if it was so filthy it had turned grey. There was only one door to the right, an ugly wooden thing that looked so flimsy that one good kick would be enough to smash it to bits.

Mary tapped on the door gently.

It opened a crack. One sea-foam green eye stared at her, “Yeah?”

“I’m Mary Watson,” Mary tucked a platinum curl behind her eye. “I’m looking for Susan Dobney’s mum and dad. Are you Mrs. Dobney?”

The door widened. A thin, dishwater-blonde woman stood in front of Mary. She wore a tattered pink dressing gown, dingy white slippers and utterly unflattering grey knee-socks. The delicate skin around her sea-foam green eyes was swollen with lavender smudges underneath. She didn’t have an ounce of superfluous fat on her body. However she had drooping cheeks and saggy breasts and
buttocks which made her look older than what she probably was, judging by her smooth throat and hands. More than likely, she had once been stout but now she looked like she could do with a feeding up.

“I’m Susan’s mum,” she whispered, wide-eyed and hunch-shouldered, as if she expected Mary to punch her in the face. “I’m Marion Dobney, but it’s Miss, not Mrs. Is Susie with you?”

“No,” Mary fumbled, expecting to do battle with rabid wolves and finding a petrified rabbit instead. “She is staying with me, though. May I come in?”

“Is she OK?” Tears sprang into Mrs. Dobney’s eyes.

“Um, yeah, she’s fine, she’s safe.”

“Oh, thank God,” Marion sniffled, searching in her dressing gown pockets for a tissue.

“Can we talk?” Mary started eyeing the thin woman with furrowed brows and a frown.

“Yeah, sure, come in,” Marion stood to the side.

Mary crept in, her guard up, her eyes open. The flat was practically Spartan, just one large room, not even a proper kitchen, just a countertop with a microwave, a toaster, a coffee pot and an electric kettle. The furniture was mismatched and all arranged around a telly on an old entertainment center that was obviously designed for the old tube style televisions, not the new flat screens. But everything was tidy. There was even a struggling philodendron plant trying to grow in a chipped Mickey Mouse mug on top of the entertainment center.

“Where’s Susan’s dad?”

Marion hobbled the three steps from the door to the flowered arm chair. “Not sure, he did a bunk when he found out I was up the duff,” she flopped down in apparent exhaustion. “Think he went to America but…” she trailed off, fidgeting with the belt of her dressing gown.

“Susan said her parents…?” Mary gingerly lowered herself down on the sofa, quite possibly the only nice piece of furniture in the cheerless room. Or at least, not nicked out of a skip for it still had a plastic covering over it. It made an embarrassing flatulent sound as Mary sat.

“Jimsie’s the closest to a dad she knows. Me and Jimsie, err, I mean James Browner that is, we’ve been off and on for years. We’re on again, ‘course.”

“You’re not married then.” Mary was startled at the woman’s willingness to share her life so easily and openly. But then, she had spent almost three years of her life with a man who would not open up even on the pains of death.

She’s lonely, Mary realized.

Marion shook her head, “Nah, never got ‘round to it. Guess we’d be common-law by now.”

“Was it Jimsie that… asked Susan to leave?”

Marion fiddled with the belt of her dressing gown. “They never got on, Jimsie and Susan.”

Mary’s training as a nurse kicked in. She eyed the thin woman, noticing not the robe or slippers but the thick knee-socks. “You’re diabetic.”

“How’d you guess that?” her mouth fell open in an 0. Then she grinned sheepishly. “Most people
look at me an’ assume I’m a junkie, a tweaker or something, since I’m so skinny. Didn’t used to be skinny, used to be kind of pudgy until my kidneys went kaput.”

“Your socks,” Mary pointed down.

“Ohhh,” Marion looked down and wiggled her toes. “Yeah, don’t need to amputate my feet, not with everything else going on with me. You figured out I got the diabetes just from my socks?” she chuckled, truly tickled. “You’re like that one detective the gossip rags write about every now and again… the know-all who wears the funny hat, oh you know! The bloke people thought was dead, but he really wasn’t.” She dropped her voice to a conspirator’s whisper. “Had a pretty ginger fiancée for a bit but she was just his beard ‘cause his boyfriend runs his blog.”

Mary smiled thinly. “I’m a nurse.”

“Eh?”

“I’m a nurse,” Mary pointed down again at Marion’s feet. “I recognize diabetic socks.”

“Oh, right.” Marion gave her toes another wiggle, “Been on dialysis for the past year or so. I read the tab-sheets while I’m getting my treatments,” she added sheepishly. “Passes the time.”

“Mmm,” Mary nodded, wanting to gain the woman’s trust but also feeling desperately impatient.

“Haven’t been able to work, so when both me and Jimsie’s out of work, it gets tense around here, even with my disability benefits. Jimsie always threatens to throw Susan out. I just… didn’t think he’d actually do it this time.” She mopped her eyes with the soggy tissue. “Sorry, I’m rude. Didn’t offer you a cuppa. I can put the kettle on, if you like.”

“You let him throw out your own daughter,” Mary said in a flat voice, ignoring Marion’s niceties. All she could think about was her own child, her little girl out there somewhere, not knowing that her mother loved her with all her heart and still searched for her.

*Meanwhile, this stupid cow didn’t appreciate the child she had. Let her boyfriend throw the teenager out without two pence to rub together...*

“I can’t work,” Marion hissed, correctly reading Mary’s stony face. “I go to dialysis every three days. The dole don’t cut it. The rent for this shithole is seven hundred pounds. That’s the cheapest we could find and it’s only one bedroom. Susie’s had to sleep on the sofa. The heat’s dodgy and we have to pay that separate, it ain’t included in the rent. Neither is the electric or water and sometimes the loo don’t flush and we have to use the grocers’ washroom. But…” she took a deep breath, her face lighting up with hope. “Jimsie’s got a good job now, works nights at a warehouse. If he don’t muck things up, if he can keep this job, then… well, maybe we three can work something out but…” she shook her head, as if her brain was an Etch-a-Sketch and she had to shake out her previous thoughts to start a new one. “Anyway, I didn’t think Susie would just run off. I thought she’d go to one of her friends’ houses.”

“She was found in Westminster,” Mary deliberately kept her voice cold, “Sick, no jacket, utterly alone with no money.”

Marion sat up as straight as she could. “I thought she’d go to her friend’s house,” she snapped back. “I thought I’d go get her and bring her home after Jimsie cooled off. Then when I realized she didn’t go to any of her friends’ houses, I thought she’d have the sense to come back.” Her eyes were slits now, “Did you come here to tell me about my daughter or judge me? I know I haven’t done right by her. I was her age when I got knocked up. Baby daddy was only a few years older than me and took
off for America or Australia or Antarctica for all I know. Me? Never finished school, couldn’t. Had a baby to feed. So I waitressed until my kidneys went to shit. I was no café waitress or barmaid neither. I was a good waitress. I worked at smart restaurants, fancy ones. I can speak proper when I have to and I used to be good-looking, even when I was fat.” She glared at Mary now. “And Susie could be selfish. Instead of contributing to the household, she hoarded her money from babysitting and bought a bloody iPhone instead of helping pay the electric bill. Play on Snapchat and arse around on Facebook instead of doing her homework. She was always a little bitch to Jimmie too, disrespectful brat. And her going on that she likes girls instead of boys, well, that’s just a phase,” she sniffed.

“I don’t think so,” Mary said quietly.

Marion glared at her with open hostility now. “What do you want? We don’t got any money.”

“For heaven’s sake, of course I don’t want your money,” Mary snapped while making a mental note to tell John things could be profoundly worse whenever he whinged about their financial woes. “She’s your daughter. I thought you’d want to know she was alright.”

“Of course I want to know! Don’t be daft. Every mother wants to know if her baby’s OK.”

Mary felt a stinging pain in her belly.

If it hadn’t been for Moriarty, she’d still be pregnant with John’s son.

If it hadn’t been for Mycroft, she’d be taking their seventeen-month-old daughter to play-dates with other toddlers.

“Yes, of course, forgive me;” Mary lowered her eyes. “That was thoughtless.”

Marion covered her face. “If I could afford to leave Jimmie, I would but I can’t. I can’t work. My parents are dead. Most of my friends are just as broke as me so they can’t help. Plus,” she lowered her hands. “Fact is, I don’t have much time left really. Unless I get a transplant, but I don’t qualify,” she snorted with mirthless laughter. Then her face softened. “Susie offered to donate one of hers, but I wouldn’t let her. She’s too young. She’s got her whole life ahead of her…” Lips trembling now, she whispered. “So, are you like a foster mum to her or something?”

“Something like that,” Mary nodded.

“You… don’t mind her? Susie?”

“Not a bit.” Mary said calmly while again hating Sherlock for being right. “As I said, I thought you’d want to know that Susan is OK, but also… well, I was wondering if I could pick up a few of Susan’s things? Her clothes and such…”

“Oh, Jimmie got rid of the lot,” Marion clumsily tucked a hank of dishwater blonde hair behind her ear. As her dressing gown sleeve slid down, Mary also observed several finger-shaped bruises on her thin forearm. “Sold her clothes and laptop and things but… I managed to save a few things from the car boot sale.” She slowly hoisted herself up with a grimace of pain then toddled towards the cardboard table that apparently doubled as the dining room table. Next to it was a Zimmer, held together by duct tape.

“Do you need help?” Mary rose; her nursing instincts once again triggered.

“I’ll manage, just… give me a minute,” Marion groused as she started hobbling towards the back rooms of the dingy loft.
Mary thought an ice age had passed but Marion hobbled back into the main room. She had a shoebox tucked under her arm and held a bedraggled Winnie-the-Pooh in her teeth by its ear.

She plopped down on the sofa next to Mary. The plastic cover again made a farting noise, louder than before. “Good thing Jimsie don’t check under the bed,” she chuckled after letting poor Pooh fall from her mouth and into her lap. “Pooh-bear was the first thing I hid,” she said proudly, petting the silly old bear on his head. Then she scowled, “And her precious iPhone. Probably could have gotten three-hundred quid for it, but…” she shoved the toy bear and the box towards Mary. “It’s in there along with some pictures and jewelry. Nothing fancy, just costume bits and bobs she picked up here and there. Her charger’s in there too…so…” she cleared her throat. “If you could tell her that we’ve got our phones turned back on again, so if she wanted to give her old Mumsie a call…” she folded her lips together.

“You can visit any time you lik-” Mary started but Marion shook her head violently.

“You’re nice people, I can tell. Smart clothes, you talk nice all the time, not when you have to, you’re a nurse so you’ve done more school than me. Probably live in a posh borough too.”

“I wouldn’t call our neighborhood posh. It’s not Chelsea or Belgravia.”

“But it’s probably nicer than here. Probably don’t have used Durexes, needles and other nasty bits on the pavement, do you?”

“Um… no.”

“Married?”

“Yes.”

“Nice bloke?”

Mary’s face softened. “Very nice, the kindest man I’ve ever met.”

“Makes a good living?”

“He does alright. We get by.”

“He don’t mind Susie?”

“Not at all.”

Marion shook her head. Mary began to wonder if it was a nervous tic. “I wouldn’t fit in. She probably hates me for not stopping Jimsie from throwing her out but he’s got a temper.” She gave Mary a tremulous smile. “One thing I did right was get life insurance. It ain’t much, but Susie’s the sole beneficiary,” she said the last word very slowly. Her smile grew bigger. “See? Told you I could speak nice if I had to, yeah?” She looked like a little girl looking for praise after reciting the ABCs correctly.

Mary gave it to her, “Nicely done.”

“Cheers, Mrs. Watson,” Marion beamed. “Anyway, Susie gets all the money when I kick the bucket. It should be enough to pay for university or maybe a little flat of her own during her gap year or something.”

“That was very responsible of you.”
“Jimsie don’t know,” Marion’s face tensed up. “If he did, he’d make me change it so he’d get all the money.”

“He won’t know.”

“You really don’t mind keeping Susie for me?”

Damn you Sherlock… Mary quietly fumed again as she said serenely, “She’s a lovely girl. I’m not just saying that. I’ll give these to her for you and encourage her to ring you.”

Marion started sobbing in earnest. Mary awkwardly patted her back until she straightened up. “You better go. Jimsie’ll be home soon. You probably shouldn’t be here.”

Mary nodded, at a rare loss for words. She had never met someone so pathetic yet oddly endearing at the same time. Poor thing, about as bright as a burnt out light bulb, she never had a chance, not really, Mary thought pityingly as she slipped out of the flat and hurried down the stairs, clutching the shoebox and Winnie-the-Pooh.

When she opened the door, she gasped a little. A tall, sallow-faced man with bushy black hair blocked her way. He filled up the entire doorframe.

“Who the hell are you?” he snapped.

“James Browner?”

“Who wants to know? And you didn’t answer my question.”

“Social worker,” Mary immediately lied. “Checking up on Susan Dobney, she’s been truant from school for over a fortnight now.”

“She ain’t my kid,” he eyed the stuffed toy and shoebox in her hands. “Hang on, if she’s truant, why you got her old bear?” He lifted his head up to Mary’s face. His eyes were rheumy, his pupils blown. His breath smelt foul, like stale beer, greasy fish and pork crisps. Then his hand came down and slapped the box and the toy bear out of Mary’s hands. The box’s contents spilled out, including a candy pink iPhone, clearly an older model.

“That little bitch, I knew that bloody mobile was somewhere!” he roared, bending down to pick it up, but Mary was faster. Quick as a flash, she drew her derringer, took the safety off, cocked it and jammed the barrel against his skull.


“Who the fuck are you?” he demanded but he was smart enough to raise his hands.

“Someone who only needs one bullet to end you,” Mary never raised her voice. “Go back to the pub. Have another drink. Don’t do anything cute like step on the mobile or kick the teddy. I want you to leave. If you decide to return, be kind to your common-law wife. I’m going to be checking up on her often now.”

“I can knock that pea-shooter out of your little hands,” he sneered.

“Try.”

The frigid, one syllable word not only got his attention but sobered him up.

“Back away from me now, slowly. Keep your eyes on the ground.”
He did as he was commanded until he was out of arm’s reach of her. Only then lifted his eyes and saw the same cold, dead face Sherlock Holmes saw the night Mary put a bullet in his chest. Browner felt his bowels liquefy as his throat seized up. He knew without a shred of doubt, this woman would kill him. He also knew she wouldn’t feel bad about it.

“Put Susan’s things back in the shoe box,” Mary ordered him, her voice never wavering, still pointing her tiny gun at Browner’s throat. When he saw her small weapon, he actually giggled but she calmly informed him, “If I pull the trigger right now, the bullet will rip straight through your carotid artery. You’d make quite a mess as you bled out, but it would be over quickly.”

Browner gulped, then knelt down and hastily put Susan’s trinkets, photographs and mobile in the shoebox. He closed the lid, put it on the bottom step and set poor old Pooh bear next to it.

Mary waved him away with the gun. He shut the door and bolted.

Mary felt her knees give way and she leaned against the wall to catch her breath. *Too close*, she chastised herself. *You’re getting soft. You’re getting slow.*

She tucked the gun away, scooped up the box and bear and hurried away from the building, walking as quickly as she could to her car. As she walked, she constantly looked over her shoulder. Her heart thudded in her chest, convinced that Browner was waiting for her around every corner or even by her car.

He was not. Mary thanked her stars, unlocked the car door as quickly as possible, threw Susan’s box and bear in and slid in herself. She locked the door and started the car, suddenly paranoid that her old Fiesta would choose now to die.

It didn’t, of course. Soon, she was on the motorway, back towards the city, back towards her modest terrace home and small garden and ugly, lovable dog and new foster daughter.

*Don’t think about the husband who abandoned you…*

Still, Mary found herself pulling over in the first car park she could find once she was out of Newham. Her hands had started shaking badly and she thought she was going to be sick.

Mary turned the car off and covered her eyes with her hand, still not sure if she was going to vomit. She had been in tight situations before. But she had been younger, fitter and had nothing to lose back then. Now she was older, still slim and active, but had lost two things that meant the world to her and felt like she was about to lose the third.

What are you doing? She scrubbed at her mouth, sure that shoppers were staring at her as they made their way towards the shopping centre she had parked at. Why do you care so much about this girl? Why are you trying to save her?

Because I wanted someone to save me, she admitted to herself as she leaned her forehead against the steering wheel. And I want someone to save my daughter and bring her back to me… Tears pricked her eyes.

I am not a bad person. I am tired of being treated like the bad guy…

Her mobile whirred.

Mary sat up and dug it out of her back jeans pocket. “This is Mary Watson.”

“Mary, it’s Sherlock. I’m on a prepaid. My brother probably has my mobile tapped.”
Bloody hell, she thought wearily. She was not in the mood for his theatrics and condescension. “Hi, Sherlock,” she struggled to make herself sound like herself, like Mary Watson, all sweetness and sass, “Everything alright?”

“You said you wanted a job, something more than baby-sitting a prepubescent street urchin and delivering meals to my decoys at 221B while I’m away?”

Mary frowned. There was an unusual tenseness to his normally urbane and placid voice. John would have recognized that strained tone in Sherlock’s voice at once. Sherlock sounded the same as he had the night “Richard Brook” made his appearance at Kitty Riley’s flat.

“I want to help,” she said carefully. “I want to help bring Violet home as much as anyone.”

Then Violet will be back in your flat and your bed. Then my husband will come home and together the four of us can find Maisie… all will be well then.

“Find the fucking bastard who is killing my Network members and cutting off their ears!”

Mary blinked. She was glad she was not driving during this call. She had never heard Sherlock so vehement before and she had never heard him use a swear word harsher than Damn. “Sherlock, I don’t understand?”

“You’re a former CIA operative; surely you’ve had some investigative training? I can’t pursue the case, obviously. I am literally in the middle of nowhere at the moment…what?” Mary could hear some muffled conversation in the background, then an explosive, exasperated sigh. “Apparently we’re in Indiana. And no, I do not know how to change a bloody tyre!”

We, who’s we? Who is he shouting at? “Is Violet with you?”

Is John with you?

“No, we’re en route to fetch her. Mary, you’re the only one I can trust to aid Lestrade and Molly to track down this villain. Even I can’t be in two places at once.”

“Sherlock, what happened?”

Dead silence. Afraid the call had dropped, she repeated herself: “Sherlock, what happened?”

In a soft and pained voice, like the first guttural roll of thunder before the storm broke, Sherlock groaned in actual sorrow. “Oh Mary…” he whispered, as if she was actually his friend.

“Sherlock?”

“They found Raz’s body.”

Chapter End Notes

Normally, if I base an O/C off of an ACD canon character, I like to give credit where credit is due... but if I do that for this chapter, it's a great big fat spoiler. So proper credit will have to wait 0:(
Dead Draw

Chapter Summary

Dead Draw

A drawn position in which neither player has any realistic chance to win. A dead draw may refer to a position in which it is impossible for either player to win (such as insufficient material), or it may refer to a simple, lifeless position which would require a major blunder before either side would have a chance to win.

+++ 

Trigger warning for violence and general ick.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eighteen: Dead Draw

20 April 2016
The Grafton Arms
Victoria, London
Wednesday
7:15 PM London Time

Sally nursed a gin and tonic while periodically checking the time on her Smartwatch, an Asus ZenWatch 2. She wasn’t one who caved to technology trends, but she discovered she really liked it and it was a great tool in her new profession. It was durable and affordable for starters. It also gave her the ability to record conversations incognito, had voice recognition so she didn’t have punch a lot of buttons to find the app she wanted and most importantly, it also had a pre-set that allowed her to send SOS messages if she got into a tight situation.

Also, she thought it was rather pretty, as she had opted for the rose-gold colour.

She sighed as she nearly finished her drink. She contemplated getting another when her appointment finally arrived.

“Jesus Christ, Donovan,” wheezed a tall man with a pot belly, wearing an ill-fitting suit. He slid into the snug across from her. His white hair had a yellowish tinge and it looked greasy and unwashed. He dropped his black rucksack underneath the table. “Could you have picked a different pub?”

“Hi, Whitey,” Donovan coolly addressed DI Walter Mason. “Nice to see you, too.”

“The fucking Yard is right across the street. Anyone could come in,” he hissed.

Donovan shrugged. “What would they see? Two old colleagues enjoying a drink.” She took the last swallow of her drink and swirled the melting ice chips around in her tumbler. “Besides, the only two people who would be suspicious are both married with kids. They’ll be going home instead of coming here.”
Mason’s face twisted, knowing exactly which “two people” Donovan was talking about. “Still can’t believe they promoted that little dyke MacDonald to sergeant after you left. Completely unfit for the job, was absolutely insubordinate to me when I was her superior,” Mason snarled. “But Lestrade’s gone soft ever since he got hitched again. Practically lets the Freak have full access to the Met now.”

“Get me a refill,” Donovan held up her glass. “Your shout since you were late.”

He grinned. “I always liked you, Sally. No bullshit about you.” He slapped the table for emphasis and went to place their orders. Soon he returned, carrying another gin and tonic as well as a pint of pale ale. “Put in an order for the Fisherman’s Platter too. Figured we could share,” he glanced down at his protruding belly. “Need to lose a few pounds before the next physical.”

“Sounds good,” Donovan accepted her drink with thanks. As Mason sat back down, she asked, “So how are things at the Met, really?”

“Well, we had a bit of excitement back in December, of course, when Moriarty came back.” He lifted his pint to his lips but didn’t drink. “Felt awful about John Watson and his wife, when Moriarty stabbed her in the shopping centre,” he took a fortifying sip. “Losing their baby and all. Very sad.”

“Speaking of babies,” Donovan pounced on the opening, “Is it true that Lestrade’s son was almost taken by Moriarty?”

“Oh yeah, the Met tried to keep that out of the press, wouldn’t confirm anything, as a favour to Lestrade, well, really as a favour to Missus-Doctor Lestrade.” Mason softened. He genuinely liked Molly, as most people did. “She was a wreck, of course. She saved Mrs. Watson’s life after Moriarty stabbed her, but she had to watch that nutter take her baby boy away.”

“Is it true that Violet Smith followed Jim through the shopping plaza? Offering herself in the child’s place?”

“Yeah.” His face scrunched up as he scratched his cheek. “Some eye-witnesses said they thought they saw some sort of ear piece, like a Bluetooth in her ear. They think she was talking to someone on the phone as she followed Moriarty and the kid.”

“What else did eye-witnesses say? That’s not in the official reports,” Donovan knew full well that the minute Jim Moriarty revealed himself in The Plaza on Oxford Street, MI-6 immediately swooped in and declared bagsies on jurisdiction.

“She had a gun,” he quietly confided. “The shop keep at the High and Mighty store watched her pull it out of her handbag when Moriarty attacked Mrs. Watson. She told him she was a cop.”

Donovan arched her eyebrow, again recalling her first meeting with the prim, bespectacled woman. Then she remembered how calm and collected Smith had been when she rescued Donovan from being blown to bits. “Obviously she’s not in the Met. What else was left out?”

“The High and Mighty shop keep said he was taunting her, Moriarty,” Mason took another drink. “Said something about her brother being murdered?”

Donovan crossed her arms, “Thought she was an only child?”

“Exactly,” Mason touched his finger to his nose. “After Holmes let Moriarty stroll away before the building blew up to kingdom come, I did a Google search for Miss Violet Emilie Laura Smith.”

Donovan already done her research but she allowed Mason to continue. “And?”
“She’s a ghost, no, that’s not right,” Mason frowned, his forehead wrinkling. Donovan noticed for the first time that his hairline had receded greatly since she’d last seen him. “She’s like Venus, in that one famous painting? Miss Smith sprang up from nowhere. She has no social media except for a personal email, velsmith8578@hotmail.com, but that was useless. Her old subordinates at Carruthers Brokerage Firm said she was civil but cold. Polite, but not very friendly, stand-offish without being snobby and she definitely did not like her picture taken. She always refused to be in any group photo for the office. They all said she had no family, no friends and no social life. The only interests she seemed to have outside of work, was tutoring kids in languages and music and her dog. Other than that, she seemed to live and die for her job.”

Donovan leaned forward, resting her forearms on the table, “I followed her paper trail,” she disclosed to Mason. “Her school records and employment history,” she lowered her voice. “No one at any of the schools she claimed to have attended remember her. Also, she has no employment history prior to 2008. Some of her underlings at Carruthers said they remembered her saying she had lived abroad for a period of time, in America. But there is no record of a Violet Smith in the United States at all… at least, not one born on August 5, 1978.”

“You don’t think she’s who she says she is, do you?”

“No,” Donovan said flatly. “I think the whole regal governess act is just that, an act. When she used to come with Holmes on crime scenes, there was something about her… the way she acted, the things she said…”

“She sounded like one of us,” Mason whispered. “Like a cop.”

“But I don’t think she’s an ordinary cop though.”

“MI- 6? Interpol?”

“Possibly, maybe even an American agency.”

“America?”

Donovan massaged her forehead, as if the memory she wanted would materialize the way a genie does when one rubs a lamp. “That day at the candy factory, right before it exploded… I could barely walk. I had been tied up for days. The blood flow to my feet was very poor. Phillip…” A lump formed in her throat. She swallowed it down. Clutching her tumbler, she forced herself to continue. “Phillip was trying to help me. We were so close to the entrance, we might have made it out in time if I hadn’t been…”

“Sally,” Mason clamped his hand over hers. “It wasn’t your fault, what happened to Phillip. Phillip Anderson was a good man. He’s also,” he lowered his voice again, “Not the first man that Freak Holmes drove around the bend. Many of the criminals that Holmes,” he snorted derisively. “Brought to justice, ended up in asylums and mental hospitals. Not prison.”

Donovan forced herself to smile, just a small upturn of the lips. Her face hurt with the effort. “I know. It still hurts though.”

“Course it does,” Mason patted her hands and retreated. “It wasn’t a secret that Phillip was, errr, a Special Friend of yours. It also wasn’t a secret that his wife is, was, whatever… a flaming bitch. Some say she only pulled the plug to collect the insurance money, but it couldn’t be proven, which was a pity.”

Donovan knew that was idle gossip, but she appreciated Mason’s sentiments behind it. “Anyway,”
she cleared her throat, getting the conversation back on track. “We were so close to the entrance, but I wasn’t moving fast enough. Violet made a run for it, leaving me and Phillip behind. Phillip stopped to pick me up, carry me out of the building. I weighed him down,” tears sprang into her rum-coloured eyes.

“Sally, don’t tear yourself apart,” Mason said kindly, tilting his head to the side, smiling a little. “He loved you. He really did, you know.”

Hearing that somehow made it all the worse. Donovan fought for composure. “We were so close, so bloody close to the entrance… but the bomb went off.” She slammed her lips together and looked up at the ceiling, calming herself. “Before it did though, I could have sworn I heard an American woman outside shouting.”

Mason had been in the process of taking another drink. He set his pint down. “What?”

“Exactly,” Donovan had herself under control again. “I thought I heard an American woman shouting ‘Go, go, go,’ and the strangest bit is, the voice was familiar, as if I had heard it before, I’m just not sure where. But I don’t trust my memory at all because when the building blew, both Phillip and I were flung through the air. I hit my head, hard when I landed. I was unconscious, had a serious concussion. Everything that happened right before the explosion is still jumbled, I remember bits and pieces, and one of the bits I remember is that voice, shouting…”

“‘Go, go, go…’” Mason murmured. “That is strange. Do you think that it was Miss Smith? That she’s actually not English?”

“I’ll know for sure when I find her,” Donovan muttered darkly before taking a drink.

“You don’t buy it, do you? The whole ‘dying in a plane crash’ bit?” When Donovan shook her head, Mason grinned bitterly, “Neither do I.”

“Did you ever meet her? Miss Smith?”

“No… but apparently I had met The Great Consulting Detective,” he spat out the title in scorn. “Before he was Great.”

“Oh?”

Before Mason could go on, their sharing platter arrived. After the bar maid, a shapely woman with swampy green eyes and thick black curls, sauntered off, Mason helped himself to crispy calamari and pickled onion. Donovan picked at the chips. “Sorry, am starving,” he mumbled through mouthfuls. He wiped his lips with a serviette then said, “Because of Holmes’ meddling in the Burned Girls case, I got put on formal written warning.”

He didn’t bother disclosing that the reason he was put on written warning was because he had hurled misogynistic and homophobic slurs at Sergeant Alex MacDonald after she took the initiative to continue surveillance on Jepthro Rucastle after Mason had thrown her off the case. She had also requested search warrants for the escort service Westaways Cortege and Rucastle’s business offices at Persephone Ltd, based off an “anonymous tip.” On top of Alex filing a complaint against Mason for his chauvinistic behavior, Lestrade also reported his concerns about Mason’s fitness for duty to their superior officers. Prior to the Burned Girls case, Mason had also bollocked up two major homicide cases as well.

He currently held onto his job by the skin of his teeth.

“I picked up where you left off,” he told Donovan instead. “Started digging into Holmes and know
what I had found? Before I applied for my transfer to CID,” he explained. “I used to work in the
Gangs and Organized Crime division. Sometimes I was partnered up with Lestrade. I don’t know if
you knew he used to be SCO19, when he was young. Lost the taste for it, preferred to mop up a
crime scene instead of going in guns blazing while a crime was in progress,” Mason said disdainfully
even though he would have caked himself if he had seen the action Lestrade had before he made the
decision to transfer to the Homicide and Serious Crime Division. Mason only felt bitter that Lestrade
had moved up the ranks of the Criminal Investigation Department faster than he had. “Lot of times,
my division helped with drugs busts, especially when we took down gang-affiliated dealers peddling
their poison. Also infiltrated loads of drug dens, never knew what we were going to find.”

Donovan helped herself to a piece of cod and started munching.

“Apparently, I had arrested the Great Detective multiple times in those busts.”

Donovan swallowed, “Oh really? I mean, I knew he was a junkie, but I always thought he was a
trust fund baby pissing his inheritance away on blow.”

“He was no toff uni lad dabbing with cocaine because he was bored with his studies and other First
World Problems. He hit whatever was below rock bottom. See, I never put two and two together
until now. His ID card said “William Holmes,” not “Sherlock.” After all, Sherlock’s a bit more of a
memorable name than William. Plus it also had been nearly ten, fifteen years ago, so no wonder I
didn’t realize who he was when he started showing up at crime scenes with Lestrade’s blessing. But
back then, when he was still using,” Mason shook his head dourly, looking like a disapproving vicar.
“He looked as disheveled and malnourished as the rest of the junkie lot, dirty jeans, shabby hoodies
and scabby elbows.” He smeared seafood pate on a baguette as Donovan nibbled on chips. “You
see, these flophouses he frequented were the lowest of the low. Sharing dirty needles,” he dropped
his voice conspiratorially. “Providing sexual favours in exchange for drugs,” he tore off of bite of
baguette and pate. “I wonder what the world would think if they knew that their beloved detective
had once been busted for prostitution.”

Donovan couldn’t help but scoff, “Sherlock Holmes, a rent-boy? But there’s no record…” she trailed
off then whispered, “There’s no record.”

“Right again in one,” Mason winked. “There’s no criminal record for William Sherlock Scott
Holmes at all, except for when he was arrested for the abduction of the ambassador’s children and
for when he and Dr. Watson were both scooped up for being drunk and disorderly after getting
pissed at the good doctor’s stag party. All of his offences are just… gone… poof,” he flourished with
his hand. “Like a puff of smoke.”

“His brother does work for the government, yes?”

“Yeah, but in a minor capacity, some sort of glorified secretary, so far as I can tell,” he reached for
the pate again. “However, Holmes’ family, well they’re rich. Not just well-off but filthy rich. Old
money plus the mother is an author in her own right, mostly mathematical texts; I tried to read one of
her books but it was over my head,” he confessed.

“You think his family bought the Met off to save their son from scandal,” Donovan murmured.

“I also think,” Mason looked around the pub before whispering to Donovan, “Based on what I’ve
read and researched, I think you’re right about Miss Smith. She’s not who she says she is and she’s
not dead. I also think Holmes had something to do with Magnussen’s death. He had motive and he
was at Appledore that night. Records show that Magnussen sent one of his private helicopters to
Holmes’ parents’ house on Christmas. It was ruled to be circumstantial because it couldn’t be
confirmed that Holmes or Watson actually got on the chopper.”
“Hold on… what about the pilot?”

“Disappeared,” Mason smiled thinly.

“How convenient,” Donovan pushed the platter away closer to Mason, no longer hungry.

“Everything about Holmes is convenient, haven’t you noticed that by now?” Mason reached for his pint. He looked over his shoulder again, then whispered to Donovan, “I think you’ll come to the same conclusion that I did after you read the files. I believe, with all my heart that Miss Smith is no mild-mannered PA. I think she’s a double-agent. At first I thought Interpol but now I think CIA. I think they know Holmes is dirty. He’s a drug addict, a possible murderer and a lunatic on top of all that. I think Miss Smith was put in Holmes’ path on purpose. I think she was sent to spy on him.”

“Spy on him for what?”

“I think Holmes was working with Moriarty, not trying to stop him,” Mason said in triumph, proud of his good detective work. “I think Holmes faked both their deaths and he probably faked Jim Moriarty’s death again. That fucker is still probably alive.”

“Holmes and Moriarty… are working together?”

“Makes sense, don’t you think? Moriarty commits his crimes, then Holmes waltzes in, pretending to solve the crime but is really covering up Moriarty’s tracks. Collars some minor criminal so when that poor sod gets the blame, Moriarty gets clean away.”

“And Miss Smith knew this?”

“I do and I think she got too close. When Holmes figured out what she was up, she….”

“Disappeared,” Donovan leaned back in her seat, smoothing a sooty curl that had worked free of her French twist.

“What’s worse, I think Holmes is looking for her as well, but at least we have the advantage, for a bit. Turns out he’s seriously ill, nursing a bleeding ulcer,” Mason looked vindicated and vindictive all at the same time, his beady eyes gleaming with undisguised glee and malice. “He hasn’t been to the Yard in weeks. Ordered on bed-rest, he hasn’t left Baker Street in ages.”

“That is good news,” Donovan muttered. “We can get ahead of him for once. The problem is we don’t know where Miss Smith could have gone.”

“I have a theory.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I think John Watson’s abduction was a cover. I don’t think Watson was in on it, after all, nice fellow, as a bit of a temper but not that bright.”

Donovan disagreed with the last bit. She had met John Watson enough times to know he was actually quite intelligent. He was a doctor after all. Still, she held her tongue.

“I think Holy Peters was sent to abduct Watson to distract Holmes. While Holmes searched for Watson, Miss Smith was extradited. After all, do you believe that it’s really a coincidence that John Watson disappeared the same night Violet Smith did?”

“No, I do not.”
Also, they didn’t kill him. Beat the tar out of him, but if they wanted him dead, they would have just blown his brains out. He escaped with a broken wrist.” Mason shrugged, oblivious that John had nearly bled out from his lacerated spleen. “Think that would be enough incentive for him to give up the detective’s life and stay home with his pretty wife.”

“I tried to warn him,” Sally scowled, “Long time ago to stay away from Sherlock Holmes.”

“If he wasn’t married to that pretty blonde, I would have sworn he was a poof just like Holmes. That’s the other reason why the whole engagement story to me was dodgy. When Holmes got busted for, ah, services rendered… he was not in the company of a female.”

Donovan swallowed down her distaste. Mason had mentored her when she had first started at the Met and she respected his detective skills greatly. However she never cared for his narrow-minded thinking and his habit of “just saying what others were thinking.” It had taken a long time for her to get him to stop calling her “that lady constable” or worse, “the darkie girl.” But he had apologized, told her he really didn’t have a problem with race, just that he was “old school” and forgot those labels weren’t OK anymore. What was important to him, was that she was a damn fine police officer.

“So…” she sidestepped his homophobic comments. “If I find Holy Peters…”

“You find Violet Smith or whoever the hell she is. Find Violet Smith and drag her by her chestnut hair to the nearest magistrate and get her to spill the dirt on Holmes. He’s dangerous,” Mason’s face tightened. “He needs to be off the street and spend the rest of his life in a cell.”

“Agreed,” Donovan raised her glass. Mason raised his and clinked it against Donovan’s.

Together, they set to work on demolishing the Fisherman’s Platter, Donovan’s appetite returning. They had another round of drinks then Mason said his good-nights. Donovan indulged in one more gin and tonic, slowly. She had no plans on getting intoxicated although she felt pleasantly tipsy. She needed a reason why she didn’t leave right away after Mason. She paid the check then scooped up the heavy black rucksack Mason had left behind.

Inside were police files Mason had copied for her.

The first file was the report on Sherlock being shot in Charles Augustus Magnussen’s office.

The second file was about the March 11, 2015 bombing of the surgery on the East End.

The third file in the March 13th fire in the City of London, which had destroyed Miss Smith’s flat.

The fourth file was about the March 15th bombing of the Carruthers Brokerage Firm

The fifth file was about Robert Caruthers’ murder, also dated March 15, 2015.

The sixth file was the Copper Beaches Massacre.

The seventh file was Jim Moriarty’s return last December.

The eighth file was John Watson’s abduction last January.

*I have a lot of reading to do tonight,* Donovan thought as she hailed a cab.

Meanwhile, after Donovan had left, the dark-haired bar maid who had brought the Fisherman’s Platter to Donovan and Mason asked her boss if she could take a quick break. “I’m gasping for a fag,” she told him, batting her heavily mascara’ed eyes at him.
Her boss, the head barman, waved her off. She ducked out of the pub and into the alley. Hiding behind a skip, she pulled her mobile out of her apron pocket and hit a speed-dial button. “It’s Freddie Porlock. That former copper you asked me to keep an eye on once she got to London? Yeah, you were right. She’s going to be a major problem. Didn’t learn the first time she stuck her nose in our business. She’s got it in her head to look for Holy Peters.”

Across the city, an old man with hair like a silver lion’s mane drummed his neatly manicured nails on his desk. “So now we have our wild card in this great game,” he muttered.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Continue monitoring her.”

“What if she finds Peters?”

“Let her,” Professor Moriarty said. “Peters can deal with her in his own special way. Just make sure she stays out of my way until her path crosses with Peters.”

He rang off then sent a quick text. Then he returned to his reading of *The Dynamics of Combustion* by Violet Marie-Lorraine Scott Holmes.

He never understood why she had published it under “ML Holmes.”

The text flew from the Professor’s mobile through space and time and across the country to a little cottage in Hastings. When it buzzed, a mongrel with mismatched ears (one brown, one black-and-white) barked.

Janine put down her copy of *The English Garden*. “What is it, Alby?” she crooned as she picked up her glass of chardonnay and hefted herself off her sofa. She padded over to the scrubbed table where her mobile lay next to paint cans and a bag of potting soil.

She swiped it to unlock it. Her breath caught when she read the message:

You were wise to alert me about Sally Donovan.
Thank you.

Janine closed her eyes, feeling hot tears burning as her stomach flopped over.

She pecked out a response:

Please don’t kill her.

But her finger hovered over the Send button. She set her wine glass down and ran her hand over her face, her stomach still turning and churning.

She hit Backspace until she erased her original text. Then she composed a new message:

We’re even now.
Please do not involve me in anymore of your business.
I want a normal life – J

She hit Send.

“Sorry, Sally,” she whispered as she sank to the floor to cuddle her dog. “I worked too hard to get
away from all of that.”

As Alby licked her face, she began reciting the Act of Contrition in a broken whisper, “O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more…”

She laughed bitterly as she gently clasped her dog’s muzzle in her hand, “To sin no more…”

What a joke.

**

20 April 2016
Creve Coeur, Missouri
Wednesday
1:15 PM Central Standard Time

“Here you go, Mrs. Fraser,” Heather Baker, an apple-cheeked, blue-eyed Midwestern woman in her mid-thirties beamed. She handed over two crisp twenties, a ten and a five, “Looks great, as usual. Smells amazing too, I love the smell of Pledge.”

“Ja, denk you,” she bowed her head, the mousy hair dyed an oily-black.

Marie Devine could speak perfect English with only a trace of her Russian accent. However she played the accent up as “Mrs. Fraser,” the recently widowed housekeeper who had come over to America with her husband years ago. After losing her husband, she moved from St. Louis to the suburbs.

“Oh, no thank you, Mrs. Fraser!” Heather gushed. “I don’t know what I’d do without you!”

Marie gave her a simpering smile that concealed her evil thoughts. She had thought the English were disgustingly polite but the Midwestern Americans had them beat. What made it worse was that Midwesterners were actually sincere. Most of them really were that sickeningly nice.

St. Louis had not been her original escape plan. However, when things started to heat up in London, she knew none of her normal bolt-holes would do. She literally had to go somewhere that no one would dream of looking for her there.

It had been a risk, going to see Mary before leaving the country. She really shouldn’t have, but she also knew she wouldn’t be able to live with herself if she hadn’t warned the only true friend she had in the world that the wolves were at her door.

Or rather, the lion.

She wished she could have persuaded Mary to come with her. She had no idea what Mary saw in that angry little man anyhow. He was so… ordinary.

But then, Mary had longed for the ordinary life, hadn’t she?

She never understood Mary’s draw towards the ordinary. Cleaning house, cooking meals and raising children all sounded terrible to her. She loathed her current job as a housekeeper. She had plenty of money, payment for taking Jim Moriarty out. But she knew she would need the bulk of that money to pay people off, to keep them from ratting her out to La Ligue des Roux.
Since she didn’t dare take up her old trade again, she took cash-only gigs, mostly housekeeping and baby-sitting. Jobs that didn’t require two forms of valid ID.

“Say, Mrs. Fraser, are you free Friday night? My husband and I were planning a date night and I was wondering if you’d be interested in watching the twins?”

“Niet, no,” Marie shook her head. “I got date night too.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful, Mrs. Fraser, good for you! Don’t worry about it. I’m sure Madison next door can keep an eye on Atticus and Clementine.”

_I fucking hate this shit_, Marie fumed. _Lady, I’m not going to worry whether or not you get a sitter for your stupid little brats because I don’t give a rat’s ass about them or you or your boring suburban life and I hate the idiotic hipster names you bequeathed to your devil spawn._

But instead she meekly said, “Oh good.”

She couldn’t wait to get out of there.

Not just out of the Bakers’ house but also out of the suburbs. Out of _Mah-zer-rah_ and onwards to her final destination.

She had hated every second she had spent in Missouri but it had been time well-spent. She had been able to plan and organize where she was going to hide for the rest of her life. She would be comfortable. She would be safe. She would be free.

Tucking the fifty dollars into her purse, she picked up her cleaning caddy, her dust-rags, paper towels, Pledge and Windex neatly organized. She said her good-byes and tried not to run screaming from the McMansion.

She did not have a date, of course. She was leaving tonight. She’d sleep on a bench so she wouldn’t miss her early morning flight to Los Angeles. From there, she’d fly to Alaska. From Alaska, an old colleague was going to fly her in his private plane across the Bering Strait to Provideniya. There she would stay until she could get safe passage to Kiev. Once ensconced in Kiev, then she’d take up arms again. After all, she was one of the best assassins, really.

She drove to the nice apartment complex where she had rented using some of the money from her hit on Jim Moriarty. The rent for the one bedroom was ridiculous, 775 American dollars, but she only needed it for one month. She had contemplated just driving straight from her cleaning job at the Spenders, but she didn’t want to leave her car (a 1992 Geo Metro she had bought off of craigslist) at the airport. Knowing her well-meaning but entirely nosy clients, once she didn’t show up to clean their house or watch their snot-nosed brats, they might actually worry instead of being indignant. Worried suburbanites tended to call the cops and Marie did not want police involved at all.

Instead, she would call Uber to have someone take her to the St. Louis Airport.

She stopped at a Noodles and Company and ordered a large Chicken Pad Thai and a giant Vanilla Coke Zero. The portion sizes of American food always baffled her. What she had could feed a family of four back in Europe.

She decided she’d eat it all anyway. Her next meal was bound to be airplane peanuts. She wouldn’t have time to get anything else in LA probably.
She let herself in her sparsely furnished apartment. All she had in the living room was a bean bag and a television set. Not as if she was entertaining anyone. The bedroom had a box spring and mattress. She knew questions would be raised when someone inevitably entered her apartment when she failed to pay next month’s rent. But before her ride picked her up, she would thoroughly clean her own apartment, make sure there was no hair, no nail clippings, no DNA or fingerprints left anywhere.

But first, lunch and a nap.

She sank into the beanbag and switched on the television, watching insipid talk shows as she slurped noodles and sucked soda through a straw. She couldn’t decide which show she hated more, The Talk or The View. She dozed off a bit then woke up with a start. She looked at her watch. 3:30.

She cursed in Russian and rose, stretching her arms and back. She bent down for her drink, sucked on the straw then shook it, listening to the ice rattling. Yawning again, she plodded towards the kitchen. She hadn’t wanted to buy a coffeemaker so now she was addicted to American soda. As it was the American way to sell things in largesse, she had been delighted to discover two-liter bottles of soda. There still was a large bottle of Pepsi in her fridge, the only food item she had left. She was pleased to see it was still three-quarters full. She opened it and frowned when there was no hiss of carbonation. She re-filled her paper cup, even though it had contained a competitor’s soda only hours ago. She replaced the plastic lid and sucked on the straw. She grimaced. The soda was flat and syrupy-sweet. Then she shrugged. She needed the caffeine, especially since she needed to give the apartment a good scrub. She needed to stay awake and alert from now until she reached her friend in Alaska.

Juggling her large drink and her cleaning caddy, she trundled down towards the bathroom. Two hours later, the bathroom was sparkling clean and reeking of bleach.

She checked her watch. The other rooms wouldn’t require as much attention as a bathroom did. Just a good wipe-down and vacuuming, then deposit the vacuum bag and garbage bag into the dumpster. Then she’d take a shower. Wipe the tub down again while making sure there was no hair in the drain. Change into fresh clothes and call Uber. She’d take one more bag of trash to the dumpster and not look back.

Her stomach burbled uncomfortably. She rubbed her abdomen absent-mindedly, wondering if she had eaten too much after all.

Suddenly, her stomach and her intestines twisted horribly, as if someone was using them as jump ropes for a double-dutch competition. She barely made it to the toilet in time and she still had to reach for the trash can and put it between her feet as her bowels let go.

When she finished vomiting, she touched her lips. Looked at her fingers and saw blood.

Then she doubled over again as pain ripped through her belly again.

She cleaned herself up the best she could as her arms and legs alternated between tingling and numbing sensations. The pain in her gut was excruciating. She couldn’t stand up straight. She had to hunch over as she wobbled out of the bathroom, inching down the hallway, hoping to get to her mobile.

She had no choice, she had to call 911. This wasn’t food poisoning.

Suddenly a painful heat rushed through her body, as if the blood in her veins had been replaced by lava. Her face went completely numb. Sweat beaded up on her flesh and someone started pounding
her head with a sledgehammer. The floor swayed as if she was on a ship and not in an apartment. She started to moan in agony then she vomited on herself.

She felt her bowels painfully contracting again and she sank to her knees. Hoping not to shit herself, she started crawling back towards the bathroom.

Then she saw black boots in front of her face.

“Hello wife,” Holy Peters looked down on her, his hands clasped behind his back. He was still dressed in his “Rev. Dr. Shlessinger” costume. “The black hair suits you.”

“What…” Blood drooled out of her mouth. “Did you do to me?” Her speech was badly slurred.

He produced an empty vial, held it down in his gloved hands so she could see it clearly. “Aconitum. Mixed it in your soda this morning when you left. You should have remembered I’m not a bad burglar either. I can break in and out of places without leaving a trace. The flower this poison comes from is actually quite pretty and it causes all sorts of fun, hypotension, ventricular arrhythmias, paralysis of the heart and it will be a slow, painful death, darling Marie.” He crouched down as Marie tried to scoot away from him. “Didn’t I say I didn’t care if you left me, just so long as you didn’t leave the Cause?”

Marie started to crawl away from him, heading down the hall, not sure what she planned on doing next. Her head swam. Her arms and legs felt like they were on fire.

Then a piercing band of sheer pain wrapped around her chest and radiated down her left arm. She opened her mouth to scream but no sound came out.

“Ironic, don’t you think?” Peters smirked as he watched his ex-wife writhe in agony. “For you to die in of heart attack in a town called Crève Coeur?” He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms as she twisted and squirmed, her eyes wide with horror and pain. “You broke my heart when you left, you know,” he told her as she was in her death throes. “I loved you. Still do, but this is business. The Work comes first.”

Marie stopped moving. Stopped seeing, stopped breathing.

Peters pushed himself off the wall and crouched down by his ex-wife. Took her pulse and grunted, satisfied she was dead. She better be. She consumed enough aconitum to kill a bloody horse, he thought. Otherwise, the next step of this little project is going to be... noisy.

He straightened up and checked his watch. He had plenty of time to take care of a few mundane errands then drop off his rental car at the Enterprise kiosk at the St. Louis Airport and still have plenty of time get in line to be molested by TSA before his flight back to Chicago.

One bitch down, one to go…

“I’m coming for you, Agent Hunter,” he crooned as he stepped over his wife’s body.

Chapter End Notes

Freddie Porlock is inspired by a character from the ACD canon Valley of Fear:

Doyle, A. C., & Morley, C. (1930). The Valley of Fear. The complete Sherlock
Chapter Nineteen: Bind

29 April 2016
ibis Lausanne Centre
Lausanne, Switzerland
Friday afternoon
4:45 PM

Born and raised in London, John Watson never saw much of the world until he joined the military. He had barely left the city, except for sporadic trips to Scotland to visit his mother’s people. But those trips were rare treats that only happened when his Auntie Meredith could scrape enough pounds together to pay for the train tickets.

During his military career, John had spent more time in Afghanistan than anywhere else. He enjoyed little pockets of leave. He had spent his brief holidays in Egypt and Greece, usually in the company of an attractive service woman and rarely the same one. However, he had been torn by homesickness and wanderlust. As much as he wanted to travel, he also longed for London with the same intensity as he craved water and air conditioning after a long day in the boiling hot desert.

Once he had recuperated from his gunshot wound, he vowed he would travel to places he wanted to visit, not just where the military sent him.

Other than Afghanistan, New Zealand had been the furthest he had traveled. He thought the country charming, lovely and peaceful. He took thousands of snaps of shamrock green mountains and cuddly white sheep, looking like clouds with feet.

Shame that he and Sarah had that row that killed their relationship in New Zealand; otherwise it would have been a lovely holiday. He had really liked her… but in the end, he hadn’t been in love with her.

If the views in New Zealand had surprised John with their beauty, then the ones in Switzerland completely knocked his socks off. John had not been expecting the overwhelming loveliness of the country, had not expected to see so much blue. The sky was an impossibly bright blue that melded with the deep sapphire blue of Lake Geneva. In the distance, the purplish-grey Jura Mountains...
capped with blindingly white snow could be seen, surrounded by lush emerald-coloured meadows. Meanwhile, the city was a mix of modern chic and antique quaint. Starbucks and strudel. Apple stores and Olympic memorabilia.

John had tried to journal about the resplendent beauty of the Swiss city, but words failed him. Once again, he ended up just taking loads of snaps on his mobile.

Still, as he took Gladstone on long walks along the lakeshores, he could understand why artists and writers had flocked to this absurdly beautiful city. Often he found himself quoting bits of TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, supposedly written while Eliot had been under psychiatric care in Lausanne:

*By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept…*

*Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,*

*Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long…*

John often had to remind himself he was not on holiday.

Yet, the strangest sensation of peace had descended over him. He felt the heavy weight of grief lifting from his shoulders for the first time in months, maybe even years. Sorrow still plagued him, of course. But it no longer threatened to crush him.

He met with Ella online for virtual therapy sessions every Monday afternoon. He had found a Swiss physiotherapist who would work with him after he had made the transition from cast to brace. Therapy was hell and his wrist and fingers ached long afterwards. But John decided he would not bloody learn how to write with his right hand, so like a good Englishman, he gritted his teeth, stiffened his lip and endured.

He took his antibiotic tablets every morning, right after cleaning his teeth.

Molly had discovered Snapchat and sent him random pictures she thought would amuse him, mostly at Greg’s expense. But also as an excuse to show off Henry, whose head still seemed bigger than his body, poor kid.

Greg texted him regularly. Nothing intrusive or overbearing, mostly just, “Hey mate, checking in, making sure you’re not dead” mixed in with dirty jokes that always made John snort in appreciative laughter.

He Skyped with Susan and Mary every Sunday night. Those chats left him strangely invigorated yet drained at the same time. It filled his heart to see Susan thriving under Mary’s care. It disheartened him that Mary still seemed determined to sink her claws into him, not let him go, never let him go…

*Damn her…*

John wrote detailed accounts about his “work” in Lausanne, writing In Code, fully anticipating that his “secret documents” will be found by the MI-6 agents who must have hacked into John’s laptop by now. He sent abbreviated accounts of his “work”, also In Code to Sherlock via email, also intended as red herrings.

Sherlock emailed back…. just… not as himself.

Whenever John received an email from “mikestamford@gmail.com”, an involuntary shiver of delight as well as a wave of relief rippled through him.

He wondered if poor old Mike would realize that Sherlock had hacked into his personal email account then decided probably not. Mike often moaned about how much spam he received in his
personal email account and he primarily used his work email instead because it was too much of a hassle to weed through the crap in his gmail account.

Sherlock emailed just often enough to assure John he was alright yet just infrequently enough so MI-6 would disregard their importance.

John threw himself into his task with enthusiasm. He followed “Rose Spender’s” trail with the same vigor as he did with any case he had worked with Sherlock. His adrenaline rush wasn’t fulfilled by the thrill of the chase, but with the vindictive joy that came with knowing he was pulling the wool over Mycroft’s eyes.

He didn’t know all the details of Sherlock’s plan.

He decided to trust Sherlock and all would sort itself out in the end.

“Come on, boy,” John tugged on Gladstone’s leash and together they made their way back to the hotel.

John had been afraid he’d be set up in some posh, luxury hotel he’d feel out of place and uncomfortable in. He had been equally afraid he’d be staying in some hovel, a shabby youth hostel where kids didn’t mind kipping out on cots, sleeping under scratchy blankets. He privately breathed a sigh of relief when he, Dupin and Gladstone arrived at the hotel they were going to call home for the next few weeks. Then he giggled to himself, thinking about the old children’s story, Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Not too soft, not too hard. Just right.

The concierge nodded at John and smiled at Gladstone as they entered the hotel and strolled to the lifts. The old canard about John being a military veteran and Gladstone being his emotional therapy dog had been trotted out again. John wondered if the concierge would still smile at Gladstone if he saw him in action. The old dog whistle hung around John’s neck on a chain, much like it had around Violet’s when they first met. Only John kept the whistle neatly tucked underneath his oxford shirts and jumpers.

He hadn’t had to use it once. He was, however, quite aware that he was being followed wherever he went. Whether it was Mycroft or the Professor’s people tailing him, he wasn’t sure. He was damn glad that the dog was with him though. He had a feeling Gladstone’s presence ensured that whoever was following him, kept their distance.

Stomach growling, John and Gladstone got off the lift, turned a right and walked towards the room he had been sharing with Dupin. Sharing with Dupin had been a challenge. John grudgingly gave the man credit for trying to keep his hoarding tendencies under control. But honestly, did he really need to bring four suitcases, two hold-alls and three laptop bags as well as his yoga mat? To his credit, Dupin did not scatter his things about, but there was one corner of the room that reminded John of the barricade scene in Les Miserables.

John let Gladstone off his leash as he opened the door. “Hey,” he called out as Gladstone bounded into the room. His nose wrinkled as he smelt cigarette smoke. He then spied the suitcases, hold-alls and laptop bags on his bed, all of luggage yawning open, waiting to be fed Dupin’s belongings.

Dupin stood in front of the ridiculously small cupboard he had been sharing with John all these weeks. He had a Gauloise cigarette hanging from his lip and his jeans and trousers draped over one arm. “Apologies, apologies,” he said swiftly, marching over to the small table where an ashtray sat. He waved the smoke towards the open window. “Was not sure when you’d be back and I had a most terrible nicotine craving,” he deposited his jeans and trousers in the largest suitcase. Then he took one last inhale and exhaled out the window like a schoolboy not wanting to be caught by the
Head Boy for smoking in the gents.

“What’s going on?”

“What pack your things,” Dupin smashed the cigarette out in the ashtray. He then ducked into the tiny lavatory. “Received a text from our mutual friend,” his voice bounced off the tiled walls.

“What happened?” John immediately tensed, his thoughts immediately going to Sherlock. He hadn’t heard from him in three days. Gladstone, sensing the strain, leapt off John’s bed and trotted over to John’s side and plunked his furry rump almost on top of John’s bare foot.

“Never fear, Dr. Watson,” Dupin re-entered the main room with all the little soaps and shampoos in his hands. His summer green eyes twinkled. “Let’s just say that...” He screwed up his face, thinking. His English was extremely good, but sometimes slang and idioms escaped him. “Ah, yes, the bait has finally been taken.”


“Mycroft,” Dupin grunted. “Apparently he is finally convinced that Sherlock is being a good boy who hasn’t left Baker Street. His flight to Switzerland has been confirmed.”

“Which means,” John gave Gladstone a pat on his head, “It’s time for us to go to Baden-Baden. Mycroft will trail us like Hansel and Gretel following breadcrumbs to the gingerbread house.”

“That is the plan,” Dupin chortled as he deposited the tiny bottles of shampoo and bars of soap into his carry-all.

“Dupin? Do you really need all of those?” John gently chided him.

Dupin looked at his collection and flushed slightly. “No. Old habits.”

“Don’t be embarrassed,” now John turned to the ridiculously small cupboard. “Breaking bad habits takes time and practice. Sherlock would smoke over thirty cigarettes in one day without even realizing it, then act shocked when he ran out of fags.”

Dupin added this little factoid regarding Sherlock to his ever-growing mental filing cabinet. Not because the fact about Sherlock’s smoking habits was interesting in itself, but how quickly John Watson recalled them. Smoothly, he said, “I leased a car. It’s nearly a four hour drive from here to Baden, give or take.”

“Are you sure you want to drive that long?” John immediately felt guilty for not being able to split up the driving duties.

“You’ll keep me awake, keep me company,” Dupin assured him as John took his sparse wardrobe out of the cupboard as well as a battered old carryall that had seen better days.

John, being a lighter traveler than Dupin, quickly packed up his clothes, his shoes, his Army Browning (loaded, safety on,) doctor’s kit and new laptop (which ironically was the MacBook Air Sherlock had stolen from Dupin’s poor, naïve protégé Honoré.) To speed things up, he then helped Dupin pack up the rest of his things, wishing there was time to dissuade him from bringing everything. But as it was almost five o’clock already and they still had to pick up the car then drive to Baden-Baden, John knew it was pointless.

Instead of enjoying traditional Swiss cuisine at a quaint local restaurant as they had planned earlier, John and Dupin picked up piping hot coffees, bottles of water, packets of crisps and disappointing
ham and cheese croissants from a nearby Starbucks.

Soon afterwards, they were on the road, driving up E25 towards Germany. John was glad Dupin had leased a Land Rover and not a mini Cooper. Anything smaller and Dupin’s things would not have fit, not to mention Gladstone’s crate. The poor hound whined dreadfully from his plastic box, but eventually, after a few dog biscuits, he settled down.

“We’ll have to find a place to stop so he can take have a pee,” John stared out the window, determined to enjoy the scenery until it was too dark to do so. “Beautiful place, Lausanne.”

“Are you sorry to leave?”

“A bit, yeah. Not that it was terribly exciting, but it was nice. You?”

“Moi? Sorry to leave?” He shrugged, eyes on the road, sunglasses back on and would stay on until the sun went down. “Yes and no. It has been an uneventful trip, I think, which is good and bad. Good because that means everything is proceeding as planned. Bad, because it was boring, but not as boring as I think it must be for our comrades back in London, Bill Wiggins and the hacker, Trinity.”

“God, they must be close to going around the bend, trapped at Baker Street all this time,” John groaned. “Hopefully they’re getting along alright. Or else Sherlock and Violet might come home to a crime scene,” he giggled.

“They are not entirely trapped,” Dupin deftly passed their gargantuan vehicle around a slow-moving Passat then started to speed even more. “Trinity has been sleeping in Mrs. Hudson’s flat. Plus, they come and go, as themselves, on the pretense of visiting Sherlock.” He then zipped around an Audi that insisted on doing the speed limit.

“Except Bill’s got to sneak back in so he can pretend to be Sherlock, pose in front of the windows, act like he’s playing the violin,” John shook his head. “I can’t believe Mycroft is actually falling for it.”

“Not Mycroft,” Dupin stuck a finger up in the air. John wished he would keep both hands on the steering wheel. “If Bill Wiggins had to trick Mycroft, this would have been over with before you and I left for Lausanne. Non, Bill has to trick the agents spying on him. The agents report what they see. Since Trinity locates and disables any listening and video devices MI-6 manages to plant in 221B, the agents living in the flat across the street from Baker Street have to rely on their eyes, which are not always reliable. All they see is a tall, dark-haired man playing the violin in front of the window.”

“Still, it’s a miracle Mycroft hasn’t taken it upon himself to visit. Or, worse, his mother drop by.”

Dupin shrugged then put both hands on the wheel again, much to John’s relief. “Sherlock said he handled that possibility and I trust him that he did so. If something unexpected should occur, then I trust we’ll all adapt to the change.”

“Be like the water?” John grinned, taking his coffee out of the cup holder. “Go with the flow.”

“Tout à fait,” Dupin beamed just as John’s mobile rang with the opening bars of Clair de Lune, the ring tone Sherlock had programmed into John’s mobile for Mary. John hadn’t found it very amusing. Worse, Sherlock had done something to his mobile so John couldn’t change it.

“You are going to answer that, no?” Dupin asked lightly. He had heard Clair de Lune many times during their trip. Many times, he had observed John sending the call to voice mail.
“Yeah,” John mustered his courage and hit the green Answer button. “Hey. Everything alright?”

“Wanted to give you an update on the Cardboard Box case since Sherlock’s not picking up. He’s probably sleeping, poor man.”

John marveled at her ability to lie at the drop of a hat. She was probably being over-cautious, but better safe than sorry. “What did you find out?”

“It’s not good, there was another murder. Lestrade called last night when the body was found.”

“Balls. Ears gone?”

“Cut clean away.”

“Jesus Christ,” John scrubbed his face. “Can I put you on speaker? Dupin might be able to provide some insight since he’s a professional and I’m just an enthusiastic amateur.”

“Professionals built the Titanic, amateurs built the ark,” Dupin rumbled but he glowed at the compliment as John switched the mobile to speaker mode.

“Right, so this brings the death toll up to five now,” Mary’s voice sounded hollow and far away. John personally was glad for the distance. Despite that, he listened to Mary intensely as she reeled off the names of the victims: “Sarah Cushing, the street artist Raz, Michael Paganini, Gus Aldridge, and now Alec Fairbairn.”

“Alec Fairbairn? Why does that name sound familiar?” John wondered out loud.

“Because he was also an up-and-coming singer, he was on X-Factor last year, was second runner-up but he managed to land a record deal anyway. The Telegraph did a lovely piece on him being homeless and a busker for years after he ran away from an abusive household.”

“This is serious,” Dupin worried, running his hand over his goatee. “La Ligue des Roux is escalating, bringing the war out of the shadows, if they’re willing to murder celebrities now, even minor celebrities. The murders of these Homeless Network members, it’s merely the appetizer.”

“What’s the main course, severed heads?” John grumbled. “Seriously, what is the deal with the severed ears? Obviously it’s some sort of… of… warning or signal to Sherlock, but I’m not brilliant like he is. Sherlock said they’re his Eyes and Ears of London, the Network.” John took a gulp of coffee before continuing, “But the killers just taking ears, not the eyes then mailing them to the victims loved ones.”

“It is baffling,” Dupin mused then he raised his voice. “Madame Watson, are the bodies being found all over London or in a specific area?”

All over London but here is the interesting bit I’ve learned. Sarah Cushing and Alec Fairbairn lived in Westminster. Sarah shared a flat with her boyfriend and Jules had a bedsit that was basically a cupboard for his clothes and instruments between gigs. Paganini and Aldridge did not have proper homes, but they often stayed in the Passage House homeless shelter in…”

“Westminster,” John finished. “Right, is there anyway way we can find out who in the Network stays or lives around the Westminster borough and have them clear out until we can find this homicidal ear-cutting berk?”
“Maybe Sherlock can get me in touch with Bill Wiggins,” Mary said causally, as if the thought just popped into her head. “Bill can maybe get the word out to the Network to stay clear of Westminster. I have to stop by Baker Street tonight anyway. It’s my turn to bring His Nibs dinner anyway. Since he’s not answering his mobile, should probably make sure he’s still breathing.”

“Good idea,” John again felt his stomach twist at how easy it was for Mary to lie.

“I’ve got tomorrow off and Susan is at school now. I asked Lestrade take me where they found Jules in the morning. He said he would. I’ll take pictures, text them to you and Sherlock.”

“Be careful,” John admonished her. “If the Red-Headed League is killing Network members, imagine what they’d do to you if they find out you’re nosing around.”

“Oh please,” Mary snorted. “I’ll be with Lestrade plus I’m a better shot than him anyway.”

Wide-eyed, John stared helplessly at Dupin. He merely kept his eyes on the road and merely mumbled, “Bah oui… gun enthusiast.”

“Well done though,” John hastily turned his attention back to his mobile. “I really mean that, Mary. Sherlock might want to have you rather than me on cases.”

“Err, John, is it alright we turn the speaker off now? I’d like to discuss something else with you.”

John gave Dupin a pained look, “Um, can it wait?”

“No really. No.”

“K, just a moment,” John turned the speaker off. “OK, it’s off.”

“You didn’t answer my email,” she informed him tersely.

“What email?” John stalled.

“About the marriage counselors,” Mary reminded him in a tight voice.

Fuck. John rubbed his forehead. “What about them?”

“I… don’t even know what to say to that.”

John turned his head away from Dupin, “Mary, this really isn’t a good time. We’re driving at the moment. We’re going to Germany.”

“Pull over then.”

“Mary, we’re on the motorway, there’s no place to stop.” He could feel Mary’s fury from nearly six hundred miles away. As if she had reached through the phone and slapped him. “I can’t decide on that right now, OK? You pick one, I trust you.”

John regretted those last three words the minute they fell from his lips. Mary pounced on them immediately, “If you trusted me, we wouldn’t need counseling.”

“Mary, how’n…” He looked at Dupin, then stupidly cupped his hand around the mouthpiece and whispered, “How in the hell are we going to be able to tell the counselor the crux of our problems without lying?” John hissed. “Can this please wait until I get home?”

“When is that?”
“I don’t know. A few more weeks, maybe,” John ran his fingers through his silvery hair. Most of the sandy-gold colour had faded while he had convalesced from his injuries over the winter. He felt a low-grade throbbing in his temples.

“John, you wouldn’t be dragging this trip out on purpose, would you? Deliberately trying to stall the discussion regarding our marriage?”

“No.”

“Well, this is a turn-up. I don’t believe you.”

Now John scrubbed his eyes, nearly clocking himself with his brace as he reached up to rub his tired eyes. “I know we need to talk,” he struggled to keep his voice even and calm despite the fact he could feel the irritation and rage swelling and bubbling, trying to force its way out. “But this is really not a good time. We have to find Violet before anything else can be decided or discussed. If Violet is found and interrogated by the wrong people, we all go down with her.”

“Yes, of course, how stupid of me,” Mary said robotically.

“Mary…”

“I understand,” Mary’s voice was still flat. “I’m being selfish. I need to think big picture.”

“You’re not being selfish,” John rushed to assure her. “Just… distracted, that’s all.”

Mary barked a soft, bitter laugh, “Thank you for setting me upon the correct course.”

“I’m sorry, really.”

“Are you?”

“Yes, of course I am.”

“You’re obviously busy. I’m disturbing you.”

“Mary, wait!”

“What?”

John attempted levity, “Why are we calling it the Cardboard Box Case again?”

“Because all the cut off ears were delivered in cardboard boxes and we agreed that Cut Off Ears was far too gruesome of a title,” and she rang off without another word.

John leaned his head against the headrest. “Fuck…”

“How much longer are you going to torture yourself?” Dupin gently chided John, “Anyone with eyes can plainly see you are no longer in love with her.” His eyes never leaving the road, he lightly added, “Maybe you were never in love with her in the first place?”

“Why did I marry her then?” John’s voice rose in frustration along with a hint of a challenge.

“Maybe because you were in love with the idea of not being alone? The… happily ever after?” He eyed John, “But that’s not why you stay. She is holding something over your head. Your body language gives that away. You are very tense after you speak to her, your shoulders?” He mimed John’s pose, bunching his shoulders up around his ears. Then he relaxed back into his easy, lounging
pose as he sped down the motorway. “You’re unconsciously shielding yourself from attack, as if she was here now and not kilometers away.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Long stories and long drives go together. Also, I think you and I have been… friends? Long enough for you to know you can trust me? After all, I know that Monsieur Holmes murdered that pig Charles Augustus Magnussen and that Miss Smith is actually Agent Hunter,” he chuckled. “She thought I wouldn’t remember her. Of course I remembered her. She was the only student at that seminar with a brain, one of the few who wasn’t boring, who actually took the job seriously. Many of the students I lectured had delusions of grandeur, believed being an agent was going to be like in the films and television? The Silence of the Lambs, The X-Files,” he snorted. “Stupid kids. But she wasn’t stupid. I remember those hazel eyes.” He glanced at John briefly out the corner of his own eyes before flicking them back onto the road. “If I wanted to be fully reinstated back at Interpol, all I have to do is turn Sherlock and Violet in.”

“You like being your own boss too much,” John reminded him.

Dupin laughed. “Very true, I do. I make my own hours, set my own fees, take the cases that interest me instead of what Interpol thinks is priority. Right now, what interests me is the story about you and your wife. It strikes me as strange that a British woman would be a gun enthusiast, especially a Liberal Democrat?”

“How did you know she voted Lib Dem?”

“Ratiocination.”

John sighed. He was getting heartily tired of being deduced and profiled and ratiocinated. “I’m not comfortable talking about this.”

“Of course you’re not. It’s about your heart, which is not an easy topic for you,” Dupin nodded in sympathy. “But your therapist is worthless. Surely you know that by now.”

“If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have gotten my medical license back,” John couldn’t help but defend Ella, even though privately, he agreed with Dupin. “Without her, I would have never started my blog, it was her idea.”

“To write about another man instead of yourself?” Dupin arched an eyebrow without turning to look at John, “Very unorthodox therapy methods.”

John opened his mouth then shut it, feeling idiotic.

Dupin hummed along with the radio which was now playing some feeble Eurotrash pop song.

A quarter of an hour passed before John fell for one of the oldest interrogation tricks in the books. Tired of Dupin’s silence, he finally snapped, “Fine, I’ll tell you. But only if I get to change the station from this crap.”

“Ca m’est égal,” Dupin wore a beatific smile as John changed the station from the terrible pop music to classic rock.

“Whatever that means,” John grumbled.

Dupin fell silent again as he patiently waited for John to start talking. John only started telling the story after the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction” had ended. For the next three hours, with the
combination of drawn-out silences and gently probing questions, Dupin drew the story out John, or as much of it as John was willing to tell. The story was only interrupted when they reached the Switzerland-Germany border and they had to produce their passports (and the “service animal” papers for Gladstone) for the border patrol’s inspection.

Thirty minutes away from Baden-Baden, Gladstone began whining incessantly. The first change they had, they pulled over so Gladstone could relieve himself. As Gladstone took care of his business, Dupin murmured, “You can’t live like this indefinitely.”

John shrugged, eyes down, lips twisted in a hard frown, his good hand clutching the dog leash like a life line.

Causally, Dupin said, “You know I still have contacts in Interpol. I can tip them off anonymously if you want to be done with the business of her.”

“No! Don’t, please, whatever you do, don’t do that!” John cried out. “You can’t. If she gets extradited to a country that has the death penalty…” he wetted his lips. “She put a something called a double-hit out. If she’s killed, then a hit goes out on Sherlock.”

“Ah. So she is threatening you with both loves of your life, not just the one, the life of your child.”

“Sherlock’s not…” John automatically lied.

Dupin waved away John’s feeble attempt at deceit. “Please. I knew the moment I saw you, after Anthea got you out of that prison cell in Paris. The look on your face when you saw that Sherlock was unharmed…” now Dupin shrugged. “Well, you cannot fake that kind of emotion. Also, it is killing you right now not to be by his side.” He leaned forward, “How much longer are you going to make him wait for you?”

“Pardon?” John scowled as the winds picked up. Gladstone, feeling much better now, rejoined the two of them and sat next to John. John immediately tugged on the leash and led Gladstone back to the Land Rover.

As John loaded Gladstone back inside his crate, Dupin held his hands up helplessly, “John, not only can you continue living with that… that conasse, you cannot continue to string him along either.”

“I’m not… stringing him along!” John spluttered, nearly catching Gladstone’s tail in the crate door. “Sorry, mate,” he muttered at the dog then he slammed the Land Rover door shut hard.

“You are,” Dupin said placidly. “John, since we are friends, I feel I can say certain truths to you plainly, as men should when they are friends.”

“I feel that you are wrong,” John snapped as he opened the passenger side door.

Dupin sighed and climbed back into the driver’s seat. “You take him for granted.”

“What? I do not,” John’s voice rose as Dupin turned the Land Rover back on. “Not after The Fall, not after the Great Hiatus, not after the Shooting.”

“You do not take his life for granted, no.” Dupin merged back into traffic. Only after he exceeded the speed limit, did he speak again. “You take his love for granted, don’t you?”

John opened his mouth to argue then shut it. To cover up his discomfiture, he reached for his coffee cup again, even though by now only stone-cold dregs remained. “You do realize Sherlock is my best friend. I know when I’m being deduced.”
“Ratiocinated.”

“Whatever,” John sniffed the remaining coffee, screwed up his face in disgust, then reached for the water bottle instead. The water was now warm, but it was better than cold coffee. Screwing the plastic lid back on, he mumbled, “Maybe it would be kinder for me to stand aside and let Sherlock and Violet pick up where they left off?”

“Kinder? Pour qui? Dupin frowned then tilted his head. “Is it really kinder for him to carry on with a dying woman?”

“Might be kinder to her, so she’s not alone during whatever time she had left!” John shouted. An uncomfortable silence fell punctuated by rock music and a sad whine from Gladstone. Cheeks burning, John added quietly, “She’s my friend too.”

Dupin still frowned, “Or perhaps you play the martyr so you can continue avoiding your fears.”


“I’m going to kill Sherlock,” John spoke through gritted teeth. “I hate that nickname.”

“You were the perfect son, the perfect soldier, the perfect doctor… until you were shot in Afghanistan. The pretty little cocoon of perfection you spun around yourself began to deteriorate. You can’t hide in your chrysalis forever.”

“Yeah, I’m seeing why Sherlock hated you at first.”

“Everyone prefers the pretty lie to the ugly truth,” Dupin was unperturbed. “Do you think I enjoyed it when I was told I was ill and not physically but mentally? Sometimes I am still in denial about my hoarding, as you noticed with the soaps and shampoos. But the ugly truth is that I am a hoarder, Sherlock has untreated PTSD, Violet is dying, your wife is a murderer and you are in love with a man.”

John wanted to crawl into the crate with Gladstone and not come out. Ever.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dupin saw John positively squirming in his seat. “There are worse things in the world to be than gay, John.”

“I’m not gay,” John responded automatically.

“Bi, then,” Dupin corrected himself.

John turned away from Dupin. He spoke to the window, to the darkening skies instead of Dupin. “When I was a boy, there was a kid named Gary. Gary the Fairy, he was called. Everyone teased him, he was terribly effeminate. I never teased him. We grew up practically next door together. He was my best friend growing up. But everyone thought Gary was a poof. The kids at school and in the neighborhood gossiped about how Gary and I were boyfriends, that he was turning me gay. Truth was… Gary was straight, as an arrow. I was the one who…”

“Experimented?” Dupin supplied.

“Yeah,” John’s voice was little more than a strangled sigh. “I was the one who… tried to initiate…
anyway, Gary put a stop to that the best he could. He was a kid, not much older than me. I ran home, tried to pretend it never happened. Gary tried to make amends, loaned me a book; asked me to hang out with him. I didn’t. When the bullies started picking on him again, he asked me to walk home with him. I didn’t. The bullies got too rough one day. He was killed.”

When John seemed intent on picking fluff off his jumper, Dupin reminded John, “His death was not your fault, John. You were a child, like he was. You wouldn’t have been able to help him.”

“I know. But…” John shook his head. “After that, then all the shit my sister when through when she came out of the closet, it was just easier to pick one team and stick to it, yeah?”

“Except, your heart chose another ‘team’,” Dupin pointed out then decided to show him mercy. “But as you said to your wife, we must focus on finding Mademoiselle Hunter first. Once we get her away from the clutches of Mycroft and Professor Moriarty, then the matters of the heart can be decided upon, oui?”

John snorted, “I'm beginning to see why Sherlock thinks love is a chemical defect.”

“Cynic,” Dupin crooned as he changed the radio station from rock to classical music.

Chapter End Notes

This week is super-stressful in Real Life, so I will respond to comments as soon as time will allow!

Murder victims Michael Paganini, Gus Aldridge, and Alec Fairbairn were inspired by ACD canon characters in "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box." I also forgot to mention last week that Marie’s alias “Mrs. Fraser” came from "The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax."


Chapter Summary

Hauptturnier

German word that is freely translated as 'candidates tournament'. In the early part of the 20th century, it was necessary for the ambitious European amateur to win a succession of prizes in small tournaments, before they could progress to a higher level of competition. The creation of the hauptturnier enabled the process to become more formalized, and they became a regular feature of the major German chess congresses. Winning such an event conferred the title of 'Master of the German Chess Federation', and this, in turn, could be used to gain admittance to prestigious international tournaments.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes]

Chapter Twenty: *Hauptturnier*

7 May 2016
Hotel Deutscher Kaiser
Baden-Baden, Germany
Saturday morning
8:15 AM

Mycroft Holmes thanked his driver politely in perfect German, the dialect correct for the region and everything. He stepped out of the town car and smoothed down his suit jacket, grey linen paired with matching bespoke trousers, a pale blue dress shirt and a matching tie. He looked like what he claimed he was: a minor bureaucrat on a business trip.

Adjusting his umbrella on the crook of his arm, he stared across the street then looked up. He frowned at the bright orange building with the glossy white shutters and window boxes exploding with brightly-coloured flowers.

*Something’s not right…*

Mycroft Holmes rarely relied on his emotions to make his decisions. And yet, he couldn’t ignore the slight niggling in the back of his head that something wasn’t quite copacetic with this whole scenario. To be completely honest, he felt like he was a fat fourteen-year-old again and the popular boys were having a laugh at his expense.

Mycroft did his homework; he *always* did his homework. He bribed Dr. Ferguson into providing regular reports regarding Sherlock’s prognosis, as well as his endoscopy scans. He learned that the ulcer was indeed severe, but not so far gone that surgery was necessary, provided that Sherlock Did As He Was Told.

“No work. No stress,” Dr. Ferguson scolded Mycroft even he pocketed the hefty fee Mycroft gave him. “Healthy, bland food and plenty of sleep; this is what’s best for him.”
Mycroft gave Sherlock breathing room. It wasn’t unusual, after all, for weeks to go by without either of them speaking to the other. He did, however, post additional agents around Baker Street. Their reports bordered on boring. Sherlock was never seen leaving the flat. He was spotted occasionally at his window, playing the violin. He removed any and all recording devices planted inside the building. His groceries and dry-cleaning were delivered to him. Mary Watson and Molly Hooper Lestrade visited frequently, usually to bring him supper. Two men also visited infrequently whose identities could not be confirmed, however it was presumed they were members of the Homeless Network.

He also ordered random surveillance checks on Sherlock’s mobile and Internet usage.

Normal.

Well… normal for Sherlock. Anyone else visiting the sites Sherlock did or who sent the texts he did would have been hauled in for questioning.

He also confirmed with that bumbling oaf Lestrade that Sherlock indeed had been working on a case for one of his colleagues, a French police detective called François le Villard. An Englishwoman had been robbed while on holiday in Calais, blaming a refugee from the camps outside of Calais. Her soon-to-be-ex-husband, however, argued that the diamond necklace and tennis bracelet were never stolen. He claimed she was hiding the jewelry because she didn’t want to declare it on the divorce decree. The diamonds had belonged to his mother and he wanted them back, not to mention the jewelry was indeed worth thousands of pounds.

Then he had been found inconveniently dead in his flat in Brook Green, windows and doors locked from within.

Mycroft had sighed. A case like that would be right up Sherlock’s alley. Of course, he’d want to go to France to interview the widow, to determine if she really was lying about the jewel theft and if she had anything to do with her husband’s sudden demise. Remembering John’s snit in the lift at the hospital, Sherlock more than likely had sent John to France to interview the newly widowed woman in his place.

Also, John would welcome any excuse to flee his dismal marriage.

The agents assigned to tail John Watson confirmed that the diminutive doctor did indeed arrive in Paris, with an appointment to meet Inspecteur général François le Villard.

Except…

Something’s not right…

It was like playing sans voir chess.

One lazy Sunday afternoon Mycroft finally realized what wasn’t right after a sumptuous lunch at his parents’. When his parents began nattering on about their boring plans for the summer holidays, Mycroft had tuned them out. Sipping his tea, he watched his mother’s two Pomeranians gamboling around out on the back garden.…

**

24 April 2016
Mr. and Mrs. Holmes’ residence
London, England
Sunday afternoon
“… so Daddy and I were thinking about popping into New York to see a show. I heard that *Hamilton* was getting ever such good reviews, isn’t that right, darling?”

“Yes dear,” Mr. Holmes didn’t even look up from *The Guardian*.

“I’m not quite sure what it’s about, something about American history, so it could be dreadfully dull,” Mrs. Holmes fussed. “Siggie, maybe we should go see an oldie-but-goodie. *The Phantom of the Opera* perhaps?”

“Dear, we can see *Phantom* here,” Mr. Holmes reminded her.

“Oh yes, that’s right. I thought it had finally finished its run here,” Mrs. Holmes threw a bright pink ball towards the frolicking Poms. “Mickey, have you spoken to your brother lately?”

“No,” Mycroft eyed the scrumptious chocolate beetroot cake his mother had made. The mocha icing glistened in the spring sunshine. He had already had demolished one large piece and toyed with the idea of having a second. “No, you know he won’t speak to me. Apparently talking to me aggravated him and he’s not to be aggravated. The ulcer, you know.”

“Well, I know we’re not supposed to visit him,” she sniffed as the confused Pomeranians circled the ball, batting at it with their dainty feet. “But I had hoped maybe you would have made the effort to at least ring him.”

“Mother, my calls go straight to voice mail,” Mycroft stared at the chocolate cake and imagined devouring it all, like that greedy little swine Augustus Gloop in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. “When he does deign to answer, he tells me to go to hell and rings right off again.”

“Well, you are his older brother,” Mrs. Holmes scolded him. “You need to be the one to make the effort to mend fences. Easter was dreadful enough, I will not tolerate another Christmas dinner with you two snarling at each other over the roast goose and boiled potato-”

“Leave it alone, Lettie,” Mr. Holmes turned the page of his paper. “They are grown men. Let them hash it out themselves.”

Mycroft gave his father an appreciative and grateful smile. Signor Holmes, the eternal peacemaker. One thing Mycroft and Sherlock both agreed on was that they could not believe this gentle, soft-spoken man of average intelligence was their father.

Sherlock had even run a secret DNA test to confirm it.

“Grown men who are acting like children,” Mrs. Holmes harrumphed.

“Sherlock is probably just tetchy because he’s ill,” Mr. Holmes shrugged, still unperturbed, still engrossed in his paper. “Surely you remember how ratty he got when he was under the weather as a child,” he grimaced, recalling the feverish temper tantrums. “This will pass and I’m sure the boys will make up by and by,” he eyed Mycroft over his paper. “Won’t you, son?”

“Of course, Daddy,” Mycroft once again, felt like he was twelve years old who had gotten caught out bullying his baby brother. He swallowed down the childish whine: *But he started it…*

Instead, he distracted his mother by asking, “Speaking of drama, Mummy, I did hear that there’s supposed to be a revival of *The Cherry Orchard* on Broadway.”
“Oh, I don’t want to see anything serious,” Mrs. Holmes scoffed, getting up to pour another cup of tea. “When I’m on holiday, I want to have fun, not think. Otherwise, what’s the point of a holiday? Mickey? Siggie, more tea?”

Mycroft said yes. Mr. Holmes said no. With his cup refreshed and his mother resuming her prattle about which insipid musical to watch, Mycroft blissfully tuned her out. As he watched the Poms ignore the pink ball and start chasing each other around the garden again, he thought about the last time he had gone on a proper holiday.

*University, Christmas holidays... with Elizabeth... Lizzie... we went to Greece...*

Mycroft stopped that memory dead in its tracks.

*Can’t handle a broken heart... how very telling...*

Mycroft banished the voice of his smug little brother out of his head as he watched his mother’s two deranged fluff balls start digging up the daisies.

“Millie, Archimedes, stop that,” his father droned.

Mycroft stifled another sigh. *Pets.* Another sentimental idiocy his brother had committed. First he had to have *friends.* Then he had to have a *pet... dogs.* *Bloody dogs, first that useless, flatulent Irish Setter whose only talent was drooling, and eating its body weight in kibble. Now he has that murderous Alsatian... damn thing nearly killed that mysterious intruder...*

Realization slapped Mycroft in the face. He dropped his tea cup. Tea spattered the turn-ups of his trousers, his socks and shoes.

“Mickey?”

“Son, are you alright?”

Mycroft did not register his mother’s distress or his father’s concern. His entire world had shrunk down to one vital question:

“Where is the dog?” he muttered.

*Where is Gladstone?*

*No one has reported that they have seen Sherlock take the dog out for a walk or to relieve itself.*

“This idiots,” Mycroft had snapped then immediately apologized to his bewildered parents. “Not you, my ag- erm, subordinates. I have to go. Apologies, so sorry,” Mycroft mumbled. Red-faced, he kissed his shocked mother goodbye and gave his bemused father a bracing clap on the shoulder as he hurried away.

Drawing his mobile out of his pocket, he rang for his driver, “I need to go to the office, at once.”

As he waited, he fumed, clutching his umbrella like a club. *Idiots. How could they have not noticed the Alsatian, the very Alsatian that had belonged to Agent Hunter was missing? They see, they don’t observe.*

Five minutes later, the black town car pulled up in front of his parents’ house. Mycroft was in the process of pulling his packet of cigarettes out of his inner coat pocket when Anthea rang him. “Yes?”
“There are reports that Agent Hunter and Agent Mitton have been spotted in Lausanne.”

“Verified?” Mycroft held the mobile to his ear with his elbow as he fished a cig out of the packet and pulled out his lighter.

“No, but we have confirmed that Dr. Watson is also in Lausanne.”

Mycroft paused, cig clamped in lips, lighter open, flame rippling. “Why,” he demanded through clenched teeth, “is Dr. Watson in Lausanne? He’s supposed to be in France.”

“Well,” now Anthea sounded nervous. “He’s not alone.”

*William Sherlock Scott Holmes, I may murder you yet.* “My brother?”

“No. Worse.”

“Worse than my brother?” Mycroft sneered. “There is no one worse than…” The cigarette fell out of Mycroft’s mouth. “Oh no. Not…”

“C. Auguste Dupin is with Dr. Watson in Lausanne.”

“Along with the dog?” Mycroft had demanded through gritted teeth.

“Sorry?”

“The dog, Sherlock’s dog,” Mycroft spat out. “The Alsatian that had belonged to Hunter.”

“Erm… yes, John has the Alsatian with him.” Anthea had sounded confused, as she should.

Mycroft had bitten back the temptation to scream at her. She hadn’t been on Sherlock’s detail so none of this was her fault. He made a mental note to reassign her back as clearly no one else was competent.

Then the pieces on the board immediately became visible.

*Sherlock sent John and Dupin to Lausanne to fetch Violet once he found out she was there.*

“I want every single agent monitoring my brother replaced. We need new eyes,” he ordered her. “He’s obviously up to something and John Watson is clearly his pawn, as usual. I want you to report to Lausanne at once. Make arrangements for me to follow. I actually have some work to do first that takes priority over my idiot brother.”

“Yes sir.”

“I want you to take lead on Violet Hunter. Track her down before Dr. Watson and Dupin do. Arrest her and drag her back to England. I’ll deal with her personally.”

Probably recalling how roughly Violet had treated her (breaking her nose even, while interrogating her regarding Maisie Watson’s whereabouts,) Anthea purred, “With pleasure.”

After Anthea rang off, Mycroft retrieved his dropped cigarette and lit it.

“There’s no smoking in here, sir,” the driver informed him timidly.

“Crack the window and hold your tongue,” Mycroft exhaled, smoke filling the backseat.
“Yes sir,” the driver said meekly.

**

7 May 2016  
Hotel Deutscher Kaiser  
Baden-Baden, Germany  
Saturday morning  
8:17 AM

However, Violet Hunter must have gotten spooked when John (good doctor, decent man, but hardly a competent spy) made his presence known in Lausanne. CCTV footage and register tills confirmed she had let a car and drove to Baden-Baden. It made sense; she was fluent in German as well as French. She had been born in Germany after all.

Dupin must have also determined Violet was in Baden-Baden as well, for he and John had left for Germany soon afterwards, only days after Mycroft had arrived.

Now, Mycroft stood in front of the hotel where John and Dupin were lodging. He had caught them in the act, caught them all in the act, trying to deceive him and yet…

*Something is not right…*

During his drive to the ostentatious hotel that reminded him of an orange iced lolly, he had received confirmation that Sherlock had not left his flat in three days. The new lead agent on Sherlock’s security detail confided to Mycroft that she had even wondered about the possibility that Sherlock might actually be dead. But she had witnessed Mary and Molly bringing him cassolets and puddings on a regular basis. She also saw him standing in front of his window, staring through the sheer curtains, watching cars drive past. She took pictures, but he always kept his back to the street when he played violin. *But where else could he be? He is obviously in no condition to be traveling…* Mycroft held his mouth in a thin line as he continued his study of the hotel.

He had planned on bursting into the hotel, confronting John and Dupin. He had also received confirmation that they breakfasting at the buffet. It wouldn’t be difficult to slither in, sit down and tell John and Dupin the facts of life, that it was in their best interest to allow MI-6 to locate and retrieve Miss Hunter.

Yet, Mycroft stalled, his face screwed up in a frown.

*Something is not right…*

*John may be naïve… but Dupin is not.*

*They are a distraction. They are bait. They hook me while Hunter scarpers.*

Mycroft pivoted on the heel of his expensive, leather shoes and started strolling away from the hotel. He pulled his mobile out of his jacket pocket and texted Anthea:

Let me know when you have her – MH

He tucked his mobile back into his pocket and started whistling, swinging his umbrella.

Meanwhile, inside their hotel room, John paced back and forth in front of their window, peering down at Mycroft’s tiny retreating figure as Dupin lounged on the bed, typing away at his laptop.
“Relax,” rumbled Dupin. “We received the warning just in time to come back here. Everything will work out.”

“I know, I know” John’s voice positively vibrated with nerves. “But how will we know everything worked out, exactly?”

“We’ll know,” Dupin reached for his coffee mug. “When Mycroft doesn’t come inside.”

“Great, thanks. That really clears things up,” John automatically reached to rub his left hand. When his right hand touched the plastic brace, he shook his head. Stupid…

“Mycroft is not interested in us. He thinks we’re Sherlock’s puppets. He’s interested in Violet. We’ve done all we can now. It’s up to Noelle to led Mycroft on,” Dupin tried to sound nonchalant but his brow was creased with worry.

“She’ll be fine,” John lied to cover up his own concerns. “It will all be fine.”

It had been eight days since they had heard from Sherlock, eleven since he had texted Dupin to go to Germany.

John pulled out his mobile, not his personal Smartphone, but the prepaid he had purchased in Paris before leaving for Lausanne.

He thumbed the following email to “mikestamford@gmail.com”:

Hey! Haven’t heard from you in donkey’s years.  
Wondering how things have been. 
Drop a line and let me know how you are. 

Talk to you soon – JW

John slid the mobile back into his jeans’ pocket and repeated the lie to himself, hoping eventually he’d believe it.

*It will be fine, everything is fine…*

**

31 May 2016
Aswaya Yoga Schule
Baden-Baden, Germany
Tuesday morning
10:27 AM

Anthea sat slouched down in the Volkswagen Passat, watching the door of a yoga studio.

She wore a frown, identical to the ones her uncles (or rather second cousin as Sherlock had pointed out to her,) wore when vexed.

Something’s not right…

Like Mycroft, something seemed off about this entire mission.

Something seemed off about Sherlock hiding inside his flat for over two months now.

After he had returned home from being shot, Sherlock had taken short walks around the block, with
Dr. Watson assisting, of course. But still… he had nearly died, twice, from a gunshot wound and he had left the flat once he was strong enough.

A week ago, she had followed up on her suspicions and sent a scathing text to the lead agent in charge of Sherlock’s detail and told him to get confirmation on the two men visiting Baker Street immediately. Apparently the agents in charge of Sherlock either didn’t take their task seriously or wildly underestimated him.

As she monitored the yoga studio, her mobile hummed. When she read the text, she sucked in a breath and hissed, “Shit,” after reading it:

Confirmed visitor is Bill Wiggins, Homeless Network affiliate, former drug addict/dealer. Second visitor identity unable to confirm but is suspected to be “Trinity”, known hacker.

She forwarded to Mycroft then sat up as students started filing out of the studio.

When she saw a tall, slender woman with wavy chestnut hair, wearing a black baseball hat and huge sunglasses, Anthea pulled the hood over her own hair. When the chestnut-haired woman was a half a block away, nearly out of eyesight, Anthea got out of the car. She stuffed her mobile in the pocket of her black hoodie.

Her fingertips grazed the handcuffs jangling in the other pocket.

She didn’t run across the street, but walked quickly, with purpose, striding towards the throng of sweaty yogis, all chattering in German. Clad in the black hoodie, a grey T-shirt and black yoga bottoms, she blended in with the crowd, keeping her eye fixed on that mane of luxurious chestnut hair...

*Something’s not right…*

Despite that nagging refrain singing in her head, Anthea kept her face neutral. She stayed a half a block behind the chestnut-haired woman.

“Stand-by,” she murmured. She had a tiny ear-bud in her ear-canal and a tiny microphone attached to her sports bra. The perimeter was surrounded by MI-6 agents. Even if Hunter thought she was going to out-run or out-gun her, she would quickly learn she was sadly out-numbered.

She quickened her pace, glad that her trainers made little sound on the pavement.

When she was within arm’s reach, she called out sharply, “Violet Hunter.”

The woman ahead of her didn’t respond. She just kept walking and texting.

Anthea closed the gap between them. “Violet Hunter,” she roughly grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. As she began fighting her, Anthea snarled, “You are under arrest,” as she pulled out her handcuffs while forcing her to the pavement.

But when the woman began cursing at her in French, Anthea froze.

True, Violet spoke French fluently. However, her French was properly Metropolitan. This woman’s accent had the slight cadence and inflection that indicated she had been born and bred in Montemarte.

As Anthea helped the woman to her feet, the black baseball hat and sunglasses fell off. Anthea found
herself face to face with an apple-cheeked, twenty-something-year-old woman with perfect skin and huge chocolate brown eyes.

As a crowd started to gather, Anthea stammered, “So sorry, there’s been a terrible mistake.”

Noelie Dupin shook her mussed chestnut curls out of her face. “Let. Me. Go,” she demanded, her eyes flashing bloody murder.

“Of course, of course,” Anthea muttered as her face pinkened. As she uncuffed Noelie, her gut churned as she imagined explaining this fiasco to Mycroft.

Once free, Noelie spun around, hitting Anthea in the face with her long chestnut hair. “Bitch,” she spat, her accent heavy, almost inarticulate.

“I apologize,” Anthea, feeling the eyes of the small crowd gathering, held her hand up beseechingly. “However, I fear that you were set up, to make the police think you’re someone else. I need to ask you a few questi-

“No,” Noelie dropped down to scoop up her mobile, hat and sunglasses. “No questions. You go to hell,” she snapped, brushing past her. “Pig,” she snapped at her over her shoulder as she stalked away.

Seeing how the onlookers had pulled their own mobiles out to record this gross miscarriage of justice, Anthea ducked her head and started walking away. “Stand down, don’t pursue,” she muttered, head down, talking to the mic in her bra. “She’s either calling a lawyer or posting the story on Facebook. Let’s not make this worse.”

“Copy,” came the crackled response.

Ignoring the crowd of shocked onlookers, Anthea strode back to her car, her breakfast threatening to crawl back up and spew from her mouth. She scrubbed at her lips with the back of her hands. She had no desire to ruin a perfectly good pair of Adidas trainers with sick.

She already had one major black mark against her. She had fallen for the MI-6 mole’s directive and murdered an innocent woman, a neo-natal nurse who believed that Maisie Watson had not died but had been kidnapped. She couldn’t afford another stain on her career.

Slumped in the driver’s seat, she pulled out her mobile to text Mycroft the bad news.

Her eyes widened when she realized the situation just got worse. So much worse.

Instead of her mobile, she held a Blackberry with a cracked screen.

“Oh God,” she covered her mouth, close to vomiting again. Knowing she looked like a lunatic, she dipped her head down and spoke to her bra again. “Do we still have visual on the girl?”

“She ducked inside a coffee shop,” a different crackled voice responded.

“Find her,” Anthea barked. “Tell me where the coffee shop is, my mobile is… compromised.”

While Anthea had been plodding back to her car, Noelie had indeed ducked into the closest coffee shop, her heart pounding so loud, she felt it echoing in her head. Her escape had depended on her reaching this destination.

She resumed her stroll down the street, scrolling through the last few text messages. She frowned at
the ones sent to Mycroft, then turned the mobile completely off, killing the GPS signal, her calm face concealing her pounding heart.

The pretty little pickpocket expertly hid her relief when she saw her destination. She breezed into the shop, nodded at the barista at the till and palmed him a €100 as she confidently strode into the back of the shop like she worked there.

She kept walking, right on out, where an idling floral delivery van waited.

“Jesus Christ,” the young coffee-skinned Briton nicknamed “Hollywood” gasped. His posh, British public-school accented voice clashed with the rumpled deliveryman’s jumpsuit and ball cap he wore. “Was worried you weren’t going to make it,” he warned her as she threw herself into the passenger-side seat.

“Pedal to the metal, Hollywood,” she ordered him, giving him a dazzling smile to hide her own terror. She understood what the stakes were. “We’re not out of it yet,” she added, her accent not as thick as she had played up when Anthea had handcuffed her.

“Right,” Hollywood put the van in gear as Noelie slid off her seat to sit on the dirty floor and stay hidden from view. As she arranged herself into a pretzel, Hollywood asked, a bit too causally, “So… did you get it then? One of the agents’ mobiles?”

Her smile transformed from dazzling to pure sinfulness. “Not just a mobile, *the* mobile.”

“No bloody way!” Hollywood’s jaw dropped open and his mocha eyes widened.

“And you underestimated me,” she purred. “Speaking of phones, I need the burner.”

Hollywood fished the prepaid out of his delivery man’s jacket and tossed it to her without taking his eyes away from the road. Noelie began texting her father, her thumb flying furiously across the keypad. “We might still be in the shit yet. They know about Bill and Trinity back at 221B.”

When his mobile pinged across town, he and John were actually enjoying the breakfast buffet at their hotel.

Dupin fished his prepaid mobile out of the pocket of his black jeans. His salt-and-pepper brows rose. Keeping his face impassive, he sent a terse text to Bill Wiggins and Trinity, warning them they were compromised.

“Time to go,” he dabbed his mouth with the cloth serviette.

John was only half-way through his pile of bread rolls and plate of sausage and cheese. He swallowed hastily, “What? Why?”

“It’s done,” he muttered softly, rising from his seat, now texting Sherlock.

John cottoned on quickly. “Right, OK,” he took a quick swallow of his coffee and tossed a sausage to Gladstone. He stood up just as Gladstone swallowed the tasty treat. “Ready when you are.”

“Take only what you can carry,” he muttered as they walked towards the lifts. “We need to leave Baden-Baden, immediately.”

“Everything alright?” Panic crawled up John’s spine and reverberated in his skull.

Dupin’s mouth twitched and eyes twinkled. “Oui.”

To John’s surprise, Dupin took only one laptop case and one hold-all. “Let MI-6 dig through my
dirty underwear,” he said loftily. John grinned as he opted to take only his doctor’s kit, laptop bag
and rucksack filled with two days worth of clean clothes. He didn’t mind traveling light. But he
ached to know exactly why they were doing a bunk in broad daylight.

Dupin waited to explain until after he had checked the leased Land Rover for listening devices and
GPS tracking. He found two bugs and one Lo-Jack. “Amateurs,” he snorted as he crushed the
devices. “I feel insulted that they think I’m so unobservant.”

Only when they neared the Baden-Baden city limits, did Dupin explain. He then startled John and
the dog by laughing uproariously, “Noelie stole Anthea’s mobile after she tried to arrest her, thinking
she was Violet Hunter.”

John blinked. “Holy shit.” He typed the best he could with his right hand, “I hope they’re on their
way out of the city… and the country… and the planet, once Mycroft finds out.”

Dupin grunted, “I must confess, I will not feel secure until I see her mischievous face in Montmartre.
I think she’s a better spy than actress. In fact,” he mumbled, “I fear it.”

“Why aren’t they coming after us?” John fully expected to see roadblocks on the motorway.

“If it was Interpol, I would be concerned. However, despite what Mycroft believes, MI-6’s reach
does not stretch to Germany.” His frown deepened. “Plus with the debate about England possibly
leaving the EU… relations are tense between Germany and England. Mycroft is not going to
authorize anything that could cause further diplomatic strains.”

“No, of course not,” John muttered as he stuck his pinkie under his brace, trying to scratch a
maddening itch. “He’s going to operate within the shadows. But why didn’t Anthea?”

“Why didn’t Anthea what?”

“Act in the shadows? Arresting our fake-Violet out in the open like she did?”

“Anthea is still young with her entire life as well as her career ahead of her. While she is greatly
influenced by Mycroft, she is not completely corrupted by him.”

“Not yet at least,” John scowled; the itch irritatingly just out of his pinkie’s reach.

“Take the brace off.”

“Too much of a bother putting taking it off then putting it back on again,” John grunted, deciding to
grit his teeth and bear it. “Anyway, how are you sure?”

“Ratiocination, naturellement.”

John rolled his eyes, “Little less ratiocination and little more elaboration, please.”

Dupin grinned: “I also knew her when she was a little girl. Back then, we called her Andi.”

“Ah, that’s cheating,” John grinned.

“She is her father’s child, you will see.”

“I don’t understand?”

“You will need to ask Sherlock to tell you the rest of that tale,” Dupin backpedalled, realizing he
may have said too much.
Fortunately for Dupin, John’s mobile hummed, his own mobile, not the prepaid. “It’s Sherlock,” John’s silvery brows flew up when he read the caller ID, “On his own mobile.”

“What does it say?”

John swiped the message open. He slumped back into his seat in relief, his itchy wrist forgotten.

“A come home – SH,’”

A broad smile spread across Dupin’s face, “He found her.”

“Yeah, he did,” John fiddled with the brace, fussing with the Velco straps.

He should have been pleased, ecstatic really. Violet was safe and sound and Sherlock was back at Baker Street. Together, they did the impossible, they hoodwinked Mycroft. All was as it should be, all was well.

Except… it wasn’t.

“Dupin… don’t you think that this was all a bit… too easy?”

Dupin arched an eyebrow but didn’t take his eyes off the road, “Says the man who does not want to return to his wife.”

John slouched in his seat, crossed his arms and stared out the window, “Wake me up when we reach France,” he groused, trying to get comfortable so he could nap instead of talk.

“Sans doute,” Dupin turned the radio on. Quickly glancing at John out the corner of his eye, he observed how his hunched-up shoulders bowed forward and how tightly he crossed his arms across his chest. As if he was protecting his heart.

Deciding to show mercy once again, Dupin murmured, “If you must stay married for the sake of the child and to protect your amour, Madame Mary does not need to be your enemy. She can be your friend.”

John snorted, “How?” then added tartly, “And don’t call him my amour.”

Dupin merely started humming along with the radio.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the late posting! Lost track of time, but I hit a good writing flow last night and HAD to finish Chapter 38. I’m almost done with the Second Act. All that’s left to write is the Third Act and Epilogue and this story is out of WIP Hell.

François le Villard is an ACD character from Sign of Four.

Thank you thank you thank you thank you again for comments and kudos :^)
Chapter Twenty-one: God

31 May 2016
Hammersmith, London
Tuesday morning
11:27 AM

After a year and a half in Cardiff, Donovan had forgotten how bloody expensive London was.

She kindly rejected Whitey’s offer of staying in his spare bedroom. Instead, she gritted her teeth and forked over the ridiculously enormous sums to secure a decent bed-sit in a fairly decent borough. After she found someone to sub-lease her larger and nicer flat in Cardiff, she rang Arthur at Conan & Doyle Private Investigative Services and informed him she was taking a two-month sabbatical, effective immediately. She interrupted Arthur’s panicked squawks and clucks of disapproval, tartly reminding him she had not taken any time off (other than bank holidays), that she had no new cases in her queue and she had the highest customer service satisfaction rating out of all the other PIs. Arthur simmered down and granted the request.

Sitting in her bed-sit, surrounded by reams of papers, black-and-white photographs, newspapers and stacks of files, Donovan pulled out the biro she had absently stuck in her top-knot. She chewed on the pen as she re-read the file regarding Robert Carruthers’ death.

It didn’t make any sense. The man didn’t have any enemies.

However, he hadn’t had any friends either. Or family.

When she had interviewed the former employees of the now defunct Carruthers Brokerage Firm, the ones who deigned to speak to her all made the same claims. Yes, Mr. Carruthers was a lovely man. Generous, but fair, he always rewarded hard work and extra effort. Handsome, in a rugged, manly way but never vain and was also unmarried. Wife died, car crash, very sad as he had moved from Canada to be with her. Yes, he stayed in England after she had passed.

Donovan could find no records of a Mrs. Carruthers. In England or Canada.

An affair between him and Miss Smith? Heavens no, not with that iced lolly.
Only one employee, a frumpy, lumpy Olivia McCullough really had anything kind to say about Miss Smith. “Oh, some people didn’t like her because she enforced the rules but that was her job, wasn’t it? Anyway, she was always lovely to me. Well, not like in a friendly way, but patient, as I always seemed to muck up the commissions spreadsheets. I would think I keyed them correctly, they looked right to me anyway… but after the overnight cycle, all the figures would be wrong and the incorrect amounts were paid into the wrong bank accounts. But Miss Smith never got cross, just said that she would make the appropriate corrections and it’s not expected of me to be accurate since I was never trained on accounting or bookkeeping. I sort of inherited the job when one of the other girls had quit. She didn’t tolerate bullying, which was another reason why some of the other girls didn’t like her.”

At this point, Olivia’s eyes watered, “She made them stop calling me Oval Ollie, can you imagine? She had to tell grown women to stop calling me names. As if we were in nursery school instead of a proper office,” and she had mopped her eyes with a crumpled tissue.

But Donovan’s curiosity had been piqued. What spreadsheets?

After some gentle prodding, Olivia cheerily explained that Miss Smith would cover the insufficient funds as well as reversing the overage by transferring having the bank transfer all the funds that had been incorrectly transferred into a suspense account and then Miss Smith would manually re-distribute the funds.

The words suspense account pricked at Sally’s ears. If it was an oversight or an error, why would the money need to be moved into a suspense account instead of Carruthers’ business accounts before being re-deposited into the GBF agents’ bank accounts?

The words money laundering rang in her head.

She wanted those spreadsheets.

But the office had been bombed, blown to bits.

How convenient.

Also worrisome was the business entity GBF Holdings, UK. Her Google search on the business was next to useless. All she could glean was that several insurance companies had merged to become this gigantic conglomerate that specialized in reinsurance, whatever the bloody hell that was. But she could never get an actual human being to talk to her whenever she called their customer service number. One day, she stayed on hold for over four hours, while binge-watching a Luther marathon. Every single one of her emails went unanswered.

Seemed dodgy.

Especially since all the buildings linked to the initial March 13th bombing had been reinsured by GBF… Donovan had tried to read up on what that meant, but gave up after an hour and a pounding headache.

She picked up the sheet she had printed out about GBF. She studied the flagstaff again, quietly reading the names out loud. She skipped over the names she had already crossed off and rested on Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper, Earl of Winchester, a recent addition to the board of directors, albeit a minor position.

“Right, haven’t tried you yet,” Donovan circled the name in red. “Maybe you’ll talk to me.”

She pushed the list aside and scratched her head. There was something else niggling at her.
She stretched her arms up over her head then grabbed her bony elbows, leaned to the left then her right, working out the kinks in her shoulders and back. She rotated her head, wincing and sighing at the same time as her neck popped.

She reached for her mobile and scrolled through her contacts until she found the number she wanted. “Hey, it’s me.”

“Wotcher Sally,” Whitey greeted her warmly.

“Got plans for this evening?”

“Only if someone inconveniently gets murdered this afternoon. Why?”

“Want to poke around Appledore. You game?”

“Abso-bloody-lutely.”

As Donovan and Whitey made plans, Professor Moriarty politely followed an estate agent as she gave him a tour of Appledore. The woman babbled nervously while trying to discreetly pull down the jacket of her too-tight lavender pantsuit. Her ridiculous heels click-clacked on the marble floors.

“As you can see, it’s quite modern,” Georgina Prescott warbled, making a flourish with her pudgy hands, showing off her perfect nails and multiple bejeweled rings. “Yet it manages not to be an eyesore on the countryside.” She flourished towards the expansive windows. “Would you just look at the view, breathtaking, isn’t it?”

“Mmm, lovely,” Professor Moriarty pretended to be impressed. “Of course, one has to wonder why the price is so low for such an impressive property.”

“Oh,” Georgina flustered as a natural blush appeared underneath her rouge. “Yes, I suppose I do have to disclose that… err, yes, well a man died here. Murdered, actually,” she finished in a small voice of a woman who had had to repeat those words with the same results afterwards: the loss of a tidy commission.

“Did they catch the killer?” Professor Moriarty started strolling around the expansive lounge.

“No,” she whispered in despair, feeling another sale slip through her fingers.

“Mm…” the Professor turned away from the staircase. Spying two door handles, he pulled them open, “And this?”

“Just a cupboard, coats, the Hoover, cleaning supplies, whatever you need it to store.”

“Spacious,” the Professor closed the door to the closet that Magnussen showed to John and Sherlock when he had revealed he had no great vault of knowledge but kept everything in his own Mind Palace.

The Professor let his eyes rove around the enormous room where Charles Augustus Magnussen had played Sherlock Holmes for a fool. Bereft of the fine furniture and artwork, the space was even colder and starker than it had been when Magnussen’s possessions had occupied the space.

As he ran a hand appreciatively over the woodwork, his mobile rang. “Excuse me,” he apologized, “This is important.”

“Oh, by all means,” she sighed, defeated, already making plans to drive him back to the city.
The Professor read the text message then smiled coldly.

MH distracted.
VH located.
SH back in London.

He texted back to his MI-6 mole:

Well done.
Await further instructions.

Then he turned back around to face the miserable estate agent.

“I’ll take it.”

“You will?” Georgina squeaked.

“It’s a beautiful property and it’s perfect for my work. But I’m not paying for the asking price,” he held up a finger. “After all, a man was murdered here. I want one hundred thousand pounds knocked off the asking price and no closing costs. That’s only fair.”

“I’ll ring the executor of the estate,” Georgina brightened. She didn’t care she was getting robbed of her cut. She just wanted this lousy piece of property off her desk. Nobody wanted to buy a place where someone had their brains blown out.

Professor Moriarty of course knew who had died here and who had done the deed.

This was exactly why he wanted Appledore.

*Pressure points...*

***

2 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Thursday morning
4:29 PM

Eyes closed, fingers tented and pressed to his lips, his legs loose and limber, Sherlock drifted between sleep and wakefulness…

He wasn’t indulging in his usual daydreams of Victorian England (when people had manners and one was not a social pariah due to his brilliance.)

Instead he was remembering… drifting back to the not-so-distant past… approximately a year ago… right after they had all returned from Edinburg and before The Copper Beaches Massacre…

... *jogging up the seventeen steps to 221B, he hummed a little tune under his breath. He didn’t have any cases but he hadn’t been bored either, at least, not today.*

*He had taken care of some mundane errands, got fitted for a few new suits, popped in the Apple store to have a chat with Bill Wiggins and drool over the new MacBook Pro. Stopped by one of his favorite used bookstores and absorbed the damp smell of old books, the scent of aging paper and old leather one of his favorite in the world. He could have bought the entire store but settled on The Complete History of Jack the Ripper, The Black Dahlia, The Devil in the White City and The*
He thought about popping into Bart’s to see if there were any body parts he could procure for a new experiment. Then he remembered Molly Hooper’s delicate condition and he was the cause of it. Plus she’d probably want to chatter about her upcoming nuptials. Her pending wedding made him feel unhappy for some inexplicable reason, practically morose, which was stupid.

Best not to dwell on it, in fact, it was illogical to do so.

So, shying away from any potential confrontation or awkwardness, he decided it was best to be homeward bound. At least he had plenty to read so his mind would be occupied until the next case… or when Jim Moriarty finally re-appeared.

As he put his key in the lock, he heard a happy bark from inside. He couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across his face. His new roommate may be irritating, but at least the dog was fun. He always had a soft spot for dogs. He valued loyalty in any species.

Hello boy, he greeted the Alsatian who was practically prancing in circles around him as he walked in. As he kicked the door closed behind him, he rumbled, And what are you doing?

She stood in front of the fireplace, her back to him. Her long, chestnut curls were piled on top of her head. Dressed in tight yoga bottoms, a loose, sleeveless work-out top and a sports bra, she shuffled barefoot in front the enormous decorative mirror over the mantle, one gloved fist up to protect her face, the other jabbing forward, her knuckles grazing the glass. As if she intended to punch her own reflection.

What does it look like I’m doing, Captain Obvious? She puffed, studying her form in the mirror.

He dropped his purchases in John’s chair and toed off his shoes. Why are you shadowboxing here instead of going to your kickboxing class?

He had hoped to have his flat to himself, enjoy a cuppa and dive into one of his new books.

Pipe burst in the woman’s locker room, she continued to huff and puff, dipping and weaving now. Gym’s closed until further notice.

Well, you’re not going to get much meaningful practice shadowboxing here, he grumbled. Much more conducive to have some sort of punching bag or a partner.

She turned to him, her cat’s eyes gleaming. She didn’t have her Miss Smith Face painted on. Every single one of her twenty-seven freckles was visible. The crescent moon scar on her cheekbone looked small and shiny, as if it really was a small moon. Her eyebrow (carefully dyed to match the hair) arched as she gave him a challenging smile. Are you volunteering? Because I really could use a punching bag, she snickered.

He couldn’t resist. He knew exactly how long his legs were, so he knew he was in no danger of actually kicking her in the face. He snapped his leg out and stretched it out faster than one could blink. The top of his foot was a millimeter from her ear. She didn’t even bat an eye. She actually looked amused.

Behind him, Gladstone growled ominously.

Easy Gladstone, she said lightly, pushing Sherlock’s foot away from her head. We’re just playing. She gave the command for Gladstone to stand down in perfect German, then said Well, if we’re going to do this, let me put him in the bedroom so he doesn’t see us fighting and think you’re trying
to kill me.

As she led Gladstone down to the master bedroom, Sherlock shed his suit jacket then untucked and unbuttoned his dress shirt. It was one of his favorites, the dark purple one, and he didn’t want it torn. Then, he hesitated, his fingers running up and down the buttonholes. He had never paraded shirtless in the flat since she had moved in, hadn’t wanted to, didn’t want to explain the scars on his back.

Reluctantly, he re-buttoned up the shirt but didn’t tuck in the tails. He rolled up his shirt sleeves instead.

Then he peeled off his socks so he’d have more traction on the wooden floor. A flutter of excitement returned to his chest as the prospect of something new and amusing loomed in the immediate future. He made room for them to maneuver by shoving the coffee table across the room, so it was between his chair and John’s chair in front of the fireplace. When she returned, her kickboxing gloves tucked under her arms, she brought with her wrappings for his knuckles and wrists.

Sit, she ordered him and he dropped down onto the sofa next to her, as gracefully and arrogantly as a spoiled brat prince. As she coiled the cloth around his right knuckles and wrist then did the same to the left, he studied her face with his usual intensity, already creating his strategy on how to defeat her.

He paid back her courtesy by helping her slide her gloves back on. They were fingerless with extra padding on the knuckles, but the padding was for her protection, not the opponent’s comfort. As he tightened the Velcro around her dainty wrists, he observed the musculature in her deceptively slender arms.

Her punches will sting, despite the extra padding, he deduced.

They stood up, eyeing each other, detective versus profiler.

No kicking below the below the belt, he rumbled.

Don’t pull your punches just because I’m a girl, she riposted archly.

Oh, I never do, my dear Violet, his voice honeyed, deceptively sweet.

Then he immediately swung his arm around for a left-handed uppercut, which she blocked easily and followed up with four rapid rabbit-punches to his ribs. Puffing out a surprised and pained breath, he wrapped his long arms around her, grappling, trying to trip her. But he wheezed out another surprised breath as her fist caught him in the side again as her feet managed not to get tangled from his.

She slid from his grip, dancing away from him easily as he rubbed his ribs. I said don’t pull your punches, she taunted him.

His eyes lit up. Finally… something fun.

He adopted a loping stance, eyes glinting with mischief as she put her fists up again, like a proper fighter. Her fists protected her face while her arms and elbows did the same for her abdomen. Truth be told, he only really knew basic martial arts moves. He wouldn’t be considered a ninja. But he could hold his own if necessary or at the very least, sucker-punch his opponent hard enough so he could run away while his assailant lost consciousness.

Observing her stance and her skills, he knew she was no novice. Not only had she been taught a variety of self-defense skills as well as how to subdue a violent or fleeing criminal at Quantico, she had trained properly in kickboxing.
If she really wanted to, she could do him a serious injury. Perhaps even kill him.

How thrilling.

He idly wondered who trained her and if he could deduce who when she went on the offensive, first feigning a kick with her right leg. Then she surprised him with a left-cross as she was most decidedly not left-handed. He ducked his head back nearly in time, muttered an Oof as her glove glanced off his face. He blocked her next swing easily and tried to get a jab in, but like a violent ballerina, she stood nearly en pointe on her right while swinging her left leg around his body, curling it around his torso so she could deliver a sharp kick to his back with her heel, hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to do any damage.

It was also the moment Sherlock was waiting for, for her to succumb to the temptation of Showing Off. He kicked her right foot from out underneath her. With a surprised gasp, she fell flat on her arse. Without missing a beat, he grabbed her by the waist as she struggled to get up. Easily, taking advantage of his height and wiry strength over her slight frame and disconcertion, he flipped her over to her back and pinned her to the floor.

His knobby knees squeezed her hips, his hands clasping her wrists and holding them over her chestnut head while both of them panting...

... then to his upmost horror, he realized his heavy breathing wasn’t from exertion...

He wanted her.

He hadn’t wanted a woman in that way since The Woman.

He hadn’t been with a woman that way since… Molly.

However, he couldn’t deny it. His body, wretched transport, betrayed his desire. His heart raced, his pupils were undoubtedly blown. He had licked his lips seconds before he realized he had done it and why.

He still couldn’t catch his breath. He could feel his magnificent mind being deprived of blood-flow at this very moment as it went to fuel the very basest part of his existence. The part that kept him grounded as a dull, ordinary man, the part that kept him from being an intellectual god.

Still… he also couldn’t deny the truth: he did find her attractive. Of course he did, her sardonic wit, her caustic tongue, her intolerance for codswallop, her ability to remain cool (most of the time) in dire situations and most importantly, her inquisitive mind and insatiable curiosity not to mention her skills in crime-solving… intrigued him greatly.

She also smelled good. She stopped wearing perfume out of respect to his hyper-sensitive olfactory systems. So she only smelt like plain old soap and his shampoo and the coconut oil she used to moisturize her face after washing it with witch-hazel. She also faintly smelt like coffee and dog-hair and old books and gun oil, which pleased Sherlock’s sense of smell rather than offend it.

She also had the most stunning eyes, really, like a precious jewel. Commonly described as “hazel”, Sherlock decided her irises had more greenish tones to them, like a peridot rather than the more common brownish topaz...

He studied those peridot eyes, almond-shaped but not as narrow as his. More like a cat’s eye when sleepy or angry.

She was neither sleepy nor angry, she was… confused.
Her scrunched brow and the unattractive sucking in of her lower lip telegraphed her thoughts loud and clear: Where are we going with this?

If she would have smiled, he would have lowered himself onto her and kissed her, ran his fingers though her sweaty curls and...

Instead, she bit her lip and studied him intently.

No… he thought. I do not have her consent. She is uncomfortable with this.

All of this flew through his head in less than three seconds.

He lithely rose off of her and held out his hand, like a gentleman. He felt glad he was not lying fully on top of her. Otherwise the situation could have become quite embarrassing.

I’m starving, he informed her. Chinese?

She smiled now, her entire body relaxing as she sat up then took his hand. We had Chinese last night, she reminded him. I’m craving fish and chips actually.

Thought you didn’t like English food? He couldn’t resist teasing her as he pulled her up.

I like grease and salt, not creams and sauces, she shrugged, sliding her small hand out of his.

Such an odd little hand… perfectly manicured as if she was a proper lady, but utterly calloused like a labourer or common criminal.

I need a shower, he brusquely announced and when she had protested she needed to clean up as well, he added that Winners shower first.

Smirking, he shut the bathroom door behind him and shucked off his clothes, dumping them in the hamper. Turning the shower on full blast, he stepped inside the claw-foot bathtub and sighed with relief as the warm water rained over him. He reached for his body wash (plain old Ivory, the only scent he could tolerate) and started vigorously scrubbing his shoulders, his neck and under his arms.

But he winced and sucked in a harsh breath when he twisted around to wash his side. Putting the sponge down, he ran his hand down his ribs, grimacing as his fingertips grazed the tender skin. His skin was pinkish from the warm spray, but tomorrow, there would definitely be a bruise, all lavender and blue on his snowy skin.

Damn her.

Alas, such as the lot of one so pale, the bruises always show.

Hand filmy and slick from the body wash, he allowed his hand to wander, to travel southward, to territories he rarely visited, on his own or with company...

He inhaled deeply as he discovered that his traitorous transport was still rebelling. Instead of resorting to his usual methods of asserting control over the pointless wants of the flesh, he indulged it. Moving his hand up and down slowly and lazily, his mind wandered off… down a corridor he rarely visited, in his Mind Palace, where frivolous fantasies were stored, useless images of riding crops and lab coats… red lipstick and battle dresses… ugly jumpers with cherries on them. Raven black hair up in a chignon. Auburn hair scraped back into a pony-tail.

(Silvery-blond hair, steady hands under pressure and dark blue eyes one could fall into and get lost
And chestnut hair, long and curly, hazel-green eyes sparkling with intelligence and a smile that transformed an ordinary face, an almost homely face into something close to beauty.

As he bit back a groan, he fantasized the door squeaking opening. The hushed sound of clothes being peeled off skin glowing with a healthy athletic sweat... the padding of bare feet on the tiled floor... the shower curtain rattling as she pulled the curtain back as she stepped in, wrapping those slender, muscular arms around his narrow waist, her breasts pressed into his back as her lips grazing against his skin as she whispered...

You liked it... I know you liked it... you little know-all brat, you little tease...

He froze in mid-stroke.

It was not her voice he heard, but his... that bastard, that unholy terror. The wolf in sheep’s clothing. A monster inside a teenager’s body. A true sociopath that hunted and preyed upon little children, boys like him: brilliant, sheltered, naïve and vulnerable.

He had thought he had deleted that terrible episode of his life. She had Inadvertently re-installed the memory back into his hard drive.

Damn her.

He grabbed the taps and turned the water cold as it would go. He scrubbed at himself viciously now while thinking about Mycroft making love to the Queen of England as he reminded himself that it would not do to fall for a flat-mate... again.

After all, let’s look at Exhibit A, John Watson, shall we? He thought bitterly as he washed his inky black hair under a freezing stream of stinging water.

When he finally left the bathroom, bundled up in his second best dressing gown and she had quipped about him leaving any hot water for her, he snapped at her. Told her he had changed his mind and wasn’t hungry and stalked off towards his bedroom.

Whatever, he heard her mutter under her breath.

He resolved not to talk to her the rest of the evening.

Later that night though, she crept to his bed, shivering and nearly in tears. When he asked in a sleepy voice what the matter was, she snuffled that she had fallen asleep in front of the television. Then she had dreamt about the day she murdered Jack Woodley after her had tortured her, water-boarded her, laughed about all the horrible things he had done to her beloved brother before killing him. Tears began falling in earnest when she said the last bit.

Without a word, he had pulled back the duvet and let her curl up next to him. He ran his hand down her hair and whispered she wasn’t the only one with demons and dreams can’t actually hurt anyone. Her breathing had evened out. She fell asleep with her wet face pressed against his chest, her slender fingers curled around his shoulder.

He laid awake the rest of the night, his arms loosely around her while thinking in an endless loop: John moved on.

Perhaps it’s time I did so as well...

Problem was, even though he finally admitted to himself that he did fancy her a bit, he could not deduce whether or not she fancied him back. This woman’s heart was more of a locked door than
John’s ever was…

As the sun began to rise, he wondered what it would take to pick the lock… wondered if maybe if he was wrong.

Maybe dreams really do hurt people.

A sharp knock at the door jolted Sherlock out of his reverie and back into the present.

He smiled indolently, like a cat anticipating the mouse running out of its hole.

“Come in, brother dear,” he drawled, now fully back in the present.

Let the games begin…

Chapter End Notes

I am super sleepy... will respond to comments asap.. but thank you thank you thank for leaving them! XOXO
Chapter Twenty-two: Middlegame

Sherlock could not recall a time where Mycroft’s face had looked that ugly.

He had not looked this ferocious even when Sherlock nearly made a dog’s mess out of the Bond Air Mission.

Now, standing at the foot of the sofa, he held his umbrella handle in a death’s grip. Sherlock deduced he was fantasizing about beating Sherlock to death with it. Sherlock gave his brother an insouciant grin as he tucked his hands into his trouser pockets, “Mycroft, any reason why you’re slumming today?”

Mycroft’s eyes flicked over the empty containers of Thai food. “Should you be eating spicy food, with your ulcer and all?”

“Oh. Right,” Sherlock pressed his right hand over his belly. “Ow.”


“Care for tea?”

Mycroft held his lips in a straight line. “Yes, actually I would,” he muttered.

Sherlock waved him off towards the kitchen. “You know where everything is.”

“I am not John Watson, I am not going to bow and scrape to your every whim.”

Sherlock feigned going back to sleep.

“You do realize that I am the only thing standing between you and Eastern Europe,” Mycroft snarled. “Serbia was not a pleasant holiday destination, as you probably recall.”

“You do realize that Violet Hunter is the only thing standing between you and utter ruination,” Sherlock silkily reminded him. “I doubt she’d be pleased if you sent me off on a suicide mission.”
“Where. Is. She?”

“Safe.”

“Where?”

Sherlock popped open an eye. “Why did you burn Agent Mitton?”

Mycroft’s mouth dropped open. “You found Mitton?”

“Mm,” Sherlock’s eye slid back shut. “He’s en route to your offices now, probably with an solicitor in tow. My, my, brother mine, what is becoming of you? Going back on your promises to leave me alone, to let me live my life in peace? Tut-tut, what would Mother say?”

“Oh my God,” Mycroft ran his hand down his long face. “Mummy was in on it…”

“Of course she was…”

**

6 April 2016
Mr. and Mrs. Holmes’ residence
London, England
Wednesday afternoon
1:50 PM

“Mother, I need to leave the country for a few weeks, possibly months.”

“Alright, lovey. Are you going to be dead again?”

“God no. Just missing in action for a bit.”

“Oh good. It worries me when you play dead. Would you like some more tea?”

“No.”

“Well, I would. Go get your old mother another cuppa since you’re apparently incapable of saying “No, thank you,” like a gentleman.”

Sherlock stifled a sigh as he rose from his parents’ giant scrubbed kitchen table to fetch the teapot, a garish thing with bright pink and orange cabbage roses hand-painted on the china.

“So, keep Mikey off your back then?” Mrs. Holmes asked as Sherlock poured warm, amber liquid from the ghastly teapot.

“Please. I need to fetch Violet. She’s in trouble,” Sherlock shunted the sugar towards her.

“Oh good, I’m so pleased you’re bringing her home. I like her. More nibbles, poppet?”

Sherlock fumed at the babyish pet name as well at her insistence on always trying to Fatten Him Up. He already felt sluggish since his mother insisted on making him cheese and pickle sandwiches (crusts cut off as if he was still five years old,) served with beans and crisps. She had also produced a box of Viennese sandwich biscuits, double chocolate no less.

Sherlock thought the seams of his trousers were about to split.
“No. I must be off. I have an appointment about a violin and then I’m due at John and Mary’s for a bit of a celebration party. John won his case, got his medical license back.”

“Oh how splendid! Of course I never had any doubts. But you’ve gotten so thin again, button, after Violet left. Are you sure you don’t fancy another sandwich? Or some more biccies?”

Sherlock counted to ten. First poppet, now button… he feared angel would be next.

*How on earth did Mycroft escape with just Mickey and Mikey but I was bequeathed with the idiotic sentimental epithets?*

Sherlock reminded himself that it was Not Good to strangle his mother, especially when she was doing him a large favor.

“No.” Then he sullenly added, “Thank you.”

Oblivious to her son’s evil thoughts, Mrs. Holmes still fussed, “Are they serving a proper meal or will it just be drinkies and noshing on starters?”

“Mary planned the party so there will be food, plenty of it.”

“Hm.”

“Mother…”

“I don’t like her.”

“Mother, she’s very, very, very sorry she shot me. I assure you.”

“Hm,” Mrs. Holmes harrumped then sighed, “Well, come here and give your old mother a hug,” She got to her feet, wrapping her black knit cardigan around her, “Before you go off being a nuisance to the bad guys.”

Sherlock gave her the quickest of hugs and a perfunctory peck on the cheek. “Good-bye Mother, and thank you. Violet thanks you as well.”

“Thank me by bringing my grandson around for a visit,” she added sweetly.

“Mother…” he growled through gritted teeth.

“Bye angel, love you,” she beamed at him. “Behave yourself.”

“Never,” he let the door slam shut behind him.

**

2 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Thursday morning
4:37 PM

“Betrayed by my own mother with reverse psychology,” Mycroft said glumly. “*Et tu, Brute?*”

“We both know she likes me best.”

Mycroft glowered at him. “Sherlock, this is a matter of national se-”
“Oh save it,” Sherlock yawned. “If you don’t have anything interesting to say, go home.”

“I can have you arrested right now for Magnussen’s murder.”

“I said interesting,” Sherlock snorted. “And if you recall, you’re not a particular favorite of Violet’s right now. She had no qualms downloading the contents of Senator Woodhouse’s laptop, which she did hack into. But she did not kill him, which a colleague of mine and I put that false claim to rest, so don’t even think about using that as leverage against her. But speaking of leverage, I do believe she’s got a bit of leverage hanging over your head.”

“You really want your personal life splashed out in the tabloids? Your childhood?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Idiots out there already think I’m either a freak or a lunatic. If Violet pulls the trigger,” he fluttered his eyelashes and pressed the fingertips of his right hand to his chest, “I become the victim, the survivor. You become the villain, the monster who covered it up.”

“That’s not true and you know it,” Mycroft whispered.

“It doesn’t have to be true, it just has to be published,” Sherlock drawled. “Didn’t you learn anything from Magnussen, after your long… business relationship with him?”

Mycroft decided that a strategic retreat might be wise, for the moment at least. He set his umbrella on the coffee table next to the empty takeaway containers. Then he paused, eying the table. “Is that new? The table?”

“Mm, newish. Got it last January.”

Noting the pink flush in his cheeks, Mycroft innocently queried, “Any reason?”

“Birthday present.”

“Ah,” Mycroft turned away, seeking out the Client’s Chair. He carried it over to the foot of the sofa and plunked it down just as Gladstone padded out of the kitchen. He snarled a little, upon seeing Mycroft. “Call him off,” he asked wearily. When he saw an evil glint in his little brother’s eyes, he added a very hasty, “Please.”

“Stone, komm,” he commanded.

If Mycroft was not a practical and pragmatic man, he would have sworn the dog gave him the stink-eye as he trotted past him to get to Sherlock. Once Gladstone sat next to Sherlock, leaning towards him as Sherlock scratched his black ears, Mycroft asked, “Tell me. You’re dying to show-off. I can feel your arrogance radiating off of you like heat from the sun.”

“Tell me why you burned Agent Mitton first.”

“Couldn’t deduce it?” Mycroft crossed his thin legs.

“Believe it or not, we had more pressing concerns.”

“Very well,” Mycroft nodded. “It was discovered that Agent Mitton was the one who leaked the evidence proving that Marissa Watson is still alive.”

“And?”

“There is no and, Sherlock.”
“So Violet lied to me about Mitton confessing that I was not beholden to MI-6 for my stay of execution when my suicide mission to Serbia was aborted, but to you?”

Mycroft opened his mouth then slammed it shut. “Damn her.”

Sherlock snickered like a boy at Mycroft’s swearing. The word itself was mild but Mycroft’s oily voice had bubbled with long-suppressed frustration. “She does get under one’s skin, doesn’t she?” Sherlock murmured. “But why would Mitton do such a thing? Telling Mary Watson that her infant daughter hadn’t died after all?”

“Perhaps you could solve that little mystery for me?”

“Or you can ask him yourself when you go back to your office. He’s not pleased with you.” He gave Mycroft a cold smile, “You’re quite fond of suicide missions, aren’t you?”

“Not anymore,” Mycroft’s smile was as equally chilling. “Quid pro quo, little brother.”

“You really need to root out that pesky mole in MI-6, Mycroft,” Sherlock advised him before regaling him with his most recent and thrilling adventure.

Mycroft was right; Sherlock was eager to show-off… and to rub his victory in his face.

**

22 April 2016
Southside Chicago, Illinois
Friday
3:15 AM Central Standard Time

“Frankie?”

When the thin woman with the shoulder-length chocolate brown curls didn’t answer him, Philip Green, First Lieutenant of the United States Army (retired) and current President of the The Devil’s Foot Motorcycle Club shook his head but wasn’t really annoyed.

She did that sometimes, acted like she didn’t hear you calling her name.

He often wondered if that was her real name.

He doubted it.

Back in March, the Ides of March, actually, his vice-president informed him that a woman wanted to speak to him. Green had groaned. Assuming it was just another desperate broad, hopping from one member to another until she found one stupid enough to make her his old lady, he told Vibart to tell her to piss off. He was having problems with his own old lady and the last thing he needed was some stupid slut making his life worse.

His VP, Julian “Jules” Vibart was a Gulf War veteran like himself initially. Nothing phased Vibart, nothing scared him. But Vibart had stalled, “Yeah, she ain’t like that… there’s something about her.”


Vibart had lowered his voice, “A Beretta. Locked and loaded.”

“Jesus,” Green was a burly man, tall, broad-chested and bald but with a thick salt-and-pepper moustache (which was looking more salty and less peppery these days.) He put down his beer,
“Anyone else notice?”

“Nah… she, uh, told me she had it.” Vibart’s hair had been flaming red when he first met him but what remained of it had a peachy hue to it now. That was the only thing tame about him and he had the patches on his cut to prove it. He lived and breathed being a member of a One Percenter MC. Vibart was also the best friend Green could ever have.

“What?”

“She showed it to me.”

“Fuckin’ Christ,” Green rolled his eyes. “Take her out back, disarm her and have one of the prospects keep an eye on her,” he snapped. “I got to make a call first.”

“Fuckin’ patch-over?”

“Can’t keep ’em waiting forever,” Green had grumbled, finished his beer and stormed off to his office. “Gotta give ‘em an answer.”

So he had stormed out of the bar, made his calls. Once finished with that business, he re-emerged back into the bar section of the clubhouse. He had made eye-contact with Vibart then jerked his head towards the back, indicating he should follow him.

When they went out back, both of their jaws had dropped.

Not only had she disarmed the prospect, but she pointed the dipshit’s own gun at him.

“What the shit?” Green barked as Vibart started to draw his own gun.

Then the bitch had dug into her jacket and flung something out of it. Something silvery whizzed between the men then they heard the tell-tale thwack of a knife-point digging into wood.

Both men had looked at the knife sticking out of the back door then back at her, who was calmly pointing her gun at Green now.

The prospect looked like he’d just shit himself.

“You’ve got balls,” Green said calmly.

“So I’ve been told,” she replied, just as coolly. “I’m OK with talking without the gun-pointing. Does that work for you?”

“You drew on one of our guys,” Green crossed his arms.

“He thought he’d be cute and cop a feel,” her voice remained steady. “No means no.”

Both men glanced at each other then back at her. Studied her stance, the way her feet were splayed, how her shoulders were squared.

She was no novice, no gun-enthusiast, no wannabe either. She had experience. She knew what she was doing.

Cop?

No.
Military?
No.
Fed?
Maybe.

“What are we talking about?” Green found himself wary but slightly amused. Definitely intrigued... there was something about her eyes, something familiar about those unwavering hazel-green eyes.

“I can help you with your minor bookkeeping problem if you do me a favor.”

“Our books are just fine, ma’am,” Green gave her an indulgent smile but alarm bells had started ringing in his head.

“Oh, so you found a way to get rid of over a hundred thousand dollars in cash from drug mules and protection running? Good for you, I'll just be on my way now.”

“How the fuck do you know about that!” Vibart spat, ready to murder her.

“There are two undercover ATF agents in your club,” she dryly informed them, “The ones posing as nomads.”

“I knew it,” Vibart had hissed as Green said, “How do you know?”

“Do nomads usually stay at a cushy Holiday Inn in Oak Park?” she had sneered.

Now she had everyone’s undivided attention. Even the prospect looked less terrified.

“You sure about that?” Vibart’s voice was respectful but he still did not lower his weapon.

“I confirmed it. I even have their room numbers if you want to make a house call,” she lowered her arms. “Look, I mean no disrespect. I know how important respect is in your world. I wouldn’t have drawn at all if it wasn’t for that idiot.” She then pointed her gun at the prospect who had jumped and whined “Aw, c’mon, lady!”

“Shut up,” Green had snapped.

“The thing of it is I’m up shit creek and so are you. You don’t have the numbers to keep your rivals the Midnights from encroaching your territory and your friends in Cali aren’t going to consider a patch-over unless you are out of the drugs and guns. They went one-hundred percent legit after their president bit it in 2014.”

Green and Vibart had looked at each other again. Practically speaking, they should have just shot her then made it look like their rivals did the deed.

And yet...

The lazer-like focus, the sheer intensity of those fucking eyes of hers...

Where have I seen a look like that before?

“Pretty lady like you on her own,” Green had started although she was definitely not pretty. She wore the heavy black and silvery eye make-up favored by the broads and old-ladies and female wannabes of the biker culture. Her nails were painted dark red, but were badly chipped. She overdid
the foundation and the bronzer. Even so, a scar showed on her cheek, a little crescent moon.

She was too thin, no ass, no tits. She looked like a skeleton wearing boots and jeans.

Her hair color was an obvious dye-job, too dark-brown to be a natural color.

Even she knew he was full of shit. She arched a heavily penciled eyebrow.

And yet…. How long had she been hanging around before anyone noticed her?

She hadn’t looked any different from the other women, other than being skinny.

“You have an old man?”

“He’s…” A smile had crooked her thin lips. “Indisposed.”

“How so?”

“House-arrest.”

“Who the fuck gets put under house-arrest?” Vibart spluttered, finally lowering his gun.

“The kind MI-6 considers an asset and a liability.”

“MI…what?” Vibart had tilted his head, looked like a confused Golden Retriever.

“Who are you?” Green had finally demanded.

“I told you, I’m desperate. I can help you if you can help me.”

All three men stared at her open-mouthed again, their eyes almost falling out of their heads.

Her *fucking voice* had changed.

She had sounded as American as Coors Light and Mom’s apple pie one second, then she sounded completely snobby and *British* the next.

“Of course, we haven’t discussed the subject of compensation,” Miss Smith continued blithely. “Not only can I help you launder the remaining dirty money you have from your criminal enterprises, but I can reimburse you for room and board as well, also a bonus if you can get me out of the country alive and in one piece.”

“Hell,” Vibart laughed and tucked his gun away. “This is some James Bond shit right here.”

“The fake nomads are staying in Rooms 223 and 224, adjoining rooms. Send one of your prospects to confirm my story… well, not that moron,” she tilted her head towards the prospect.

“Get out of here,” Green had rumbled at the moron. “Leave the kutte.”

As he pulled the black leather vest off, he stammered, “Uh… what about my gun?”

“GET OUT OF HERE!” both Green and Vibart had barked.

After the former prospect scurried away, slipping on the icy concrete, Green had grinned at her. This one had sass. He liked sass.

“What’s your name, sweetheart?”
“Frances,” she had replied promptly, switching back to an American accent. “Frances Carfax.”

“Well, Frankie,” he had grinned at her. “It’s cold as hell out here. Let’s go inside, get a drink, get to know each other and talk some business…”

She hadn’t been lying about the ATF agents. She had also been able to straighten out their little bookkeeping dilemmas.

She was also a hell of a bartender.

Her hair and make-up improved, but she still favored the dark eye make-up and hair color.

Her eyes still unnerved them. As if they belonged in someone else’s head.

Green shook that unsettling feeling off and reminded himself that not only did she know her way around guns, she actually was knowledgeable about and appreciative of motorcycles. She had no problem hanging around after hours, chewing the fat, busting balls with the other patch-holders, talking bikes.

Some of the members tried hitting on her at first. Once Green and Vibart got the word out that her old man was doing time (and there was no prison clause for them,) they left her alone.

Of course, as all women were, she was excluded from “church.” But, unfazed, Frankie had merely shrugged a thin shoulder and commented, “The less I know what goes on behind those closed doors, the better off I am.”

The clubhouse was deserted now, except for him and Frankie. The younger guys had either found a broad to hook up with or gone out to raise a little hell elsewhere. Most of the older guys had gone home to their old ladies and kids.

His old lady was still being a bitch, so Green lingered over his seven-and-seven. “Hey Frankie,” he tried again.

This time, she snapped out of whatever fug she had been in. “Hey,” she turned her head and smiled. “Am I calling your wife or a cab?”

“Jesus Christ,” Green goggled at the scrapes on her face. “The fuck, Frankie?”

It had been dark when Frankie had come in for her shift. A female bartender in an MC clubhouse was somewhat of a novelty, but she poured perfect beers and didn’t fuck up any mixed drink orders. She also remembered everyone’s favorite poison as well.

But since it was dark, no one really noticed or commented on her face. He had turned the lights on when everyone left because he found drinking alone in the dark was goddamned depressing.

“If you tell me you ran into a door…” he growled.

“A door probably would have hurt less,” she gave him a lopsided grin.

“Is your old man… no longer under house arrest?” he asked gruffly.

Wouldn’t be the first time an old lady had been knocked around.

Her hazel eyes darted away from him, “No,” she turned to start washing glasses.

He swirled the ice around in his glass. “Hey, Frankie, can I ask you something?” When she didn’t
answer, he asked anyway, “Why us? Why our club? I mean… you know enough shit to bury this club. But you didn’t. You actually implicated yourself in our dirty shit. That is to say that the feds came after us for RICO you’d go down with us too.” He stared hard at the side of her head, willing her to turn and face him. When she didn’t, he huffed and said, “I’m not stupid. You’re obviously some sort of cop turned outlaw. I think it’s fair for me to ask, why us? Why involve my club and not some other?”

She turned to him finally, tucking a chocolate-brown curl behind her ear. Softly, she asked, “When you were in the Persian Gulf, back in ’89, did you serve with a Major Anthony Hunter?”

He blinked. He stared.

*The eyes…*

He studied her. The lines around her mouth, the crinkles around those bright, intelligent eyes… she was no spring-chicken. Late thirties, early forties for sure…

*Pretty girl, you’ve got there Hunter. How old is she now?*

*Thirteen, God help me. I’m more scared of having a teenage daughter than the entire goddamned Iraqi army…*

*She’s got your eyes, man…*

*Yeah… thank God the rest of her looks like her mom…*

“Holy shit,” the fifty-two year old war vet rumbled. “You’re… you’re Tony Hunter’s girl.” He scoured his memory for her name, her *real name*. Something with a V, a dumb tradition on Tony’s wife’s side of the family… all the girls were named with something starting with the letter V… and *her* name was something old-fashioned… Veronica? Valerie? Vanessa… no, that’s was Ted’s wife… Viola? No… close though…

“Violet?” he whispered.

She nodded.

“I think,” he pushed his glass towards her. “You better pour yourself one and tell me everything.”

Chapter End Notes

You know... I went to bed early last night, but I had this nagging feeling that I was forgetting something... this morning when I woke up, I was like "OMG, I didn't post last night!" LOL

Phillip Green and Jules Vibart are names from ACD's "Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax." The MC's name was inspired by the ACD canon story "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot."


Doyle, A. C., & Morley, C. (1930). The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax. The
Chapter Summary

Lady

Slang for queen. To "bring out the lady" means to develop the queen.

OR

"Dear me, Miss Hunter, dear me..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Twenty-three: Lady

21 April 2016
Fuller Park, Chicago
Thursday
4:15 PM Central Standard Time

No matter what side of the law she was on, one thing remained true: surveillance was boring.

She reminded herself that surveillance wasn’t nearly as bad as transcribing hours of wire-tap conversations... or running for her life, trying to hide from her government, the British government... the literal British government as well as The British Government. Not to mention a shadowy criminal syndicate fighting to survive.

*Maybe I should have become a concert pianist like Grandma wanted*, she sighed as she stared at a seemingly abandoned firehouse through tiny binoculars. *Or become an interpreter for the UN like Dad wanted.*

Funny, how her dad didn’t want her to have anything to do with the military or the government. Was it due to mild sexism stemming from Daddy wanting to protect his only daughter or was it because of the things her father had witnessed during his years of service?

She decided it was probably both.

Ruminating about dead men’s dreams wouldn’t provide a solution to her unique predicament.

She wasn’t as pure and clean as the freshly fallen snow, but god-dammit she was not guilty of the crimes they claimed she’d committed.

Well… not everything.

Her hacking skills were increasing by leaps and bounds, thanks to a little code Richard Brook, under
the guise of the IRA terrorist “Ciaran” had given her.

Just like Dorothy and her magic shoes, she’d had the power all along… she just needed a wizard to show her the way… or a certain insufferable, yet oddly endearing consulting detective…

Stop…

Violet drew in a long sharp breath through her nose and a long, slow exhale through her mouth. She felt her chest rise and fall with each breath as she cleared her mind of all things British.

Except for the MI-6 agent she felt compelled to rescue.

Once they had figured out that they had been set up, Mitton and Violet conjured up a plan based on nerves, luck and pure desperation.

“We can figure out who played us false later,” Mitton had muttered when the treacherous “flight attendants” retreated to bring him another cup of coffee and Violet a Coke. “Right now, let’s figure out how to extradite ourselves from his mess.”

Oddly, she had appreciated it that he had automatically included her in planning their escape instead of treating her like the pathetic damsel he had to save.

*Three cheers for feminism…*

As Mitton shielded her thin frame with his own broad body, Violet pulled out her iPad and opened the Moriarty Code (or as she privately called it, her “Evil Google.”) The code actually opened an untraceable search engine built specifically to make using the Dark Internet as easy as the regular Internet. It was a digital roadmap that led the user through the Mordor of the World Wide Web undetected.

That did not mean information popped up quickly or easily. When she realized they only had two hours before they were going to land in DC, she had actually begun to sweat. With only forty-five minutes to landing, she managed to find a way to get past Dulles’s firewalls and various other security measures. Then, she scheduled a Routine System Outage that would affect the lights, PA system and security systems at the approximate time they would be delivered to the fake FBI agents.

The power of 0s and 1s… no one would notice until it was too late.

“Cutting it close, aren’t you?” Mitton had muttered, trying for levity.

“Just trying to keep you on your toes,” she had replied serenely while hoping her damp underarms weren’t as smelly as she thought they were.

It almost went without a hitch. The power in the terminal cut out just as Violet and Mitton were introduced to the “FBI agents.”

Violet got away. Mitton didn’t.

She bolted at a dead run, not caring who she ran into as she fled. By the time she realized Mitton wasn’t behind her, the emergency generators had whirred to life and the terminal began to glow with the low-power emergency lights.

“Oh shit,” she had breathed while a cacophony of screams from panicked travelers, cries from scared kids and shouts from various law enforcement agents swirled around her until the din threatened to deafen her.
It was unconscionable to her to leave him behind.

She did it anyway.

She hated herself for leaving him behind. She tried to tell herself there was no shame in a strategic retreat. As they say, those who run away live to fight another day.

And here she was, living to fight another day.

*If what I’m doing now can be called living…*

After an extremely close call with an actual FBI agent in one of Dulles’ short term parking garages, Violet didn’t stay in DC very long. The agent who had pursued her had been a rookie, so green she might have just graduated from Quantico an hour before chasing Violet. It had been easy to mind-game her, then overpower her then take her gun, her badge, her shiny new FBI windbreaker and ball-cap.

She had lost her switchblade in the scuffle. That annoyed her but couldn’t be helped.

She had handcuffing the rookie agent with her own cuffs and forced her into the trunk of her own car. She put on the FBI ball-cap, hiding her hair and pulled on the windbreaker. At the parking garage’s exit, she had flashed the rookie’s badge at the security guard at the garage’s exit. He had waved her through without a second glance.

Violet drove the rookie’s car away from the airport and into the suburbs, all the way to Falls Church to the rookie’s apartment complex. She parked the car in the garage and left her there.

“Damn, they must have given newbies a pay bump, I couldn’t afford a place like this back when I graduated,” she rapped the trunk with her knuckles while the rookie screamed obscenities from inside. Violet had rolled her eyes and shut the garage door, making a mental note to make an anonymous tip so the agent would be found… eventually.

She had then let herself into the rookie’s apartment and to her delight, found an old fashioned landline. *Glory, hallelujah!*

She called a cab.

While she had waited anxiously for the cab, she pilfered a larger backpack and a black hooded sweatshirt from the rookie’s closet, careful to wipe away any fingerprints she might have left. She then had found a pair of scissors and made her way to the bathroom, which looked like a bomb had gone off. Pots of eye shadow and tubes of concealer were scattered all over the nice granite counter. Globs of toothpaste decorated the sink.

“Gross,” Violet had wrinkled her nose as she started braiding her hair as tightly as she could. Her eyes had actually watered…

*I like your curls…*

She squeezed her eyes shut tight, *STOP.*

Eyes still closed, she quickly finished braided her hair tightly.

Then she had picked up the scissor and, at the base of her skull, she started sawing away at the chestnut braid. It was the best she could do at short notice.
She tucked the braid into her messenger bag. Hair, after all, had DNA markers. She had then yanked off the cashmere scarf (… his scarf… STOP…) off her neck and jammed it in there as well. She had just zipped up the messenger bag when the landline rang.

Heart in her throat, she had answered. Her legs had wobbled when she heard a man with a slight Indian accent inform her that he was with Yellow Cab and he was in front of her building.

After stealing the rookie’s Washington Redskins ball cap, Violet had brazenly walked out of the apartment and into the cab with a confidence she didn’t feel. She calmly told the cabbie to take her to Georgetown University.

By now, they would have figured out she was no longer at Dulles. They probably would have noticed that they were missing an FBI agent as well.

True, her face would be flagged at all airports and train stations… but not at colleges.

She wandered the neighborhood until she found a bar where she would not look out of place. Ironically, it was styled after a “traditional” English pub.

_God has a sense of humor…_ she thought grimly as she ordered a beer. She sipped at it slowly, acting like she was waiting for someone. When enough time had passed, she batted her eyelashes at the bartender and asked if there was a phone she could use as she had lost hers and she had _obviously_ been stood up.

The bartender let her use the phone in his office far in the back. She called Uber and thirty minutes later, a cheerful college boy with tawny-brown skin and neatly braided dreadlocks pulled up in front of the bar in a sensible 2007 Honda Accord. He wore black-rimmed glasses, a Georgetown sweatshirt and neatly pressed khakis. He made small talk but nothing intrusive as he drove her to a Holiday Inn in Alexandria.

After he drove away, she walked until she found a Metro stop. Her feet ached inside her now dirt-streaked boots. She shivered in the black hoodie, having put her black pea coat she had been wearing in the backpack she had stolen. But she blended in as a weary commuter as she changed routes until she arrived at a surprisingly nice Wal-mart. After picking up some necessary supplies (such as a heavy winter coat) and making some money transfers, using the Moriarty Code of course, she used the prepaid cell phone she had just bought to call another cab. This driver was a pink-faced, wizened old man with a thick Southern drawl that made Violet think of Mardi Gras, jambalaya and voodoo.

She told him to take her to the Best Western in Fairfax, where she went to earth until she found a ride out of DC.

The FBI and CIA would also have flagged car rental agencies.

But they probably didn’t think to check craigslist.

_Nobody_ thinks about craigslist, until something is stolen…

_My life has been stolen…_

Two days later, she was on her way out of DC with another college student driving. This one was a smiley idealistic college girl with long blonde hair like a hippie from the Sixties. She wore awful, oversized glasses from the Eighties, a flannel shirt that invoked Nineties grunge and the terrible skinny-jeans that were popular now. She needed someone to help split the cost of the moving van, gas and hotel rooms as she moved back to her parents’ house in Vegas.
Destination, Las Vegas... perfect really. It wasn’t called Sin City for nothing.

Other than a mild panic attack as they had driven through her old stomping grounds in Albuquerque, the ride was mostly uneventful. Violet hadn’t wanted to risk driving through New Mexico, through the state where she had lived and worked before accepting a promotion to DC. But the weather in the East and Midwest was far more unpredictable than in the South. The roads in the South could and did get icy... but the South also didn’t get hit with blizzards like the East and Midwest. Violet, having driven white-knuckled through a howling, blinding snowstorm more than once, reluctantly agreed on the southern route.

So, to avoid the nasty snowy weather of the East and Midwest, they took I-40 through Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and finally Nevada. Culture shock finally hit Violet when they drove through McDonalds or stopped at a truck stop. The portion sizes appalled her. After experiencing English chips, McDonald’s fries tasted over-salted and saturated in grease. At the same time, she remembered how much she had loved Southern sweet tea, fluffy buttermilk pancakes drowned in maple syrup and crispy hash browns smothered with cheese. She indulged when they stopped at a Waffle House in Oklahoma City.

Then her stomach immediately rebelled after eight years of eating lightly and blandly because she couldn’t tolerate the greasy, starchy English foods drowned in creamy sauces.

The rest of the trip she stuck to toast, Sprite and lukewarm water.

As they zipped down the interstate in the battered U-Haul van, Violet watched the landscape slowly change from gray slush and chiaroscuro clouds to glittery, gritty sand and the over-bright cerulean skies.

She spent her first night in Vegas at a decent Howard Johnson’s on the Strip. Once again, she began the painstaking process of altering her appearance. Her badly cut chestnut tresses had been transformed into a shaggy mop of brunette curls. She slathered self-tanner on her fair skin to hide the freckles on not just her face, but her arms... having learned her lesson when Sherlock had exposed her as a fraud nearly a year ago.

She had experimented with make-up until she had perfected the trashy look she wanted, complete with chipped nail polish. She looked like hell. She wanted to look like hell. After all, everyone interested in locating her expected her to be up to her old tricks. That she would integrate herself once again into polite middle-class society and blend in.

She had no desire to blend in. She wanted to disappear.

I’m a ghost... she had reminded herself as she checked out of the HoJo’s, paying cash.

Then she hailed a cab that would take her to her latest hideaway, also paying cash, careful not to leave any digital or money trails. Ghosts, after all, don’t have debit cards.

Holed up in a shabby motel on the outskirts of Vegas, Violet managed to stay below everyone’s radar. She learned to sleep from dawn until two in the afternoon. The nights were too noisy, with altercations and fights going on in the parking lots almost every night. She kept her curtains closed and every night, she barricaded the flimsy door with the insubstantial chest of drawers. There had been a few nights she had also locked herself in the bathroom as well, curling up in the bathtub with the scratchy hotel comforter and pillows.

Sometimes, there had been gunshots.
Violet always carried the stolen Sig Sauer with her at all times. Strange men were always sizing her up. Strange women kept staring her down, wondering if she was after their man or the street corner they worked.

She had just kept her head down and her loaded gun close, acting like she was just another loser who had hit rock bottom. She let them think she was a burn-out who spent her days sitting by the garbage-filled pool, smoking and drinking Coke concealed by a paper sack so they assumed she was just boozing it up.

But the gangsters, the drug dealers and the addicts weren’t even the worst part of that shitty motel. To Violet, the kids were the saddest part. They should have been sitting in a classroom where they belonged. Instead they milled around the steaming asphalt of the parking lot or loitering around the crappy, outdated and unsafe playground. Hyper-vigilant as usual, Violet observed how large families were crammed into one tiny motel room, usually single women with multiple children of a variety of ages.

Observing the healing bruises and cuts as well as their narrow suspicious eyes and hard mouths, Violet deduced that most women staying there with their kids obviously had no choice but to flee an abusive situation. The shabby motel the only place they could afford after leaving.

Then there had been that one man with a toddler that Violet strongly suspected he had abducted from his estranged wife. He absolutely doted on the boy, took him out daily to the rusty old playground so he could push him on the squeaky swings or try making the merry-go-round spin for him. He always had treats and snacks for the kid while he looked like he could do with a good feeding up. While the chubby boy laughed and clapped his hands as he played outside, the man always looked around with a wary, hunted look on his thin bearded face.

Much to Violet’s dismay and surprise, there were so many fucking kids at this motel. There were the kids who had decent parents who had lost everything after losing their jobs due to illness or layoffs and still couldn’t get up on their feet. There were kids who had hard-working parents who had not entered the country legally but would risk it all to give their kids an American life.

Then there were kids just had the shit-bad luck of being born to asshole parents. Parents that would rather get high or get drunk than to get a job and take care of their kids, content to lounge around while their kids shambled through the parking lot instead of going to school. Parents that didn’t give a shit that their sons were being recruited into gangs or that their daughters were being vetted for prostitution.

All the kids had huge, scared eyes except for the happy little toddler with the skittish father.

Violet had often fantasized about just emptying out Woodley’s offshore account, giving every single parent a huge wad of cash. Then reality would set in. First of all, she might as well paint a giant bull’s eye on her back while screaming “Come and get me!” while skipping down the Strip naked. Second, the druggies and drunks would just burn through the cash instead of taking care of their kids. The illegal immigrants would get deported. The remaining decent people would have the cash taken from them because the money came from criminal enterprises.

*This world makes it so hard to be a decent person*... she had often brooded while trying to ignore the shouts and sobs audible through the toilet-paper thin walls.

The best she could do was to pay off the people next to her to keep quiet, leave her alone and also to alert her if anyone shady was snooping around her room. She threatened the occupants of the room to her left with deportation if they talked about her or about the money she gave them. The occupant to her right was the wary man with the toddler. She threatened to call DHS, his scared face becoming
more pinched, confirming her suspicion he had kidnapped the boy.

But the kid was chubby and happy, showing no signs of abuse, so she left it alone.

After insulating herself the best she could, she got to work. Create a new identity. Get a new fake driver’s license... get a fucking fake passport.

Find a way to buy a car without causing any red flags to flare up.

Discreetly move money from Woodley’s accounts into a legitimate checking account so she could buy things like food, gas... plane tickets.

Find allies.

Find Mitton.

Get the hell out of Dodge.

While the brawls and shrieking matches went on in the parking lot, she worked. Worked, drank coffee and tried not to chain-smoke. It had shocked her not only how quickly she fell back into one of her worst habits, but how easily. Mostly she smoked to fit in with her new neighbors, to blend in, but a tiny part of her smoked because the scent of cigarette smoke comforted her...

Cigarette smoke, formaldehyde and cologne that smelled like cedar, sandalwood and... and... dammit...

She never had been able to fully determine all the scent notes in his cologne, but never mind. Not like she’d ever smell it again, it had been made especially for him by a grateful client.

Stop...

Too often, she had to push Sherlock out of her mind.

But, like the stubborn ass he was, he would just butt right back in, usually at the worst times.

Belatedly, she realized he wouldn’t be fooled forever. Probably figured out she had lied to him the minute the plane exploded. She hoped Mycroft could deter him from looking for her.

But more than likely, John’s injuries kept Sherlock from looking for her...

... or maybe her predicament finally bored him and he had moved on.

She couldn’t rule that possibility out. However, she hoped it was because of John’s condition.

Her gut would twist as she remembered how badly she had wanted to stay, to help Sherlock find John after he had disappeared. I should have stayed! Every instinct in my body was screaming at me to stay, but I let emotion override my good sense. I thought Sherlock would be safer if I had left...

She honestly had no idea what was going on with Sherlock. He didn’t have any social media and he hadn’t updated The Science of Deduction website since 2012.

John however...

She had barely gotten through reading Mary’s post on John’s blog after he had been found before bursting into loud, choking sobs. She turned her iPad off and curled up around it, as if it were a doll and she were a little girl...
... a little six-year-old girl who had just been told that Mommy was in a car accident and she’s not coming home because she’s in heaven now, Pumpkin so I need you to be brave for your little brother because he’s not going to understand...

She had cried herself to sleep like a child. She had woken up with swollen eyes and a sore throat and her entire left side of her body felt numb and tingling… prickly and cold.

Not this shit again...

But John’s injuries had stiffened her resolve. She would not abandon Mitton. Finally her work had paid off in dividends when she had found Mitton.

All it took for the pieces to come together into a complete puzzle was a combination of her painstakingly reading all of Woodhouse’s emails she had stolen then stumbling across the right news story. Thanks to Woodhouse’s emails, she knew that Mitton was held in a black site somewhere in the Midwest. She had ruled out small towns and small-to-medium sized cities, but that still left a lot of Midwestern cities where someone could disappear. Detroit, Milwaukee, St. Louis, the Twin Cities, Chicago…

Chicago…

One of the files in Woodhouse’s emails had a subject line labeled “Operation Onion Field” with a secure attachment, but she hadn’t been able to decrypt it, not even with the help from her “Evil Google.” She also didn’t dare reach out to any other hacker to help her decode it… those bastards didn’t work for cheap or for free.

Sitting on her bed, ignoring the volley of Spanish curse words flying back and forth in the parking lot outside, Violet had closed her eyes and imagined her rows and rows of neat file cabinets. She wandered until she found the cabinet called “Useless Trivia.”

She had mentally opened a drawer and plucked out an imaginary file: What does Chicago mean in Alquonquin?

“Onion Field,” Violet had opened her eyes and started digging online, smirking while thinking And they said playing trivia at the bar during college was a waste of time. Please… I’ve used trivia in my career more than I’ve ever used algebra.

“Holy shit,” she had breathed as the story about the busted black site in Homan Square in Chicago populated the screen.

“Jackpot,” she had muttered, her fingers flying across the keyboard… except when she had to stop and flex her left fingers. Instead of trembling like it used to, her left hand now liked to go completely numb. Some mornings, she couldn’t even curl her hand into a fist…

Stop. Keep working. You probably have a pinched nerve… or carpal tunnel…

Wrong, a smug, urbane baritone had purred…

“Shut up, Sherlock,” she had muttered as she scrolled because once she had found out where to look, she could slip in through the Internet’s nefarious back door and maneuver though the catacombs of the online world until she found exactly what she was looking for… and more importantly who.

Stay alive, Mitton, I’m coming… I owe you at least that much…

There was just one tiny problem… They’re setting me up as Woodhouse’s murderer in order to flush
me out, she fumed at the unfairness of it all.

She wouldn’t have minded killing Woodhouse. She also wouldn’t have minded being accused of killing him… if she had actually killed him.

But I didn’t, she grit her teeth.

She had read the same news stories Mycroft had advised Sherlock to read. She also read between the lines. While the stories didn’t specifically state her name (because she was still legally dead in the United States), they gave a pretty accurate description of her appearance and possible motive. She had definitely been set up to be the fall-guy for Woodhouse’s death.

Unlike Sherlock and John, she knew exactly who was setting her up, or at least, which federal agency. Felt it in her bones, in her heart, in her soul, in the very core of her being. Sherlock would have scolded her for using emotion instead of logic to solve that mystery.

But as Mycroft had stated, her emotional intelligence was superior to both Holmes brothers. Her intuition, her “spidey-sense”, has yet to fail her.

Who did I piss off in the CIA?

After all, Sherlock had assured her that Mycroft had informed the CIA of her existence in England. Mycroft’s CIA contact had bluntly told him that she was England’s problem, not America’s. Do what you want, had been his exact words.

Assuming she had stayed in England, of course.

But, thanks to the sacrifices made by Section Chief Adrienne Melrose and her team, the FBI realized she was innocent of the treasonous crimes she had originally been accused of, so she was returned to the United States. Deputy Director Barton Marshall had personally guaranteed her safety if she gave State’s evidence against Senator Woodhouse. He was more valuable alive to everyone, even to the La Ligue des Roux.

Jack Woodley had been the La Ligue des Roux plant in the FBI. The Senator, also Jack’s uncle, had been Moriarty’s man in Congress.

So why was the CIA interfering?

Was there a La Ligue des Roux plant in the CIA as well?

Did they know about the Moriarty Code? Did they want it?

That thought made Violet go stone cold.

The idea of any political party or government organization having the ability to infiltrate anyone’s privacy as invisible and insidious as radon chilled Violet even more.

What was worse than infiltration was manipulation. Generate a false digital trail against opponents, creating new witch-hunts based on false evidence.

The United States of Salem.

She didn’t trust anybody with this much power, this sinister little series of 0s and 1s.

Biting on her lower lip, she dragged herself back into the present day. She chewed on her lower lip until it bled as she continued to gaze out of the dirty window with the giant crack down the middle.
Without looking, she reached for the bottle of Coke Zero next to her hip and swallowed. She grimaced because the soda was now warm and syrupy, which caused her stomach to start roiling.

Fortunately, she did have a connection in Chicago who would definitely not run to the police. Or any law enforcement agency.

She had vaguely remembered her dad’s old Army buddies. She barely remembered Lieutenant Green offering her condolences at her father’s funeral. The funeral had been a blur. She had been more focused on calming her inconsolable little brother more than anything else. Quite honestly, she had completely forgotten about Green until her interview with the FBI for admittance into Quantico, when they questioned her relationship with Phillip Green. She had been genuinely puzzled why they pressed her about this man. When they were convinced she wasn’t lying, they finally disclosed he had joined a criminal motorcycle gang.

“Would it be a problem to you to pursue and apprehend a family friend if necessary?” the interviewer had asked.

“No,” Violet had responded immediately with all the arrogance of a twenty-five-year-old. “Plus my father would have been furious if he knew one of his men turned his back on his country.”

But her father had been shot in the back of his head by one of his own men. She learned that fact after she graduated from Quantico. A file appeared on her desk in New Mexico with a Post-It note stuck to it that read: “You deserve to know the truth.”

Oh, but the lie was so much more comfortable, Violet sighed as she checked her watch, a cheap thing she had picked up in Walgreens. The pretty gold wristwatch she had received from her brother Michael she wore as a bracelet on her other wrist. Once again, it was useless. She had dunked it in a cup of coffee after she had left the MI-6 hangar. It was the only way she could think of to disable the GPS tracker Sherlock had installed in it.

They’re late, Violet frowned, looking out at the road pocked with potholes.

The abandoned firehouse was a relic of the Fifties. Many of the buildings in Fuller Park were abandoned in this tiny slice of hell in the Greater Chicago Metro Area. Depopulated, forgotten and dangerous, it was the perfect place to set up a black site.

Three things made the old firehouse stick out like a sore thumb, at least to Violet. None of the windows were broken. All the windows had blackout curtains.

And usually, at 4:30 on the dot, a delivery van appeared. Different vans, different makes and models with different plate numbers, of course. But they all appeared at 4:30 sharp. The old garage doors would open, the van would drive inside. Then about twenty to thirty minutes later, the doors would open again, the van would back out, with a completely different license plate and drive away.

Just as she was about to give up and slip away, at 4:56, a florist van trundled along the crappy road. Violet peered through her binoculars, spying a “donut” instead of a regular tire. Somebody ran into problems, she thought, watching as the garage doors rolled up and the van limped inside. The garage doors went down faster than it went up.

Violet bit her lip. She knew Mitton was in there, going through God only knew what, but… what the hell was in those vans?

She wanted to find a point of origin for the vehicles. She wanted to know what was being loaded into those vans. If she was still a fed, she’d have all of the FBI backing her up. Hell, all she’d really
need was a search warrant. If she was still in England, Sherlock surely would have thought of some audacious, brilliant plan to solve the case… stop.

Violet puffed out an annoyed breath. She knew she couldn’t delay much longer, she knew the clock was counting down on Mitton. Before she made any moves, she wanted to know exactly what was in that garage.

They were pulling WiFi from somewhere, which had been easy to hack into. The files, however, were encrypted. While her computer skills increased the longer she remained an outlaw, that didn’t make her a cryptologist. Paranoia still made her unwilling to reach out on the Internet for help. After all, one of Sherlock’s few friends was a powerful hacker called “Wasp” who was regarded as an online legend, akin to a wizard.

She wouldn’t be surprised if Sherlock had enlisted Wasp to look for her online.

She toyed with the idea of calling the police. Then she laughed, remembering she was in Chicago. Also, she had no probable cause. Just a lot of weird vans coming and going at approximately the same time, so if a cop even took her call seriously, the La Ligue des Roux would have had the place cleaned out before the cop even left the station.

And Mitton more than likely would be dead.

I have no choice, she realized grimly. I need to get a car and follow the van. Tomorrow.

As the van, with a new tire and new license plate, drove away, Violet studied her left hand.

It didn’t shake anymore. Now it tingled and burned and was horribly stiff, like she had been outside in the snow without a glove. She curled and uncurled her fingers, staring at it as if willing her fingers to obey her command.

Her left pinkie absolutely refused to bend at all. She had to use her right hand to curl her left pinkie over to ball her left hand into a fist.

She shook her head, shaking her hand out. As she packed up her gear, she pushed down the fear that always threatened to push through the surface.

Time was running out on her as well. She needed to get Mitton and get away, somewhere safe, so she could figure out what the fuck was wrong with her.

She couldn’t go to a doctor here. That left a paper trail not to mention putting her DNA in the system if they needed blood samples or any other sort of bodily fluid for testing. Also, whatever treatment they prescribed, she’d have to pay out of pocket, so she would either leave a money trail or raise suspicions by paying in cash. Neither option was viable.

Tomorrow, she told herself again as she stood up and hoisted her backpack onto her shoulders. Tomorrow, I’ll bite the bullet, get a car and follow them.

She pulled out her gun and twitched the hood over her head. The empty warehouse moaned as mice squeaked and rats scurried. Even after all the time she spent in the rotting, creaking building, she never got used to it. Any little sound triggered her flight-or-fight response.

She was, after all, in the one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago.

The irony was the high number of churches populating the tiny neighborhood.
Violet pushed an old filing cabinet she had barricaded the door with aside then slipped through the crack. She hurried down the stairs, cringing at the spider-webs hitting her face. She bit back her screams of disgust and fear all while keeping her finger on the trigger.

Spiders are not the worst things out there…. She tried to convince herself.

Eyes open, ears straining for the smallest sound, she hurried across the first floor of the abandoned warehouse. Heart pounding, she headed towards the back, the side of the building not facing the firehouse. Instead of using the back door, she slipped through a broken window covered with plastic. She pushed the plastic aside, wincing at the slight noise it made, even though the neighborhood was all but deserted… for now.

Through her surveillance, she also knew their schedule for patrolling their perimeter. She had missed her window to leave once. She had spent a terrifying night hidden in the crawlspace above an empty office as young men prowled through the building, making sure it was empty. By the way they spoke, she could tell they were amateurs, gang members and street kids with no military or police training on how to do a search correctly. But that didn’t make it any less terrifying as they were armed. She hadn’t dared to move until dawn.

So she knew she was pushing her luck as she hurried through the narrow spaces between empty brick buildings. She kept her gun in her hand until she saw buildings and houses that actually had lights flickering from the windows. She clicked the safety back on and tucked the gun into her side holster, a present she had picked up for herself at one of Vegas’ gun shows.

Fortunately, the abandoned firehouse was not that far away from the Garfield stops on the Red Line or the Green Line. Violet wondered if that was done on purpose and if so, why. Nevertheless, she felt some of her anxiety float away as she made her way from the shadows and alleys and onto the street she needed. Keeping her head down, hood shielding her face but walking with purpose, she strode towards the Red Line stop.

The Red Line would have taken her directly to Chinatown and her shitty studio. She hadn’t been back to her apartment since yesterday morning.

When she had come home after bartending at the clubhouse, she heard someone moving around her apartment. Walking around, moving things. A light shone through the crack of the floor and door to her studio.

She had frozen, key in her hand, her heart pounding. Slowly, she had started backpedalling down the hallway. As she crept away, she had stuffed the key back into her pocket and drew her gun. She pointed it at her apartment door, her breath shaking and unsteady, heart racing. She kept her gun pointed at the door until she rounded the corner.

Then she had run.

She had been running ever since. For the past two days now, she had been living on adrenaline and CokeZero.

Thank God everything she needed was in her backpack.

Even if that hadn’t just happened though, she never took the Red Line straight from Fuller Park to Chinatown. She always rode the train all the way to the Loop. Then she always got off at Washington then selected a random train to ride around the Loop. Then, when she felt secure enough that she hadn’t been followed, she got off and walked down the platform to either wait for the bus or hail a cab to take her back to Chinatown.
As she sat down on the train, she rolled her neck, sighing with relief as she heard the pops and crack. The intruder was another reason she couldn’t delay any longer. Maybe it was a random burglar. Maybe not. She wasn’t willing to take any more chances.

Once the train screeched away from the Garfield stop, Violet relaxed and pushed the hood off her head. She felt the hypnotic jerk and sway of the train as it rattled its way north.

As the train jerked to a stop at the 47th station, she decided she would keep riding the L on the Red Line past downtown all the way to the Loyola station. There would be hotels near Loyola University. She needed a shower and some sleep.

After the passengers had filed onto the train and it had lurched to life again, Violet’s skin began to prickle, in that creepy-crawly way it does when someone is watching.

Violet lifted her eyes, trying to make no sudden movements.

She sucked in a horrified breath.

Five rows ahead of her, sat Holy Peters.

He gave her a menacing little grin and a tiny wave, a flirty waggle of his enormous fingers.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the late posting! Real life stole me away from the Internets last night (damn Real life!)

Hope the cliffhanger was worth it!
Chapter Twenty-four: Attack

21 April 2016
L Train Red Line, Northbound
Thursday evening
5:52 PM Central Standard Time

The plastic of her seat crinkled as Violet pressed her spine flat against it. Her heart pounded against her ribs. Her fingers flailed, looking for something to grab, to hold on to as tightly as possible. Her stomach curled up into one hard knot as she broke out into a cold sweat.

She wanted to take her leather gloves off. Her clammy hands were becoming hot and sticky.

All the while, Peters just leered at her, surrounded by oblivious commuters.

Through the thick fog of panic threatening to smother her, a hysterical voice sounded in her head: Not like this! It can’t end like this!

It won’t if you gather your wits around you and THINK, a different voice, a hypnotic voice, low and thunderous with the rounded and rolled British accent of the overeducated. You know everything about him… what does he know about you?

As the train waved and swayed as it rounded a corner, she thought desperately, He knows I’m a federal agent. He knows that I’m a profiler. He knows I’ve been in hiding in plain sight ever since my team and I got burned for crimes we didn’t comm-

Stop, her inner-Sherlock commanded her. He knows you’ve been hiding in plain sight. He expects you to attempt to skulk away, in fact, would you believe that he is expecting it?

The panic started to ebb. She was still plenty scared, but she wasn’t frozen anymore. Peters, in his arrogance, would expect her to try and slip away, not to make a scene…

Then do the complete opposite.

Count on people always to underestimate you.

When she heard the announcer drone from the speakers that the next stop was the Sox-35 station, she pressed her lips into a thin line, her eyes never leaving Peters’ face. No one sat next to him or ahead of him. He had leaned forward now, his massive arms resting on top of the seat in front of him. His fixed his beady eyes on her, sparkling with malcontent.
Violet allowed herself to quickly glance around the train car without moving her head. Not many passengers, but they would be coming from the South, not North, so they probably weren’t going home after a long day’s work. Many of them had baseball caps and some wore jerseys and jackets all decorated with… the White Sox emblem, not the Cubs…

Baseball game…

The announcer droned again that they were approaching the Sox-35 platform.

Now!

Violet bolted from her seat and yanked on the emergency cord that ran above all the windows of the train car. She braced herself against the window and the seat ahead of her as the train skidded to a halt. A huge belch of air emitted from the train as the compressed air-brakes locked down on the wheels. A terrible screeching filling everyone’s ears as metal wheels scraped against metal rails. People jolted forward in their seats. Others who’d chosen to stand toppled over. Cries of pain and fright filled the carriage.

In the confusion, Violet unzipped her hoodie and drew the gun she had taken off of the idiotic biker-gang prospect then threw the hood over her head as the train came to a complete stop. She fixed her eyes on Peters again, who rubbed his chest as he had been slammed against the seat in front of him. His eyes widened when he saw the Ruger SR9 pointed at him.

“Shit!” he yelped as he ducked just as she pulled the trigger, twice. He cursed loudly as a bullet ripped through his shoulder. The second bullet missed his head by inches.

“Gun!” a panicked voice cried out and Violet trained her weapon towards the sound of that voice as she gritted her teeth, glancing down where Peters had fallen. Dammit, that should have been a clear kill shot.

But at least no one else was hurt… scratch that… Violet realized as she saw people struggling to get up, many of them rubbing their necks, shoulders and chests, some of them with blood gushing down crushed noses, No one else got shot.

But as people screamed and hid behind seats or shielded their children from the madwoman with a gun, she scooped up her backpack and climbed out of her seat. Awkwardly swinging the backpack on as she kept her gun pointed, she backpedaled until she reached the emergency exit. She watched people flutter around a bleeding Peters. A Good Samaritan was pressing his scarf to his bleeding shoulder. When Violet saw a woman trying to be sneaky and reach for her cell phone in her purse, Violet pointed the gun at her face. The woman squealed and cowered, too terrified to notice that Violet did not have her finger on the trigger.

Taking advantage of the chaos, Violet shoved her shoulder against the emergency exit door and twisted the handle. It screeched open and she hurried out, slamming it behind her.

Once outside, Violet gasped as an unexpectedly chill wind hit her. Knowing the police had probably been alerted the minute she pulled the emergency cord, Violet assessed her situation as quickly as possible. She couldn’t just jump from the train to the tracks; she would be electrocuted the minute she touched the rails.

The only way out was up.

Three chains were looped in front of the emergency exit at the end of the train, like Christmas garland in front of a mantel. Violet shoved her gun back into its holster and climbed up the chains,
her stomach lurching as they swung like an unstable rope ladder. As they clanged against each other, Violet reached the third chain and swung her legs over. Reaching for the hand bar to the right, she hoisted herself up, reaching for the roof of the train car with her left hand.

Her useless left hand that barely could grip anything these days… oh come on, please, she begged as she spread her left fingers as wide as they could go, hoping she could hold herself steady just long enough to finish climbing onto the roof…

Immediately her left hand began to slide, her leather gloves squeaking against the metal roof.

In the distance, she heard police sirens.

“Shit,” she swore as she tensed her arm muscles, locking her left arm, using her left hand only for balance and not for gripping. “One…” she puffed. “Two… three!”

At the same time, she let go of the hand bar and swung her right leg up and over. She clung to the roof of the train desperately with her right hand while hooking her heel onto the roof. She rolled herself up onto the roof of the train, scrambled to her feet and started running while trying not to lose her balance.

The metal roof was not the easiest thing in the world to run on. It wasn’t completely flat and condensation made it slippery. She wobbled several times, but as the siren wail grew closer, she pressed forward, her boots clamping on the rooftop.

Jumping from train car to train car reminded her vaguely of the first night she and Sherlock met, when they had jumped from rooftop to rooftop to escape a bomb in her kitchen. Fortunately, the distance between train cars was not nearly as wide as the distance between the London flats.

She didn’t have to run far to see the platform looming. There were only a few passengers waiting on it, but still… more witnesses. Not good.

You’re still going to have to jump…

Violet slid as if sliding into home base, something she hadn’t done since she played softball in high school and college. She swore as her hip hit the metal, a small starburst of eye-watering pain vibrating through the bone. Gritting her teeth, she rolled to her belly and lowered her legs, preparing to push herself off the train then tuck and roll and break into a run again.

But her left hand gave way and she fell instead.

She managed to twist herself so she belly-flopped onto her face instead of landing on her back. She tried to catch herself with her hands but when she landed, she felt another jolt of pain, this one radiating from her knee, causing her to actually cry out. As her temple made contact with the old wooden platform, she felt the burn and scrape of wood against the tender flesh of her cheek as well as a throbbing in her skull.

Disorientated, she struggled to her feet. As she stood up, she felt blood beading on her scraped cheek and starting to trickle down. Suddenly strong hands held her steady. Instinctively she started twisting out of his grip, ready to do anything necessary to get away, claw out his eyes, punch him in the throat, knee him in the groin.

Then she caught the familiar whiff of cannabis from his clothes.

“Lady, what the hell?” the man who held her upright was slightly overweight with a long beard that could be either considered hipster or hillbilly. His breath also reeked of the yeasty reek of cheap beer.
“I mean, don’t get me wrong, that was totally bad-ass, but are you crazy?”

“Do you need to go to the hospital?” one of his friends, a clean-shaven man wearing black-rimmed eyeglasses and a Chicago Blackhawks jacket actually sounded slightly concerned.

“Let me go,” Violet felt her bearings come back to her as the sirens grew closer.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” the stoned bearded hipster released her as his friend asked, “Are you filming like a YouTube video or something? Some sort of hidden camera stunt thing?”

“Yeah, and you’re blocking my shot,” she puffed as she pushed past him. She hurried down the steps, pulling her hood over her curly brown hair again. Blood coursed down her scraped face.

As she reached the bottom step that led to the street, her legs nearly gave way again.

The police cars were getting closer, but there was an actual taxi waiting by the curb.

*There is a God!* She nearly wept with relief as she half-limped, half-ran towards the cab, waving her hand at the cabbie just as a young couple wearing White Sox gear started strolling towards the cab. Violet added another burst of speed and nearly launched herself at the bright yellow cab, ignoring the sparking pain in her knee. She jerked the door open and threw herself in.

“US Cellular Field,” she gasped, slouching down in her seat, rubbing her hip.

The pain wasn’t as bad from when she wrecked her motorcycle on the A1, but it still hurt plenty.

As the cab pulled away, she craned her head up just enough to see in the rear view mirror a police car pull up just where the cab had been.

She slid back down again, beginning to shake from head to toe.

*Get a grip, Hunter, it’s not over yet,* she touched her bleeding face. Her lip felt puffy and her nose hurt. She wondered if she had splinters in her face. She ran her tongue over her teeth, relieved not to find any of them loose.

She rubbed the blood off her leather gloves onto her jeans.

The cabbie (a squat fellow with jaundiced skin and huge ashy circles around his eyes wearing a grimy Mickey Mouse sweatshirt) didn’t make any conversation, just listened to NPR on the radio as he drove. He stopped in front of the stadium and told her the fare. She paid in cash and left him a large bonus, keeping her face hidden the best she could.

As she walked away from the cab and towards the stadium, she wondered if there were CCTV cameras by the Sox-35 Stop. Her stomach lurched, trying to think if there were cameras and if there was, had enough of her face been visible for a positive photo identification?

She grasped the straps of her backpack as she tried to stroll causally towards the baseball stadium. Now she saw Angels hats and sweatshirts as well. She merged into the crowd of happy baseball fans, digging out a pair of sunglasses from her hoodie pocket. She swore under her breath when she saw the lenses were shattered. *Must have broken when I fell off the train,* she seethed, looking around from under her hood. Her face hurt like hell and her knee and hip didn’t feel so wonderful either.

Plus, baseball stadiums usually did bag checks. She couldn’t let a rent-a-cop see what was in her backpack, especially after… well… shooting up an L train.
Not to mention the gun in her side holster or the knife in her boot.

*Well... in for a penny, in for a pound*....

Violet did an about-face and started walking in the opposite direction, towards the parking lots.

She kept her head down and her hands in her pocket. Her eyes roved, searching for her prey.

Her knee and hip burned, her head thumped and blood oozed down her face. She felt the flat soda she had been drinking slosh in her stomach. She wanted to puke then lie down.

She trudged on, looking for a way out.

A few people passed her, but they didn’t pay attention to her, too consumed with the excitement of watching the White Sox play against the Angels while downing beers and hot dogs.

Finally, finally she found what she was looking for... her eyes locked on a single woman, sitting in a 2015 Lexus IS, texting.

*How many times*, Violet sighed as she pulled her gun out again, slowly so not to attract attention.

*How many freaking times do women have to be warned not to dick around alone in a parking lot? Especially when it's starting to get dark?*

Hating herself, but her drive to survive outweighing her morals, Violet limped towards the expensive car then slowly slid next to it, keeping her head down the entire time. She rapped against the driver’s window.

The woman, a bleached blond with a fake tan and a perfectly made-up face looked up at her with a scowl. Then her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened when she noticed the gun barrel trained at her head. Her French-manicured nails hovered over her iPhone.

Violet tilted her head. *Get out.*

Shaking, sobbing, the woman got out. She only wore skinny jeans, flimsy shoes that resembled Converse sneakers but had the Coach logo printed all over them and a White Sox jersey. She clutched her phone, sniffing.

“Leave the phone,” Violet ordered her. Gulping, the woman tossed it back into her car.

Violet kept the Ruger trained on her until she was inside the car and turned on the ignition. Feeling merciful, she did throw the woman’s purse out the window.

She kept the cell phone though.

She then sped away without sparing the woman another look.

She drove the speed limit until she reached the Loop. Then she turned off the Loop, and got on Long Shore Drive, heading north. Then she merged with traffic and floored it, not completely sure where she was going, but she knew she couldn’t stay in one place and an opulent car like this would stick out like a sore thumb.

*I just committed grand theft auto*... the thought dawned on her as Lake Michigan turned black as oil while the sun finally fell behind the Chicago skyline.

Then she giggled. Then the giggles turned into almost hysterical laughter.
Lying below the laughter though was the insidious realization *I can’t do this much longer*…

As she pulled off on Belmont, she tried to clench her left hand into a fist.

It was as if she were trying to crush an apple with her bare hands instead of folding her fingers over air.

She pulled over the first chance she got. The hysterical laughter turned into tears as she leaned her forehead on the steering wheel and sobbed. Reality hit her with all the force of a hurricane. How close of a shave she had just experienced… how shitty she felt all the time now…

... and just how fucking alone she really was.

She didn’t allow herself the luxury of wallowing in her misery for long. She pulled herself together and began driving again, trying to think of her best option, really not wanting to stay in a hot car for any longer than necessary… plus, she felt fairly confident if she didn’t have a concussion, she was definitely going to have a hell of a headache. Getting off the road was top priority, followed by finding a place where she could crash undetected.

Then she smiled grimly, knowing exactly where to go.

The next morning, a Southside chop shop had an unexpected surprise.

Parked behind its dilapidated building was a pristine 2015 Lexus IS with all the bells and whistles. The inside of the car smelled like bleach. In the passenger seat was an unloaded Ruger SR9 with the serial numbers filed away, a small brown envelope and a note.

Inside the envelope, there were ten crisp one-hundred dollar bills.

The note read: Make this all disappear.

The chop-shop crew looked at each other then shrugged.

Best not to look a gift horse in the mouth, right?

One of the guys sauntered off to drive the Lexus inside the shop before anyone else noticed it while the other two guys followed, trying to figure out how to split a grand three ways.

**

23 April 2016
The Devil’s Foot, Clubhouse
Southside Chicago, Illinois
Saturday morning
4:01 AM Central Standard Time

His drink forgotten long ago, Philip Green stared at Violet, open mouthed.

“Holy shit,” he finally said when Violet finished her tale.

“Yeah,” she limped over to switch on an ancient Sunbeam coffeemaker next to the cash register. “I hid out in the backroom most of today. Hope that was OK.”

Green ran his hand down his face, his mind reeling. He first ran his hand over his bald head then down his black moustache.
On one side, she was Tony’s little girl. Tony had been a brother-in-arms. More importantly, he had been a good friend… a good enough friend that he called in the last favor he had in the military to have a file appear on Agent Hunter’s desk with a Post-It note stuck to it that read: “You deserve to know the truth.”

He damn well knew Tony hadn’t died by “friendly fire.” His knowledge was the reason why he’d taken early retirement and joined an outlaw gang.

He had kept tabs on her and Michael after Tony had died. Then Michael had been killed on assignment while in the Middle East. Then Violet had died in a plane crash over the Atlantic…

Except she wasn’t dead; she stood in his clubhouse, making coffee.

That was the other side, the club. The club came before anything and everything: your parents, your kids, your spouse, your government, your religion, your old friends. The club was your parents, your kids, your spouse, your government, your religion, and your old friends.

Ted had been a good man, but he wasn’t A Member. And his daughter had the potential to bring a lot of unwanted heat to their club.

Not to mention the God-damned patch-over looming on the horizon.

The timing couldn’t be worse.

“I have to bring this to the table,” he told her regretfully.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” she told him evenly.

“I personally guarantee your safety,” he told her, not completely sure if he could keep his word. “No matter what’s decided.” He threw his watered-down drink down his throat. The ice had melted away a long time ago.

“I’m not worried about what could happen to me,” she spooned Folgers into the coffee maker. Shutting the lid and turning it on, she added as the coffee maker burbled to life, “I’m worried about what will happen to you guys. Besides,” her feline eyes twinkled. “You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep.”

He snorted, “You’re just like your dad, you know that? He could read people. He always had a sort of sixth sense.”

Her face softened as she smiled. Green wished she would smile more often. She didn’t look so hard when she smiled. She hobbled back to the bar and leaned on it. In a soft, small voice, she asked, “Did you know my mom?”

“A little, not real well,” he admitted gruffly. “She was a nice lady, from what I remember.”

“I was six when she died. I don’t really remember much.” She cleared her throat. “When you bring this matter to the table, let them know that if they help me get out of the country, the club would be richly rewarded.”

“How rich?” his ears perked up. Money was money, after all.

“How does a million sound to you?” She didn’t bat an eye, “Half now, half before I leave.”

“You… have that?”
The smile slipped off her face, “Why do you think so many people want me dead?”

“You must have stolen more than a million,” Green ran his finger over the rim of his tumbler.

“Nearly sixty million, American.”

He whistled. “Do I want to know where it came from?”

“Middle Eastern terrorists and European gangsters,” she said blandly. “But I made them believe one of their own took it first.”

“Except now, they know it was you.” He ran his hand over his bald head again, feeling the stubble in patches where hair still tried to grow. He made a mental note that he needed to shave his head again. “Go, crash in the backroom. You probably haven’t slept in the past two days. Consider that room home until we get shit figured out, OK?”

As Violet disappeared, he poured himself a cup of coffee and added a generous splash of whiskey. The backroom had a bed and dresser and a small bathroom, complete with a shower. He had planned on crashing there, but he felt too wired. Plus Violet looked dead on her feet… *I have to remember to call her Frankie in front of the club though…* he reminded himself.

He checked his watch. He had an ulterior motive for sending Violet to the backroom.

The delegation from their brothers from Northern Cali was this morning.

He did not want them seeing her until he talked to everybody.

Before he talked to everyone though, he spoke to his VP.

“Jesus Christ,” Vibart’s jaw went slack with shock. Then his eyes narrowed. “You mean we’ve been sheltering a goddamned *fed* this entire time?” His face became mottled with rage. “How do we know she’s not going to rat us out?”

“Because if we go down, she goes down,” Green explained. “She’s all about self-preservation. She needs to get out of the country until the heat dies down.”

“No shit!”

“She can pay, generously.”

That gave Vibart pause. “How generous?”

“One million, half now, half later,” Green told him. “Chunk of change that big would keep us flush, help us out if shit with the Midnight crew does pop and we go to war.”

Vibart whistled but immediately demanded, “She good for it?”

“She better be,” Green put his hands on his hips, staring off towards the back room where Violet slept like the dead. “Or she’s going to have bigger problems than the Red-Headed League.”

“The what?”

“Exactly, it’s that type of gang, not a bunch of outlaws like us. Piss them off, families disappear.”

“Goddammit,” Vibart groused but he cocked his head as motorcycle engines could be heard rumbling in the distance. “They’re here,” he reached into his jeans pocket for his cigarettes.
“Yup.”

“Gonna bring them up to speed?”

“I will, at church along with everyone else.”

As Green walked out to greet their soon-to-be-adoptive motorcycle club, Vibart lit a Marlboro Red. Hazy smoke enveloped him.

He looked down the hallway towards the back bedroom.

“Shit.”
Kotov Syndrome

Chapter Summary

Kotov Syndrome

This phenomenon, first described by Alexander Kotov, can occur when a player does not find a good plan after thinking long and hard on a position. The player, under time pressure, then suddenly decides to make a move, often a terrible one which was not analyzed properly.

Chapter Notes

So... does anyone remember this part from the first story?

"Sherlock got his revenge on the perpetrator of that beating when he tipped off an American biker gang in Northern California regarding that particular fellow’s whereabouts. As that fellow had stolen quite a bit of cash plus some illegal automatic weapons from the gang, there wasn’t much left of him after the bikers were finished..."

Wonder who that biker gang was... and apologies for any spoilers *points to the 'Other Fandoms Not Mentioned in Tags' tag ... 0:^)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-five: Kotov Syndrome

23 April 2016
The Devil’s Foot Clubhouse
Southside Chicago, Illinois
Saturday evening
6:35 PM Central Standard Time

“Are you bloody serious?”

Nobody expected a president of an American MC to have a Scottish accent.

But nobody had expected the Sons of Anarchy president to come down to Chicago personally either. But here he was, all six feet of him. Longish silvery hair and goatee and the infamous “Glasgow smile” scars on his face, the source of his nickname “Chibs.”

He was not smiling.

Neither were his travelling companions. To his right was a young, lanky man with short brown hair, neatly trimmed goatee and dark, serious eyes. Even though they called him “Rat Boy”, he looked more like a hungry wolf than a rat.

To the president’s right stood his VP, Tig Trager. Wild, black curly hair, he stood slightly shorter
than his president. His ice-blue eyes were wilder than his hair. His lips curled as Green had explained their predicament. Trager’s reputation for irrational violence preceded him. It was rumored his trigger finger (literally and figuratively speaking) was what had sparked the inferno that ended up consuming the last two SOA presidents as well as spreading out, causing a lot of collateral damage.

But he had been promoted to VP, so he had to have learned to control himself… right?

When no one answered his question, the president cleared his throat and looked at every member of the Devil’s Foot before fixing his hard gaze on Green. “Is it the accent?” he asked sardonically. “Is that why no one is answering me?” Filip “Chibs” Telford demanded.

The silence was deafening. No one sat. Everyone stood around the large table, looking at the three Sons with stony faces.

“You mean,” Trager vibrated with nervous energy. “You mean you’re telling us that there’s a goddamned fed here? Right now?”

“Not right now, no,” Green said placidly. “She left.”

“Oh my God,” Trager ran his hands down his face as Chibs turned his back on the Devil’s Foot, showing the back of his kutte, the Sons of Anarchy emblem, a grinning reaper, holding an M16 with a bloody scythe sticking out of the barrel while also holding a ball with a dripping A in the middle. Rat Boy just stared incredulously at the Devil’s Foot then at Green, then at Trager.

“Well, shouldn’t we go get her?” Rat Boy spoke for the first time. Only recently patched in, he didn’t carry as much weight as Chibs or Trager. He had been slightly surprised and more than a little flattered when he had been tapped to go to Chicago for the patch-over. He didn’t want to blow it.

“She rooted out two ATF rats for us,” Vibart pointed out.

“How do you know she’s not ratting you guys out right now?” Trager yelled.

“She helped us clean a lot of dirty money that we wouldn’t have been able to get rid of ourselves. Her hands aren’t clean.”

Chibs turned around, his face twisted. “One of the conditions of the patch-over was to go legit. No more weapons, no more drugs. We went through bloody hell going legit.”

“And we’re out of gun running, been out of it for months,” Green refused to raise his voice. “We just had a small problem with the cash and she cleaned it for us.”

“Jesus Christ,” Chibs rolled his eyes. “You can all go down for bloody RICO, you muppets!”

“So she’s a dirty fed,” Trager sneered, thinking of all the crooked law enforcement agents he had dealt with in his life. “That’s great, just great.”

“No,” Green said. “She’s outlaw.”

“She could still sell you out to get back in,” Trager pointed out.

“No,” Green shook his bald head. “She’s got bigger fish to fry than us.” He took a step forward. “Look, a psychopath tried to kill her two days ago. She needs to get out of the city.”

“What are you proposing?” Chibs’ voice was deadly.

“Take her back with you to Charming.”
“Oh fuck that!” Trager yelled but Chibs held up a hand, silencing him.

“And?”

“She’s resourceful. Get her to Northern Cali and she can make it to Canada herself.”

“Look,” Chibs strove for conciliatory. “We understand and appreciate that she’s your friend’s daughter. But the risk she’s bringing to the club, our club, SAMCRO,” he shook his head. “It’s too much. We can’t do the patch-over if she’s part of the deal and the Devil’s Foot is not going to survive without us.”

“She can pay for the risk,” Green informed him.

“I doubt it,” Trager snorted.

“She said one million.”

The three Sons started at Green.

“Dollars?” Rat Boy asked for clarification. “Not pesos or Monopoly money or some shit?”

“She stole a shit-ton of cash from European gangsters and Middle Eastern terrorists. That’s why there is a price on her head.”

“Jesus,” Chibs closed his eyes.

“That’s not just feds, that’s Interpol and CIA!” Trager yelped.

“We just got the CIA off our goddamn backs after the cartel bullshit. We don’t need to be to be back on their radar again!” Trager made a sweeping motion with his hands. “Nah, nuh-uh. I’m not signing on for this shit. No. Way.”

“I think she’ll be open to negotiations,” Green lied, not sure if Violet would be or not.

“Would she?” Chibs stroked his goatee.

“Chibs, what are you doing?” Trager hissed in his ear but Chibs waved him down.

“She’s like her dad,” Green pressed on, “Reasonable, practical, not much rattles her cage.”

That much at least is true, he thought, hoping his poker face would hold.

The Sons stayed silent for a moment. Then Trager burst out, “The gash better offer more than a mil! I mean… the goddamn CIA. The dust has finally settled after…” his voice suddenly became choked. “After everything that happened with the cartel and August Marks and… Jax.” Tears sprang into Trager’s bright blue eyes.

It’d been two years, but their last president’s spectacular sacrifice still cut to the core of each Son. Rat Boy suddenly became interested in his shoes, blindingly white sneakers, worn in homage to his fallen president.

Chibs folded his lips tight together, his throat working. “Right,” he finally croaked. “We don’t make any moves until we talk to her. We have eyes on her?”
“We did,” a young, heavily muscled blond named Bevington piped up. “But, she’s sneaky.”

“Sneaky?” Chibs snapped.

“Yeah, she’s real good at disappearing into a crowd.”

“Oh fuck,” Trager groaned. “I hate this more and more.”

“Aye,” Chibs muttered, “New plan, lads. If she shows up and she’s reasonable, we can do business. We can get her to Charming. We can even charter a flight to Ireland. She’ll have to fly in the cargo bay of a commercial flight but she’ll be undetected.”

“We’ve done it before,” Trager muttered. “It ain’t so bad.”

“Really?” Rat Boy asked.

“Long story,” Trager snapped. “Shut up and pay attention.”

“If she doesn’t show up by,” he checked his watch. “This time tomorrow, we’re going to assume she sold you boys out to Uncle Sam. There’ll be no patch-over. You’ll be on your own, so you better hope little Miss J. Edgar Hoover shows up. Now,” he turned to Trager and Rat Boy. “We better go find a place to crash. I doubt staying here is in our best interest.”

Trager and Rat Boy trailed after Chibs, but Trager paused to stick his finger in Green then Vibart’s faces.

“If this little escapade screws me out of another patch-over party… I’m gonna… I’m…” Trager’s eyes were wide and maniacal. “I’m really not going to be happy.”

“Tiggy!” Chibs shouted.

“I’m coming,” Trager sulked and stomped out of the meeting room.

Green walked around the table and slouched down at the head of the table. He pointed at Bevington then at a short, beefy man named Stirmon. “You two, find her. Drag her back by her hair if you have to,” he picked up his gavel. “The rest of you, out. Not you, Vibart.”

Vibart closed the door behind the rest of the club. “Yeah?”

Green fiddled with the gavel. “Spit it out.”

“Is she worth it?”

Green set the gavel down carefully. “She stole over sixty million dollars from Eurotrash and towel-heads.”

Vibart blinked. “I’m gonna… uh, help the guys go find her.”

“Good idea,” Green smiled beatifically at his VP.

**

23 April 2016
L Train, State and Division Stop
Chicago, Illinois
Saturday night
9:33 PM Central Standard Time

The local news reported the shooting on the Red Line but nothing about the stolen Lexus.

The reporter earnestly explained how eye-witnesses described a “young, Hispanic woman” opening fire on the Red Line then evading police in a “daring escape.”

“Are you kidding me?” Violet had muttered in disbelief as she had watched WGN News on one of the television sets in the clubhouse. “I’m being saved by racism and really good self-tanner?”

She avoided the Red Line. She opted to take the Green Line to downtown instead.

Not that she had planned on any particular destination. She needed to get away and think.

*I have a way out of the city, maybe even the country. Now I just need to figure out how the hell to get Mitton out of that black site.*

As much as she hated to admit it, falling off the train instead of leaping off like she wanted to only proved she did not have the stamina to break into the black site herself.

*What’s wrong with me?*

She shook that fear away.

She found it harder and harder to do so as her left hand grew progressively weaker.

Especially since now her left foot liked to fall asleep at the most random, inopportune times.

*Stop… deal with your transport later, you need to focus on the bigger problem… you didn’t kill Peters when you had the chance…*

If she wanted to live long enough to get Mitton out of the black site, she needed to figure out where the hell Holy Peters disappeared to; the dewy-eyed news anchor said nothing about a large Australian man being shot, just that shots had been fired.

After her conversation with Green, Violet had crashed. But she woke up around nine-thirty, her body aching and her throat parched. After a glass of water and a cup of coffee (her stomach still felt off) Violet made a few calls to the bigger hospitals, faking an Australian accent the best of her ability, as it was not as similar to a British accent as she thought. She claimed to be his wife, so the admissions nurse could release information about him to her. Her attempts had been in vain. None of the hospitals she had called had admitted a man matching Peters’ description for a gunshot wound.

That was not good. That meant she only winged him. That meant he was still out there.

She didn’t dare stay at the clubhouse. She didn’t know how long Peters had been following her or who else he had following her. It was more than likely he had been the one who broke into her shitty studio in Chinatown.

As much as she wanted to stay curled up under the blankets, she needed to stay mobile.

Still, her injuries hindered her best efforts. After making her phone calls and choking down eight ibupроfens, she fell back asleep, despite her stomach churning from the pills and coffee. But unfamiliar voices outside the backroom had startled her awake at a quarter to two. She then showered, scrubbing away as much of the self-tanner as she could. In the cracked mirror in the
bathroom, she debated on how best to cover up the scrapes. With the self-tanner scrubbed away, her skin looked pink and blotchy, not coppery. Touching the scabs and grunting in relief when her touch did not cause them to bleed anew, she dug into her make-up bag and found the tube theatrical foundation she used as a base. It made her break out terribly and it couldn’t be good for the scrapes, but she didn’t have a choice if she wanted to go out. Wincing, she made up her face then put on powder, but not the bronzer.

She looked like a tired, sick version of herself so she added some blush and added more highlights around her puffy eyes. Her lip already swollen, she applied lipstick and liner until she had achieved a sultry, pouting look. Then she dressed quickly then slipped out the back while pulling on an oversized black knitted beanie over her curls.

She knew, of course, about a merger going on between the Devil’s Foot and a West Coast club. She had also decided the less she knew about that, the better.

Unfortunately that plan had been ruined when she saw three unfamiliar black motorcycles neatly parked next to the rest of the club’s bikes. Intrigued, she stepped closer but when she saw the Sons of Anarchy emblem airbrushed into the tank of one of the unfamiliar bikes, she had squeezed her eyes tightly shut, as if she could un-see what she’d just seen.

“Fuck me,” she turned on her heel, hurrying away from the bikes and the clubhouse.

In her FBI career, she had never dealt with outlaw motorcycle clubs directly. But she had made friends with agents in ATF and NSA, had gone out for drinks with them, talked shop over plastic pitchers of shitty beer and bowls of stale popcorn. So she was familiar with the Sons and the path of destruction that followed them. She didn’t know everything about them, of course. She did know enough that she didn’t dare mess with them either.

She also didn’t dare risk going back to Fuller Park, not when she still felt so shitty. She took the L back to the Loop, then damned the expense and took a cab to Shedd’s Aquarium.

She had learned in London that museums and zoos were a great place to hide in plain sight. They were also wonderful because you could sit down without drawing attention to yourself.

She spent the bulk of her time at the otter exhibit. With an almost child-like sense of delight and wonder, she watched them cavorting in the water. Watching them zipping through the water, diving and twirling and showing off, she felt her worries and cares drift away, for a little bit.

Just enough so her brain was a blank slate and she could start again from a fresh perspective…

Who would be crazy enough to help me get Mitton out…? Or… who is greedy enough is the better question, I think…

As she walked out of Shedd’s at closing time, she discovered it was turning into a nice evening. Feeling the breeze from the lake on her injured face and overestimating herself, she decided to walk to Bridgeport Coffeehouse. She wanted to refuel with caffeine and carbs and ponder her dilemma some more. She soon regretted her decision since the coffee shop was a mile away from the aquarium. After contemplating her situation over a frothy latte and three doughnuts, she hobbled out, biting back a whimper as her hip and knee throbbed anew.

She shuffled her way to the nearest L stop, eyes open, watching everyone, trusting no one.

Soon, she was limping again, her hip and knee wretchedly reminding her she was forty, not twenty. She didn’t dare return to the clubhouse yet. So she rode the L until she reached the Belmont station,
planning on finding a hotel. As her knee and hip continued to give her trouble, she realized she had no choice but to go back to the clubhouse. Peters had gotten the jump on her once before. She couldn’t take that risk again.

Plus, she was running out of cash.

She got off her train and plodded over to the other side so she could catch the next Brown Line train back to the Loop. Unhappily, she decided she would take the bus back to the Southside. The nearest bus stop to the station was four blocks towards the club. She decided she’d text Green from her prepaid cell once she was on the bus and beg him to pick her up at the station.

As she stood on the platform, waiting for her train, a gaggle of transvestites hobbled down the stairs and fluttered past her, all giggling and bitching. Violet barely noticed them, only looking to make sure none of them were Peters in disguise. She also briefly noted that one wore an exceptionally bright blue \textit{haute couture} dress... mermaid-style, skin-tight through the waist and thighs but billowing out around the knees with high-heeled open-toe sandals encrusted with rhinestones peeping out from the hem.

\textit{Electric blue}... she thought distantly as she watched a thin man set up a speaker on the platform on the other side of the tracks. She smiled, she always liked street musicians.

Before she could see what instrument he was going to play, the trains roared up and screeched to a stop, blocking her view. It wasn’t the train she wanted, so she clutched the straps of her backpack and idly watched the train stop. Passengers stumbled out and made their way up the stairs. But none of the transvestites hopped aboard.

As the trains rattled away, Violet watched a rat trot across the rail. She wondered how a rodent could walk across the rail without getting electrocuted. Or keel over from the unique stench of urine and damp, like a basement after a flood or a sewage pipe had burst.

Then a strum of recorded guitar music filled the subway... followed by a violin’s wail.

Jerking her head up, Violet gasped as she saw a tall and impossibly thin man lovingly slide the bow over a violin. He wore a maroon chambray shirt and worn blue jeans instead of a sharp suit. Still... his lithe body weaved to the music, as if he was about to burst into dance at any moment. His long slender fingers moved up and down the neck in a familiar fashion. But his battered fedora hid his face.

She couldn’t place the tune at first, then with a jolt, she realized, it was \textit{Yesterday}, by the Beatles. She found herself drawn to the music, the lyrics floating through her head...

\textit{Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away.}
Now it looks as though they’re here to stay.
Oh, I believe in yesterday...

Lifting her head up more, her hood slipped off. Still, despite this exposure, she took a step closer, her legs trembling. Clutching the straps to her backpack now for dear life, her toes hung over the edge. Her throat tightened as the violin music reverberated beautifully off the tiled walls and concrete floors.

\textit{Is that you?}

\textit{It can’t be you...}

\textit{If it is, I’m going to kill you...}
Please let me see your face…

Her heart began to speed up while her stomach ached. *He’s not supposed to find me, he can’t leave England, if he leaves England, Mycroft will have his head…*

The thin musician finished with a flourish, then lifted his head.

Feeling disappointment and relief battling each other, Violet gave a smile and a nod to the very young man with dark brown eyes. He tucked his bow and violin under his arm and doffed his hat at her. Then he took it off, revealing a shock of straight, brown hair, as he wiped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt.

As he fussed with the iPhone plugged into the speaker, trying to find the right accompanying music for his next violin solo, Violet felt tears sting her eyes but she refused to cry, mostly because she couldn’t risk ruining her make-up and revealing her shredded cheek. She stepped away from the edge, scolding herself for being so stupid. Anyone could have pushed her into the tracks while she had been distracted. *Focus*, she ordered herself. *Stay alive. Figure out a way to get Mitton out, then both of you get the hell out of Chicago.*

Another train came roaring up. This time, the transvestites clambered on, all still talking in high, shrill voices… or as high and shrill as bass, tenor and baritone voices could get.

As the train screeched away, picking up speed, the young violinist started playing Adele’s *Rolling in the Deep.*

Again, her skin prickled with that unbearable *Someone Is Watching Me* sensation.

Out of habit, she unzipped her beat-up leather jacket. She reached into her side holster and unsnapped the holster and clicked the safety off. She heard the clip-clop of footsteps behind her… *no, not clip-clop… click-clack…*

She frowned. Those weren’t the sounds of a man’s boot or shoe… those are *high heels…*

She pivoted, ready for a fight.

Then her eyes nearly fell out of her head as her mouth dropped open.

The transvestite in the electric blue dress stood in front of her. She then realized it was *her* electric blue dress, the monstrosity Rucastle had strapped her into when he took her and Sherlock out to dinner for her “birthday.” She had thought she had thrown it in the dumpster behind the restaurant.

Stupefied, she moved her eyes up, starting at the sparkling high-heeled sandals, the plume of fabric swathing the knees, calves and feet, the peek-a-boo cut-outs on the narrow hips, the plunging neckline, up the hairless chest revealed by the scandalous décolleté, the collarbone jutting out, the long neck, up to a face so meticulously made up that would have made RuPaul weep with pride and joy. The Adam’s apple was concealed by a black velvet choker embellished with gaudy rhinestones. Teardrop rhinestone earrings dangled from pale earlobes. The face itself was framed by waist-long raven-black hair, each lock painstakingly curled into a perfect ringlet.

Numbly she realized how the copper and taupe eye-shadow and the dark brown eyeliner really brought the green and gold out of his heterochromatic eyes.

“What the hell?” she finally spit out.
“Delightful to see you as well, my dear Violet,” Sherlock Holmes purred in a *basso profondo*.

**Chapter End Notes**

Apologies for not posting last week. I messed up my wrist and hand - nothing serious, but enough that I was supposed to keep typing and swiping and scrolling to a minimum (boo...)

SO, if you've never watched "Sons of Anarchy", drop everything and watch. All seven seasons are on Netflix now and it's dramatic and inappropriately funny and violent and heart-wrenching. The acting is phenomenal... one minute you find yourself passionately hating a certain character, the next you're sobbing because they got killed ... It's basically "Hamlet" with bikers. It's also tied with "Sherlock" for one of my favorite show. However, if you've never seen SOA or if it doesn't sound like that's your cup of tea, you'll still be able to follow along with this fic and the spoilers will be minimal.

Stirmon and Bevington were names of characters from the ACD canon story "Lady Carfax."

Hope everyone is having a fantastic April so far! XOXO

Chapter Summary

Analysis

The study of a position to determine best play for both sides.

Chapter Twenty-six: Analysis

“What are you doing here?” Violet hissed as Sherlock adjusted the tiny strap holding his frock up over his broad shoulder. “You’re not supposed to be here!”

“What, and let you have all the fun?” Sherlock batted his heavily made up eyes at her. “I must say, I did not fully realize just how uncomfortable you were in this dress until now.” He rolled his hips from side to side. “There is absolutely no room to run in this.”

“Oh my God,” Violet closed her eyes. “This is just a game to you, as usual.”

“Life is a game we are forced to play one way or another,” he intoned with a dramatic roll of his heavily made-up eyes. “Now, as enlightening as this conversation could be, I would like to suggest,” he craned his neck to look behind him, seeing approaching headlights. “We depart so we can discuss your predicament in a more secure location.” He crooked his arm, looking even more ridiculous as there was a powder-blue Chanel purse dangling from his wrist.

“Your purse doesn’t match your dress,” Violet sniped as she took his proffered arm.

“It was the best I could do with the limited time I had,” he flipped his long curls over his broad shoulder as the train shuddered to a stop in front of them. The doors whooshed open and the few riders filtered out.

The train was deserted when Sherlock and Violet boarded. She sat stiffly next to him as he crossed his ankles like a dainty lady.

Once the train started moving, she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly around his shoulders and throat. Startled, Sherlock sat stock-still, unused to being randomly touched after living alone again for so many months. Then he quickly deduced that his naturally extroverted former flatmate and fiancée was starved for a friendly gesture. Gingerly he put his arms around her the best he could, the dress severely restricting his movements. But he did press his cheek against hers, touching her chin with his fingertips, tilting her head this way and that. “It appears that I located you just in time as well. You did well, as usual, using cosmetics to alter your appearance, but pancake makeup can’t be good for healing.”

“Holy Peters found me,” she told him in a raspy voice. “I barely got away.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened. All business now, he demanded, “How did you get away?”

“I shot him.”
“Expedient, I can appreciate that. Hush, no,” he put his fingertips now on her lips. “No more talk until we get to the hotel.”

“What?”

“You forget,” his mercurial eyes twinkled. “I spent some time in Chicago during my Great Hiatus. I made some contacts.”

When they got off the train, Sherlock hailed a cab. Even in a different city, a different country, he had the knack of getting a cab on the first try. Raising his voice several octaves, he told the cabbie in a falsetto take them to the Four Seasons.

“Sherloc- errm Sheryl,” Violet found herself automatically reverting to her “Miss Smith” voice within minutes of being out in public with Sherlock. Old habits die hard… “The Four Seasons, are you sure, it’s quite dear after all.”

“Don’t fuss, dearie,” he minced, patting her right knee while eying her left, frowning.

Once the cab pulled into traffic, Violet hissed Sherlock’s ear, “I can’t go to the Four Seasons dressed like this.”

He looked at her scruffy leather jacket, her faded navy blue hoodie, her black beanie, her dirty jeans, her motorcycle boots as well as her heavy eye makeup, disheveled brown curls and chipped nail polish. “I have it all under control,” he simpered. “Trust me.”

Violet slid the backpack off and held it in her lap. She put it back on when the cab stopped in front of the sumptuous hotel. Sherlock paid and tipped the cabbie generously.

Then he tilted his head, the long black curls rippling down his back. Violet followed with great trepidation as Sherlock strutted around the hotel, towards the back, where deliveries were made. 

_Goddammit, he’s a prettier woman than I am_, she couldn’t help fuming, despite everything.

A young man with coal black hair and skin like a brand new penny was leaning against a Four Seasons shuttle van, smoking. He wore the uniform of a Four Seasons employee. “Señor Scott,” he exclaimed with a Cuban accent as he ground his cigarette out under his perfectly polished shoe.

“This is Galtero Bonaventura,” Sherlock leaned against the van to take off the sparkly sandals. “I assisted him in a matter regarding his father and his illegal status in America.”

Violet asked sympathetically in Spanish, “He helped save your dad from deportation?”

Galtero beamed. At first Violet thought it was because she spoke in his native tongue.

But then the young man replied in English, “No. Señor Scott got him deported.”

“Oh.”

“He was a son-of-a-bitch,” Galtero explained helpfully.

“He really was,” Sherlock added, tossing the sandals in the dumpster.

“Of course,” Violet said faintly.

“This way,” Galtero beckoned them to follow him as he led them through the service door.
Through the labyrinth of the hotel, Galtero led Sherlock and Violet to the service elevator. “Here is your key card,” he handed Sherlock a piece of plastic the size of a credit card. “Lake View Executive Suite, floor 32,” he cringed a little. “It was the best I could do on such short notice.”

“I’m sure it will be satisfactory,” Sherlock handed the key card to Violet to hold. “I don’t have any pockets,” he waved the card at her as the elevator door slid shut.

Violet reached for it with her left hand and it slipped through her fingers. “Dammit.”

Sherlock eyed her as she bent down, fumbling to pick up the card. Just as he decided it would speed things along if he assisted, she snatched it up. “You are still such a pain in the ass,” she grumbled, pushing a curl that had escaped the beanie out of her eyes. Immediately after touching her head, she sucked in a pained breath, “Ow.”

The doors slid open. Sherlock stuck his head out first, looking left, then right. “This way, hurry.”

“Are you positive the room is secure?” Violet asked, trying to keep up with Sherlock’s long-legged stride.

“One hundred percent,” he declared.

“How? If you’ve been looking for me then who’s watching…” she stopped dead in her tracks. “Is John with you?”

“No, he’s on his own thrilling adventure at the moment, which I shall entertain you with later. My travel companion, an old friend has been minding the room.”

If John had known who Sherlock’s travel companion was, he would not have been pleased. When he had made Sherlock promise not to travel alone, he had expected Sherlock to bring someone like Dupin or Lestrade with him. Someone large, someone physically intimidating.

Not a tiny doll-like Swedish hacker.

Lisbeth Salander had her “Irene Nesser” disguise on, except for the blonde wig and designer boots. She sat on the pristine white sofa in the living room, clacking away on her laptop. When the door lock clicked and the door started to swing open, she reached for the shiny Kimber Pro Carry II next to her. Her dainty fingers curled around the butt of the gun, her finger lightly on the trigger. But she let it go when Sherlock called out, “It’s us.”

“So you’re the one causing all the trouble,” Lisbeth locked her computer screen and put the safety back on the handgun as Violet and Sherlock slipped inside.

As he locked the door, twisting the deadbolt home, he said, “Violet Hunter, this is Lisbeth Salander. You know her better as ‘Wasp’.”

“Oh,” Violet slung the backpack off her shoulders. She started at the juxtaposition the young woman posed, the spiky black hair, the facial piercing, the faint outline on her neck where a tattoo had been removed, the diamond necklace, the pearly pink mohair sweater, the brown leather skirt and bare unshaven legs. “Hi. It’s good to meet you at last.”

Lisbeth gave her a curt nod.

“Is there any ice? Violet had a bad spill and has injured her knee, hip and head.”

“In the freezer,” Lisbeth padded back towards the sofa. “I tracked Peters down. He’s still using his
Shlessinger alias, the idiot,” she snorted.

“Is he at a hospital?” Violet pulled off her beanie.

Sherlock, upon realizing Lisbeth was not going to get the ice, busied himself at the kitchenette making ice-packs. “Oh,” he crinkled his nose at Violet’s hair-color. “Pity, the chestnut suited you much better than that dung-coloured hue.”

“Thanks for pointing out my hair looks like shit,” Violet said dryly, shedding layers until she was down to her T-shirt, the same black T-shirt she had been wearing since she fled her Chinatown studio. She suddenly craved clean clothes as fiercely as she craved a cigarette.

She collapsed onto the sofa just as Lisbeth asked, “Why would he be in hospital?”

“I shot him.”

Lisbeth gave her a crooked smile. “Good. He’s a bastard who kills women.”

“We would have been here a day earlier,” Sherlock carried two ice-packs over. Placing one on her knee, he said, “We had a flat tyre in Indiana, which caused a delay. Unfortunately, that gave Peters enough time to finish whatever business he had in St. Louis to track you down.”

“Why would Peters be in St. Louis?”

“To kill his wife,” Lisbeth blurted out.

“The unproven theory is that Peters went to St. Louis to murder his wife, Marie Devine,” Sherlock plopped the other ice pack in Violet’s hand. “Hold that to the bump on your head. It must be aching by now.” To Lisbeth, he scolded her, “We do not have any tangible proof that the business Peters had in St. Louis was to murder his wife. Although, I must confess that if Marie Devine does turn up dead in Missouri, I would not be surprised.”

“It’s hard to take you seriously dressed up like that,” Lisbeth informed him. “Go change.”

“Can someone help me with the zip?”

Both women stared at him serenely, not budging.

“Rude,” Sherlock grumbled, peeling the long black wig off his head. He tousled his own much shorter messy curls. “I’m not joking, I really do require assistance. How on earth did you get out of this by yourself in the restaurant?”

“If I remember right, that bitch Mrs. Toller had to help squeeze me into that death trap of a gown,” Violet pressed the ice-pack to her head while awkwardly holding the other pack to her knee. “But honestly, I just yanked the damn thing off. I think I burst a few seams.”

“I did have to do some alterations,” Sherlock twisted like a contortionist until he could reach hidden zipper on the right-hand side of the bodice. As he awkwardly tugged it down, he added, “Obviously had to lengthen the skirt as well.”

“I can’t believe that thing fit you, but I could barely get into it,” Violet groused as Sherlock shimmied the gown down to his hips.

“I believe I’ll take the rest of this off in the bedroom,” he suddenly pinked up. “No need to give anyone a show,”
“Why? I’ve seen everything,” Violet drawled, feeling inexplicably better for the first time in months, even though the entire point of faking her death had been completely thwarted.

“He’s wearing pantyhose,” Lisbeth explained, “Doesn’t want you to see his bits squished.”

As Violet snorted, Sherlock scowled, “This is the thanks I receive for coming to fetch you.”

“I never asked you to come get me!” Violet shouted as he slammed the bedroom door.

“Drama queen,” Lisbeth said under her breath.

“Who? Me?”

Lisbeth shook her head, “No. Him.”

“Ah, so you’ve known him for a while then?”

Lisbeth nodded curtly, her attention back onto her computer.

Violet meanwhile noted the pretty semi-automatic on the couch cushion between them.

“Thank you, by the way,” she kept her voice neutral as she studied the tiny young woman. Already, her profiler’s brain had kicked into high gear, *Late twenties, early thirties, baby-faced but hands and throat give away her real age. Skinny, but not anorexic, she has good muscle tone and her complexion is healthy, not sallow or pale, plus, well…* her hazel eyes flicked over to the room service tray on the coffee table, the only thing remaining on the plate was a few crumbs from a hamburger and two cold French fries. *She likes to eat.* Violet had to fight a smirk as she continued looking over the small woman.

*Boob job, obviously, so we do have some body image issues going on, but who doesn’t? But she won’t meet my eyes, keeps the gun between me and her, so we’ve got some trust issues going on as well. If she knows Sherlock and is actually friends with him, she’s probably not stupid. Maybe not a genius per se, but an extra something to hold Sherlock’s interest…*

“For helping Sherlock,” she continued as Lisbeth continued to clack away on her computer, “And for looking into Operation Raven and Operation von Blücher.”

Lisbeth’s delicate nostrils flared. “Mycroft is a bastard, just like all the other bastard politicians.”

“Preaching to the choir, sister,” Violet leaned back on the sofa just as Lisbeth turned her head, looking at her for the first time.

Years of experience had trained Violet not to react immediately to people’s reactions. Otherwise she might have melted from Lisbeth’s burning glare.

“You studied psychology?”

“Yes, I have a master’s degree,” Violet arched an eyebrow at her odd question but nothing more. Lisbeth’s hostility was impossible to miss but it puzzled Violet.

Lisbeth’s next question took Violet slightly aback as well: “But you’re not actually a crazy-doctor?”

Violet fought down the urge to smile at the childish term. Last thing she wanted was to sound patronizing, especially with a loaded weapon within the Swede’s reach. “No. I’m not a psychologist or psychiatrist. I’m a federal agent, well,” Violet studied her hands, realizing she still wore her gloves. Her hands felt too warm but she didn’t dare take them off, didn’t want to leave fingerprints.
“At least, I used to be.”

Then she realized Lisbeth’s face had darkened even more, twisting into something feral. “I hate cops. I don’t talk to cops or crazy-doctors,” she snarled.

“Fortunately,” Sherlock stepped out of the bedroom, fastening a button in the cuff of his light blue button-down shirt. “She is not a police officer, as I’ve explained to you multiple times.”

Lisbeth sniffed. “Säpo, FBI, MI-6, what’s the difference?” her nimble fingers flew over the keyboard. “Pigs hiding in back rooms, making plans, playing games with people’s lives, ah-ha!” her sulky rant unexpected ended with a yelp of exhaustion, “Got him.”

As she turned the computer so Violet could see, Sherlock stood behind her, “He’s gone to earth in Little Italy,” he murmured, studying the bank statement of the good Rev. Dr Shlessinger.

“Thought I had lost him at first, but the dirty bugger has two bank accounts for the Shlessinger alias; one was in Australia, this one was actually opened here in America,” Lisbeth shook her head, as if she had missed a simple equation on a child’s maths exam. “He bought medical supplies at this veterinary supply warehouse here,” Lisbeth pointed to the screen.

“Or more realistically, somebody bought supplies for him with his debit card. I got him in the shoulder. He’s probably in a shit-load of pain plus woozy from the blood loss,” Violet put her hands to her lips, chewing on the tip of the glove’s pointer finger.

“That’s a fair assumption,” Lisbeth opened another window, showing the veterinary supply warehouse billing transactions. “Here, he bought silk for sutures, needles, IV catheters and tubing, Fentanyl and morphine.”

Violet stopped gnawing on her glove. Her brows furrowed, “Isn’t Fentanyl used as anesthesia?”

“It can be,” Sherlock, the chemist expert and drug enthusiast, chimed in. “You must have really damaged him.”

“I should have fucking killed him,” Violet pressed her forefinger and thumb against her tired eyes then pressed the bridge of her nose.

“Why didn’t you?” Lisbeth snapped.

“Too many people,” Violet kept pinching her nose, “Wanted to avoid collateral damage.”

She didn’t see Lisbeth’s nod of approval but she did feel the sofa move when Lisbeth stood up. “I’m going to finish getting ready then I’m heading out.” She strode towards the bedroom.

“Out where?” Violet dropped her hand.

“To Little Italy,” Lisbeth said calmly.

*Great,* Violet thought dully. *Another adrenaline junkie, just like the rest of us… “Give me a minute to recoup and I’ll be ready.”*

If Lisbeth’s first murderous glare at Violet had been fiery, this one was positively nuclear. “I have work to do. Work to do on my own. You two,” she flashed her baleful gaze at Sherlock. “Need to talk. Hash shit out. Tonight.”

Violet twisted her head around to look up at Sherlock. His face looked implacable as usual, but
Violet noted how tightly he pressed his lips. Then his brows flew up and he intoned in his loftiest voice, “She should rest, after what she had been through on the train.”

“She can rest tomorrow, before we go to the MC,” Lisbeth crossed her arms and lifted her chin up, her dark eyes pools of bubbling oil.

“Wait, you know about the MC?” Violet spluttered.

“That reminds me, I need to contact Chibs,” Sherlock started patting his pockets for his mobile.

“Chibs?”

“President of the Sons of Anarchy,” Sherlock draw out his mobile.

“Wait, you knew about the fucking Sons?” Violet now felt the old irritation towards her flatmate-friend-lover-fiancé.

“You’re stalling,” Lisbeth cut across them both. “Your long overdue conversation needs to be done tonight because once the shit hits the fan; you two aren’t going to have a chance to properly talk again until Florida.”

“What’s in Florida?”

Ignoring Violet’s question, Lisbeth squared her narrowed shoulders. “Sherlock, we talked about this during the drive,” she added lowly.

“Talked about what?” Violet shifted in her seat, half-tempted to snag the gun still lying on the sofa. However that temptation melted away when Lisbeth turned her face back towards Violet. Her eyes no longer sparked with anger and frustration. Her face softened, making her look less like a doll with a porcelain face and more like a human.

Violet’s brows knit together, trying to piece together why Lisbeth stared at her with such… pity.

“Tell her, Sherlock,” she muttered, ducking her head and stomping off towards the bedroom.

As the bedroom door slammed for the second time, Violet turned her aching head back up towards Sherlock, “What. The. Fuck. Is going on?”

Sherlock scrubbed his long face with his hand, completely of character. “Do take your gloves off, you look ridiculous,” he quietly ordered her. “No need to worry about leaving fingerprints or DNA. Galtero’s sister Delmara is a housekeeper here as well. Both of them will thoroughly clean this room so there will be no trace of us left here.”

“I always wondered why your Spanish had a cubano accent. I had expected Castille,” Violet peeled off her gloves, flexing her fingers. She studied her right ring and pinkie fingers, remembering how she had sprained them last winter, when the clinic had exploded… they had healed, but her pinkie always seemed a little crooked to her afterwards.

“A logical assumption, but an assumption nevertheless,” Sherlock retreated back to the kitchenette and started making tea.

Violet smiled fondly as she allowed herself to relax slightly. Tea… the British solution to everything… “I still hate tea,” she reminded him.

“Which is why I’ll fix you a stout drink,” Sherlock said as he frowned, seeing he’d have to use a
Keurig t to heat the water as there was no kettle. “For medicinal purposes only, can’t have you hung-over tomorrow.”

Lisbeth came back out, wearing her sandy-blond wig and expensive boots. She had touched up her make-up and looked nearly unrecognizable. She also carried a very expensive purse, which Violet realized was a genuine Louis Vutton.

Who is this chick? She thought as Lisbeth walked around the coffee table and snatched up the gun. Checked the sights then popped it in her purse. “I’m craving lasagna,” she announced, using a Norwegian accent instead of Swedish.

Violet’s frown of consternation deepened. Seriously, who the fuck is this chick?

“Happy hunting,” Sherlock watched boiling hot water stream from the expensive coffeemaker into a large, bleached-bone-white cup.

“Irene Nesser” gave Violet a curt nod then strode over towards Sherlock. She reached up and gripped his upper arm, gave him a supportive squeeze. Then she let go and marched out of the posh hotel room without another word.

“She seems nice,” Violet said lamely.

“She is many things. Nice isn’t one of them,” Sherlock popped an Earl Grey tea bag into his mug. Then he found a Caribou Coffee K-cup and popped it into the Keurig, muttering, “Blast this contraption, stupid coffee-maker, no proper kettles, Americans…”

“Sherlock,” Violet started crossing her legs then winced as her knee and hip protested.

“You have questions,”

“No shit, Captain Obvious.”

“Then start with the most logical question,” Sherlock plucked two raw sugar packets out of the basket of complimentary condiments.

She blew out a breath as Sherlock sprinkled brownish sugar crystals into his tea.

“How did you know?”

“You gave yourself away at the hangar.” Finished doctoring his tea, he knelt in front of the mini-fridge and studied its contents. “Five American dollars for a Snickers bar? That’s daylight robbery,” he groused as he plucked two candy bars and a tiny bottle of Bailey’s Irish Cream out of the mini-fridge.

“How did I give myself away?” she shook her head in disbelief, then winced again. “Ow,” she squeezed her eyes tightly shut. She hoped she didn’t have a concussion, but she didn’t have any of the symptoms other than a raging headache. “I was so careful.” Stubbornly, she added, “I know how your mind works.”

“You looked away.”

“What?” Violet very carefully turned her head towards Sherlock.

The comforting scent of freshly brewed coffee filled the room. Sherlock nimbly unscrewed the airplane booze bottle. The plastic lid cracked as it fell away. As Sherlock poured the alcohol into the
coffee, he explained: “I knew you were up to something after you had met Mycroft on the Millennium Bridge, but I could not figure out what. I feared something drastic though. The night you left however, after you stole my mobile and saw that John had been taken . . .” he tossed the empty bottle into the trash can. Tucking the candy bars into his trouser pockets, he then carried the two enormous cups back into the living room. He handed Violet her Irish coffee then held out the Snickers. “Take it. You always spoke of Snickers bars with such longing when you were still in London. That and Doritos.”

“Don’t forget Oreos,” Violet took the proffered candy bar. Truth be told, she felt a bit shaky. The latte and doughnuts not only were an insubstantial meal, but it had also been hours since she had last eaten. Her blood sugar was probably plummeting and the caffeine high was wearing off.

Sherlock pulled out the package of Rolos out of his pocket. He put it on the coffee table and sat down. He blew on his tea, took a cautious sip, sighed and mumbled something about the inferiority of American tea compared with British. Then he continued, glad he wasn’t required to expound on John’s horrific ordeal any further for the time being: “In the hangar, I had asked you what plan you and Mycroft had concocted and you had hidden your face behind your hands. Then, uh . . .” He found himself suddenly tongue-tied. He hid his discomfiture with a large gulp of the inferior tea. It had been so long since he had thought about That Night he hadn’t been prepared to deal with the sudden rush of emotion surging through him. “When we said good-bye, when I held your face in my hands and called you ‘My clever girl,’” he kept his eyes on the contents of his mug. “You wrenched your face from my grasp, covering your eyes. You can lie with the best of them. A criminal, a mortal enemy, a stranger in the street you have no vested interest in, you can lie right to their face without flinching, without remorse, without guilt. But to a loved one,” he tilted his head towards her, a smug little smile on his lips, “You can’t look them in the eye and lie. I’ve watched you stare at Mary Watson and at Mycroft straight in the face and tell the most appalling fabrications without batting so much as an eyelash. But you avert your eyes when you’ve had to lie to John and Molly and Mrs. Hudson,” he paused, this time for dramatic effect (he really couldn’t resist,) “And to me.”

Violet had been listening quietly, clutching the mug in her hands. Then she grumbled, “God-dammit. Mycroft was fucking right, you did see through everything.”

“Naturally,” Sherlock preened.

“Alright, show-off,” Violet put the mug to her nose and inhaled deeply, reveling in the rich scent of alcohol and coffee. “How did you find me? I thought I covered my tracks fairly well.”

“You did, I assure you,” Sherlock’s eyes twinkled. “It was a challenge, but a welcome one.”

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18 January 2016
221B Baker Street
London, England
Monday morning
10:21 AM

“For pity sake, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson moaned as she picked up the teapot. “You don’t need twenty laptops for research. Even I know how to use tabs.”

“Helps me think,” Sherlock had not moved from the middle of the room, surrounded by his fortress of computers. He had put on his nice white dress shirt and a pair of dark blue bespoke trousers but not in anticipation of Mrs. Hudson’s arrival. He usually rolled out of bed and pulled on the nearest dressing gown. However he had a busy day ahead and he knew Mrs. Hudson planned on staying for
a chat after bringing his morning tea. He knew it would be time-saving to be showered, shaved and
dressed when Mrs. Hudson arrived.

But he didn’t bother to put socks on.

Or move from his ring of computers. He hoped Mrs. Hudson would get the hint and not overstay her
welcome…. Or start asking questions he couldn’t answer.

Mostly she vacillated between sniffling over John’s ordeal and gushing about how grateful she was
he was alive, plus wasn’t it lucky that Mary was a nurse? In Mrs. Hudson’s opinion, John was in the
best hands possible.

Sherlock’s response to Mrs. Hudson’s proclamation was a noncommital hum as he started typing
furiously on the nearest laptop. That was when Mrs. Hudson started chiding him about the excess of
computers.

Mrs. Hudson gave him a tender look as she poured him a refill, “Sherlock?” She held the dainty
bone-china cup out to him. When he looked up, she asked softly, “Do all of these computers have
anything to do with Violet?”

“No,” he said sharply as he snatched the cup and saucer from her. Tea slopped over his knuckles and
fingers, the tiny cup with the delicate painted-on primroses a juxtaposition to his enormous hands.

“Sherlock, I’m not a fool, though you treat me like one,” she sounded like a displeased
schoolteacher. “I know she was in hiding.”

“Then if you’re not a fool, you should know that death is the greatest disguise of all.”

Mrs. Hudson’s mouth dropped open then quirked up in delight. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” She stood
up and rubbed her hip, as she was wont to do after she had been sitting for too long. “I’m going to
visit John in hospital later tonight, would you like to come with me?”

“I’ll ring for a cab.”

“Oh, I can drive, the doctor said I could.”

“Which doctor?” Sherlock sneered, “The orthopaedist who took care of your broken rib or your
ophthalmologist who has been saying for the last five years that you need bifocals?”

“It’s your money,” she groused as she started clearing up. She left him a plate of chocolate Hobnobs
along with an apple and cheese slices in hopes that maybe he’d eat something later since he had
mostly picked at the nice breakfast she had whipped up for them.

Then she left him in peace.

Fingers tented together, Sherlock’s eyes roved over all the laptops set up everywhere in the flat,
except John’s chair, of course. His eyes darted up to the bookshelves, towards the top shelf where a
battered old copy of *The Little Prince* still resided.

He hummed and closed his eyes, pressing his steepled fingers to his Cupid Bow’s lips, thinking…
thinking… thinking… remembering his conversation with Mycroft yesterday…

*Instead of New York, where proper federal agents were supposed to meet her and Mitton and was to
escort her to protective custody, their flight got diverted to Washington DC, where imposters
waited… Washington DC has two airports…*
He stretched out his long arms and grasped the laptop closest to him and pulled it to his lap.

Knowing his brother was monitoring his Internet usage was why he opened browsers in twenty different laptops. It drove the tech agents mad, tracking the various IP addresses, trying to figure out exactly what he was researching. Sometimes he pulled this trick even when he wasn’t on a case, just for a laugh at Big Brother’s expense. True, it slowed his Internet connection down, but Sherlock used the lag time to use the best computer in the world, his own mind.

He Googled “Dog groomers, London, German Shepherd” then pushed the computer away from him. He reached for the laptop right next to him as Gladstone padded out of the kitchen and sat next to Sherlock. The dog cocked his head as if to say “What the hell are you doing, mate?”

“Looking for your mistress,” Sherlock crooned pulling the new laptop closer to him and starting to type furiously. “Any ideas, boy?”

Gladstone’s black nose quivered as he stared hard at the plate of snacks by Sherlock’s knee.

“Not a chance, my dear furry friend,” Sherlock droned as his studied his screen intensely. “You won’t eat fruit, you can’t have chocolate and I remember all too vividly what happened to my rug and my shoe the last time I fed you cheese.”

His face contorted as he recalled that particular day last October, rushing to the door, dizzily excited for what promised to be a thrilling case…and stepping right into a gigantic mound of liquidly dog excrement.

As he had jerked his foot out in dismay and loudly bemoaned the ruination of his favorite pair of Oxfords, Violet had crept up behind him and mildly exclaimed, You gave him that Gouda after I told you not to, didn’t you? You should have deduced he’s lactose-intolerant.

Then she left him to clear up the mess.

He ended up binning the shoe and the rug.

“Go,” he told the dog, pointing towards the sofa. Gladstone whuffed indignantly and ponced off to sulk. “Good boy,” Sherlock said absently as Gladstone flopped onto the sofa in fair imitation of Sherlock when he was stroppy.

Sherlock found nothing of interest regarding the Ronald Reagan International Airport.

However, there was a small story about how an unexplained power outage at Dulles caused some delays. Authorities said a squirrel had gotten into the power lines.

Ah yes, the convenient Fried Squirrel cover story. Almost as effective as the old gas main blowing story… Sherlock bounced to his feet and faced the wall.

The yellow smiley face and bullet holes were now covered up by a gigantic map of the United States of America.

“You were here…” Sherlock stuck a thumbtack into the city of Washington DC. “We know you escaped, the question is… where are you going next?”

Sherlock put his hands behind his back and wiggled his bare toes.

She’s still alive because my personal life has not been splashed out on the tabloids yet.
She’s clever, she’s quick-witted and she has a great desire to stay alive… she wouldn’t stay in DC, wouldn’t risk trying to steal or procure a vehicle, not after Woodhouse’s unexpected death since the Investigation Pending clearly indicates that our mutual enemies plan on implicating her for the crime. Nor would she risk purchasing any sort of ticket, plane, train or bus. She is beset by enemies on all sides and time is running out. What would she do?

Blend in…

Sherlock turned back to his circle of computers and knelt in front of another laptop, his own personal computer, not the ones he had picked up here and there for the express purpose of tormenting Mycroft’s spies.

He clicked on a little icon on his screen that looked like a W but was actually an upside M. A small, unassuming window popped open with a simple request: LOGIN.

He typed in the series of 0s and 1s that correlated to Bach’s *Partita No 1* and also to the English phrase: *There is no key.*

Sherlock treated the Dark Web the same way he treated poisonous snakes; he respected its power but did not poke it with a stick; he was content to observe. Knowing the evil doings the Dark Web hid, using it made him uneasy, nearly ill sometimes if he allowed himself to dwell too long on the matter. But it was better he use it rather than Professor Moriarty or worse, Mycroft.

Honestly, the best custodian of the Moriarty Code really was Violet. She had no emotional triggers, not like his anyway. She had a solid sense of principles yet wasn’t so rigid that she wasn’t willing to compromise if and when necessary.

She also treated the Moriarty Code like a poisonous snake, but she was a snake charmer. She knew how to handle it with deference in order to avoid being bitten.

All Sherlock needed at the moment though, was a secure browser his brother or MI-6 couldn’t see him using.

He typed in *craigslist/washingtondc* then clicked on the Ride Shares link when it popped up. He scrolled slowly, his sharp blue-green-gold eyes fixed on the screen.

Then he softly exclaimed, “Aha,” when he saw an ad that read:

!!! UPDATE !!! REPOSTING: MOVING TO VEGAS 1/19/16, NEED SHARE FOR GAS, MOVING VAN, DRIVE, GAY MALE OR STRAIGHT FEMALE PREFERRED. !!! UPDATE !!!

He clicked the link.

Found a travel buddy. Thanks for everyone who responded J

“There you are, clever girl,” Sherlock purred, then set back on his heels.

Only he could have made such a deductive leap. Everyone else looking for her wouldn’t have even considered craigslist. They were too busy monitoring airports, train stations or bus stops.

Idiots.

The list of requested ride shares was daunting, but Sherlock had been monitoring it ever since meeting Mycroft yesterday. After the incident at Dulles and after Woodhouse’s inconvenient demise,
the morons thought she had fled, headed towards New York or Canada.

Wrong. She went to ground until she found a secure exit.

He immediately and automatically eliminated any and all requests for rides to East Coast cities due to their proximity to Washington DC. He also eliminated the South because she would not be able to blend in with her nasally Midwestern accent. People would ask questions. She would also stick out like a sore thumb in the South if she tried to use her “Miss Smith” faux British accent. The native Southerners would definitely ask questions then.

That left the Midwest, the Southwest and West.

He then eliminated the Southwest and Southern California. She was pale as moonlight. She would not blend in with the tanned snowbirds or the Hispanic community.

He did not rule out the Midwest, but the only ride share request currently on the DC craigslist board was to Omaha, Nebraska. A quick Google search one of his other laptops told him that Omaha was too small of a city for someone like her to hide in. She needed an enormous city, a true metropolis something the size of London, New York, or LA, or…

Chicago…? Maybe, don’t rule that destination out yet… she would blend in.

He then eliminated all requests that reeked of a scam. Violet, with her profiler’s eyes and suspicious nature mind would see through those… he hoped.

She would be exhausted by now. Fatigue caused stupid errors after all… he pondered the possibilities for a moment then shook his head, recalling that she had been trained to keep her wits together under extremely stressful situations, which included sleep deprivation.

He then eliminated any requests that were definitely posted by men or possibly posted by men. Violet could take care of herself, but she wasn’t stupid either. She would choose to travel with a female, preferably a young woman. Someone she could overpower easily if necessary.

So he then eliminated any posts made by older women.

Young woman tended to ask for either a gay male or a straight female as a travel companion or flatmate. For some reason, young ladies thought gay men or women of their own sexual orientation were less threatening.

Naïve little twits, Sherlock rolled his eyes as he scrolled slowly through the remaining posts.

With the remaining posts, he looked specifically for requests stating they would be leaving in a day or two. Violet couldn’t afford to remain in DC much longer.

Therefore, the logical choice was: !!! UPDATE !!! REPOSTING: MOVING TO VEGAS 1/19/16, NEED SHARE FOR GAS, MOVING VAN, DRIVE, GAY MALE OR STRAIGHT FEMALE PREFERRED. !!! UPDATE !!!

Sin City would be the perfect place to start over, wouldn’t it now?

The problem was she wouldn’t stay in Vegas, not for long and definitely not long enough for him to go get her. Plus, she would not be easy to find in Vegas. She would stay off the grid...

The first thing she did after she left the hangar was probably dunk her watch in a glass of water to destroy the GPS tracker I inserted in it, he grumbled to himself, Clever girl… too clever for her own
She would stay long enough to regroup herself, get a new false identity. Siphon money from Jack Woodley’s off-shore account to a legitimate American bank account. After that… where would she go? Canada? Mexico? No…

“You idiot,” Sherlock groaned, raking his fingers through his already unruly hair. His short curls became frizzy after running his fingers through them. “You’re trying to find Mitton, aren’t you?”

He looked at his own hands, his long musician’s fingers, how steady they stayed.

He furrowed his brow and sucked in his lower lip.

Wondered how much time she had left before the disease started aggressively progressing.

Ached for John, wishing he could talk to him. *Oh John, I need your help…*

Except now, it was the other way around, John needed his help, needed his support to help him get through the grueling months of therapy and recovery that loomed ahead… *and it’s my fault.*

Gladstone, sensing his distress perhaps, leapt off the sofa and trotted to his side, his nails clicking on the hardwood floor. He whined a little, pressing his snout against Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock grinned a little. “She may be clever but she’s not as clever as *me.* I’ll find her.” He scratched Gladstone’s ears, “Fancy a walk, my furry flatmate?”

Gladstone yipped and practically danced towards the door.

As Sherlock stood up, all the fluff flew from his brain.

*Find Mitton first, obviously.*

*But first, I must divert Mycroft.*

He glanced at his chess set and the beginnings of a plan began to form.
Chapter Summary

**Gardez**

French for "look out!"; it is a warning to the opponent that their queen is under direct attack, similar to the announcement of "check". This warning is no longer customary.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Since I didn't post last week or yesterday, here's another chapter... although, you may not thank me for this one... not going to lie. It's going to hurt like hell #sorrynotsorry

Also, trigger warnings :( 

Thanks for your patience! XOXO

Chapter Twenty-seven: *Gardez*

23 April 2016  
Chicago, Illinois  
Saturday night  
11:19 PM Central Standard Time

“We were working in tandem, you and I, as we searched for Mitton. You just didn’t realize it.” Sherlock set the half-full mug on the coffee table. The unsatisfactory tea had gone cold while Sherlock cheerfully bragged how he deduced Violet’s escape route from Washington DC.

As he snatched up the Rolos and began shredding the gold foil, Violet asked, “How did you manage to distract Mycroft?”

“Ah, another part of my brilliant plan,” Sherlock grinned before popping a Rolo into his mouth. “Do you recall Dupin’s daughter, Noelie?”

“The pickpocket?”

“Mm. She bears an uncanny resemblance to you.”

“Does she?” Violet crinkled her nose and frowned deeply.

“Don’t be ridiculous, of course she doesn’t,” Sherlock shook his head. “But with the right hair dye and clothes, people see what they want to see… especially when I sent John to investigate the rumors of Violet sightings as I was seriously ill and could not travel abroad.”

“So when Mycroft found out John was investigating these sightings, he took them seriously,” Violet
swirled the last dregs of her coffee, the remaining liquid a sickly tannish-white from the Bailey’s.
“That is brilliant.” Then she furrowed her slender brows as realization hit her. “Sherlock, does John know I’m alive?”

“Of course.”

“God damn it,” she bolted off the sofa, slamming the cup on the coffee table. The Snickers bar fell off her lap and onto the floor.

“Problem?” Sherlock arched an eyebrow.

“Yeah, big fucking problem, genius,” she spread her arms out wide. Then she let her arms flap to her sides, “If he knows I’m alive, he’s not going to leave Mary.”

“What makes you assume that?”

“Because,” Violet groaned. “He’ll take the high road. He’ll stand aside so you and I can be together, you dipshit.”


“Oh my God,” Violet once again massaged her exhausted eyes with her fingers. Then she pressed her palms together and muttered “OK,” to herself. Turning around, she walked back towards Sherlock. Instead of sitting next to him on the couch, she moved his mug and sat down directly in front of him. Wetting her upper lip with the tip of her tongue, her hands reached out, retreated, fingers curling in hesitation as she screwed her eyes tightly shut, obviously mentally reviewing her argument. Then her eyes snapped open, tiger’s eyes, glittery green and fiery gold.

There was no hesitation this time when she slid the Rolos out of his loose grip and curled her small fingers around his enormous hands.

Out of habit, he folded his long, elegant fingers over hers.

“Sherlock,” she said firmly, no wobble, no whisper. Her eyes were as he remembered them, clear and confident, bright and intelligent.

Sherlock swallowed hard. How he hated to be the one to destroy that light in her eyes. It was the equivalent to destroying a stained glass window, shattering a priceless work of art with a precise throw of a stone.

“I never want you to think for one second that I’m ungrateful for everything you have done for me,” Violet’s eyes and voice never wavered, as they never did when she told the pure, unadulterated truth. “Or to think that I am not happy to see you,” she squeezed his hands for emphasis.

Sherlock noted a marked weakness in the left hand as opposed to the right.

The light in her eyes still shone like stained glass windows, glorious and bright, during a pitch-black Midnight Mass, streaming colors of hope. Redemption spilling into the dark and cold.

Father Christmas isn’t real and religion a myth and she must know the truth…

But to watch the light die… to be the one to snuff it out… Sherlock barely heard her carefully constructed speech.

“… especially now that Holy Peters has found me, that means Professor Moriarty is going to know
I’m alive, which means not only are MI-6 and the CIA hunting me, so is the La Ligue des Roux. It’s personal now for the Professor, he won’t stop until I’m dead. But as long as he believes that I’m the only one who knows the Moriarty Code, he’ll keep coming after me, not you. If they learn that you figured out I faked my death, or that you know how to use the Moriarty Code too, they’ll come for you again. They won’t stop, he won’t stop until everything you love is ashes and they’ll set the world on fire to accomplish that if they have to,” she inhaled deeply. “Go home Sherlock,” she ended her speech with a whispered. “Go home to London and your cases and John,” she ran her thumbs over the thin skin of his hand. Then she lifted his hands to her lips and kissed his knuckles. As she lowered his hands, she added, “And to your son.”

Then she let go and stood up, planning on walking out.

Slightly stunned, Sherlock sat utterly still, but only for a moment. Leaping out of his seat, he chuckled, “Masterful stroke, Violet, playing at my two greatest vulnerabilities, John and little Henry. But,” he kept walking towards her as she stooped to pick up her coat and sweatshirt. “It. Will not. Work. My dear Violet.”

“I’m not mind-gaming you, Sherlock,” she stood up, holding her coat by its collar and her sweatshirt by its hood. “You have more to lose than I do, you have a fucking kid.”

“A child whose custody I relinquished to his mother and her husband,” Sherlock reminded her, hands behind his back. “A decision I think we can all agree is in the best interest of the boy.”

“Don’t feed me that tired line of shit,” Violet groaned, her shoulders slumping as her head lolled back. Then she snapped it forward to glare at Sherlock, only to wince immediately as her head started throbbing again with the sudden motion. Still, she was able to snap at him, “You were seriously contemplating taking him away from Molly and Greg so you could raise him in secret when you thought the Earl was after him. So don’t waste my time with the whole ‘lack of sentimentality bullshit.’” She shifted her coat to the same arm that held her sweatshirt then jabbed herself in the chest with her pointer finger. “I lived with you for nearly a year. I don’t believe John’s blogs about your lack of emotion, your coldness, your slavish devotion to logic.” An inferno blazed in her hazel eyes now, making them seem more dragon- than tigress-like. “I know you,” she reminded him. “I know you better than you know yourself. You don’t fit the medical criteria of a sociopath. You feel, you observe, you absorb and you are affected by what you’ve seen. You say that your brain tears itself apart if it stagnates but we both know that’s not true. If you don’t keep your mind occupied, your heart attacks your mind, filling it with things you don’t want to think about, like pain and regret and loss.”

“Are you implying,” Sherlock’s lips twitched in amusement. “That I came after you because I was bored?”

She rolled her eyes, “Mycroft did try to warn me that this wouldn’t work, said you’d see through the ruse in two seconds.”

Sherlock smirked, “Well, as I just explained, it was rather obvious. Once I realized the motivation behind your disappearing act, I knew it would only be a matter of time before the Professor figured it out as well, as we still have the issue of that pesky mole running rampant throughout MI-6, which I have narrowed down to exactly three people.” He leaned forward, hands still behind his back, “As a confrontation between myself and Professor Moriarty is inevitable, I knew I needed to locate you as quickly as possible to extradite you from any potential fallout to the ultimate battle of wits, but you did make it a challenge, which (while I know it was unintentional) was greatly appreciated. Made a dull winter pass by quickly.”

“A dull winter,” she blinked at him. She immediately followed that statement with “Battle of wits?”
Then she exploded,

“THIS IS NOT A FUCKING GAME, SHERLOCK!”

She threw her coat at him, then her hooded sweatshirt. He ducked, missing the coat, but got hit in the face with the hoodie.

Meanwhile, Violet stampeded throughout the hotel room, her iron-clad grip on her temper gone. Practicality and pragmatism were damned as she screamed at him, “This goddamned, never-ending death wish of yours! I left London so you could live! So you could have a life, to work as a consulting detective and not as Mycroft’s dancing monkey for MI-6!”

“I am hardly Mycroft’s dancing monkey,” Sherlock pouted.

Violet ignored his protest. Ignoring her aching and sore body, she raged on, “I left you so you and John could be together, so he would leave Mary.”

“There’s been a complication on that front.”

“Oh, there’s always going to be a complication with John,” Violet waved that protest away with a dismissive flap of her hand. “Until you grow a dick, take charge and make the first move.”

“Lovely imagery,” Sherlock drawled. “I do believe your language has gotten much more colourful since you’re returned to the Land of the Good Old Red, White and Blue, emphasis on blue.”

Violet didn’t rise to his bait, “Not to mention how fucking irresponsible you are being now that you are a father.”

“I’m not his fa-”

“You’re not his dad,” Violet sawed him off at the kneecaps, just as she had done so many times in the past. “But you’re his father and Henry deserves to know you. Not read about you on the Internet because you gambled your life too many times and lost.”

“So it’s alright for your niece to read about you on the Internet?” Sherlock lifted his eyebrows.

“Niece, not daughter,” Violet pointed out. “And because Vivian will have to read about her dad on the Internet. How is her mother going to explain that to her?” she demanded then her voice became syrupy and sing-song. “Well, honey, you see, your Aunt Violet pissed off the wrong people and had to disappear and your dad tried to find her, but he got killed by the people Aunt Violet pissed off.”

She reverted to her normal voice, her true voice, “I’m not going to have history repeat itself,” she declared with a sweep of her hand.

“How noble,” Sherlock now rolled his eyes, “Or stupid. I think stupid and noble can be used interchangeably, yes? Let’s test the theory… hmm. Oh! Here we go. It is noble of you to try to rescue Mitton on your own. It is stupid of you to try and rescue Mitton on your own. Ah, see, I’m right, as usual.”

“I don’t need your help getting Mitton out of that black site,” Violet spoke through clenched teeth.

“Yes, because you’re doing marvelously on your own.”

“Oh my God, you arrogant prick. I do not need your help. I do not need rescuing.”

“I am well aware that when you are paralyzed, you will be able to find a way to outwit your enemies
with only your eyebrows, but right now time is not on anyone’s side, so do use your head instead of your heart and use me as an asset rather than treating me like a liability so we can all flee this accursed metropolis in one piece!”

Violet had stopped yelling. Stopped moving.

Almost stopped breathing.

Her eyes were wide as saucers.

“What did you say?”

Sherlock opened his mouth, closed it. Reviewed the angry words he had hastily spewed out in his frustration.

Cursed himself.

*Not good.*


Although Violet looked like her heart had actually stopped.

“What,” she sounded out of breath. “Did you say?”

*To battle then,* Sherlock mentally girded himself.

This deduction might kill her before the actual diagnosis.

“I didn’t seek you out because it was a game or because I was bored,” he nervously tapped the back of the sofa, ill-equipped to handle such a situation, although he had envisioned the moment a thousand different ways, a thousand different times during his flight to New York and the cross-country drive though America.

He always imagined himself making a right dog’s mess out of things.

Because that’s what he did, when it came to matters of the heart.

*And she matters, to my heart. Despite John, despite everything... she’s still my clever girl... My friend...*

“I observed your hand tremor the first time I saw you.”

“At the office, when we met with Robert,” Violet now rested her weight on her uninjured hip and leg. “I remember wanting to kill you for butting into our business.”

“It’s my business to know other people’s business,” Sherlock protested woodenly. “That’s what detectives do and I’m good at my job.” He sighed. “I had been following you for days prior to our first meeting at Carruthers Brokerage Firm. That’s how I knew you were lying to me and John in the coffee shop when you gave us a fake home address.”

“You were stalking me,” Violet groaned as she wandered towards the kitchenette.

“I was doing surveillance on you,” Sherlock defended himself as Violet knelt in front of the mini-
fridge. As she pulled out a tiny bottle of whiskey, Sherlock began speaking quickly, “You were a person of interest in a case, just as I was a person of interest in your case, when you were investigating my brother for the FBI.” Despite Violet’s inarticulate splutter of displeasure, he doggedly continued: “Your boss had sold the insurance to all the properties that had mysteriously exploded. You and Robert were the common denominators. You almost always bicycled to work, except when the weather was especially foul and it was impossible to make the trip. You used to have an older Pronto work bicycle, a heavier bicycle that what most commuters used, you bought a heavier bicycle on purpose, for endurance training. Three days before we officially met, before I had even made an appointment to visit your offices, you went to the supermarket after work, do you recall?”

“No,” Violet said stiffly as she cracked a can of 7-Up open and mixed herself a stout drink.

“You had trouble doing up the security chain,” Sherlock reminded her. “You had to fiddle with the lock before you could secure it.”

“That doesn’t mean anythi-” She poured the 7-Up over ice in a tumbler then added half of the whiskey to the glass.

“You weren’t upset, you weren’t angry,” Sherlock pointed out. “You weren’t even tired. But your hand was tingling and trembling slightly. You kept shaking it, like it had fallen asleep.”

Violet stared at him uncomprehendingly. Then she poured the rest of the whiskey in the tumbler.

“The problems with your hands, is not psychosomatic,” Sherlock pressed on. “It’s also not a complication from being poisoned by Mrs. Toller either.”

Violet fixed him with a sullen look. Then she poured a quarter of her drink down her throat.

“When we started living together, I had narrowed it down to six possibilities at first. Soon, I was able to rule out fibromyalgia and lupus. I considered Huntington’s disease and multiple sclerosis and myasthenia gravis. Since you did not have the trademark ‘blank expression’ nor muscle weakness in your neck, causing a bobbing head, I ruled out myasthenia gravis from the equation. The waters became muddied after Copper Beaches for it was unclear for a very long time whether or not your decline was caused by prolonged exposure to arsenic. Still, I was able to eliminate Huntington’s and multiple sclerosis.”

“The tremors stopped, Sherlock.”

“Yes, they would, wouldn’t they? And they weren’t tremors. They were clonic spasms.”

“OK, great, thanks for the deduction. I don’t have any of those shitty diseases you just listed and the hand tremors stopped. Hip, hip hooray,” she lifted her glass to him as if to make a toast.

“The tremors stopped because the motor neurons in the intrinsic muscles of your hands are degenerating,” Sherlock spluttered, desperate for this conversation to be over but unable to say the actual words. “And the degeneration won’t stop with just your hands.”

Violet put the tumbler down. “What?”

“You always complained about your hands and sometimes your legs and feet going numb, that they tingled, the ‘pins and needles’ sensation.”

“I slept on the couch a lot,” she shrugged. “A nerve probably got pinched.”
She is willfully misunderstanding me… Sherlock realized with a jolt.

She knows.

Not on a conscious level, no. Below the surface, past reasoning and memories, down in the subterranean of her subconscious, she knows. Has always known, had always…felt it.

Her “spidey sense,” her high emotional intelligence alerted her to it, of course.

She protected herself with not a Mind Palace, but a cocoon, spun around her to save her from the truth, that her transport is an unreliable ride, a lemon. The cocoon preserved her mind, saved her sanity but the truth damaged her psyche just as irreparably as The Earl mine.

It all makes perfect sense now, her reluctance to become close to anyone on an emotionally intimate level, though her conscious reasons were logical and sensible. She was in hiding for her life. A traditional girlfriend-boyfriend relationship was unfathomable as well as unpractical.

Even her emotional reasons made sense. She had lost the only man she had loved unconditionally, a man she had actually wanted to marry, in the most horrific and tragic way imaginable. Also, her last serious boyfriend prior to me was an emotionally abusive brute who had tried to cross the line to physical abuse as well as being chronically unfaithful.

And… she attempted a relationship with me. Talk about proclivity towards self-destruction.

But she trusted that my detachment, my lack of sentiment and my apparent disinterest in sex would be a sufficient barrier between our two broken hearts.

She pursued me because she had believed it would go nowhere.

She underestimated me… she didn’t expect me to actually bloody try. Because that would be out of character for me, it doesn’t fit her profile…

My kissing John hurt her in ways she hadn’t expected and with that action, a door opened in her Mind Palace leading down to her Mind Dungeon, where all the dark and dangerous things lie in wait to thwart logic and manipulate emotion, her demons lay in wait.

Tormenting her, taunting her, telling her she could never be close to anyone every again. They gleefully tell her to scamper away. Don’t fight for me, for us. Let me go. Let me be with John, it’s better that way, or so her mental tormentors say… And she believes her inner demons’ greatest lies, that there is no point to being with anyone…

… because she was going to die.

“How old was your mother when she died?” Sherlock blurted out.

Violet had just put the tumbler to her lips again. She took a swallow before answering. “Forty.”

“Our age.”

“Yes.”

“How did she die?”

“I told you,” Violet leaned against the counter as she glowered at Sherlock. “In a car accident, what the hell does that have to do with anything?”
“What do you remember about the accident?”

“I was sick. She came to pick me up from school. She never came.”

“What happened?”

“The weather was bad, the roads were slick. She lost control of the car.”

“That is what you remember?”

“Yes,” she looked at Sherlock dead in the eyes.

“When you were still in your ‘Miss Smith’ guise, you had told John that your mother had some sort of fit and lost control of the car.”

Violet frowned then her face relaxed. “Oh yeah, that. That was the lie I told people when they asked about my mother. I mixed truth with a lie to make it more believable, you know that.”

“Or you mixed truth with truth. When you and John had thought you drugged me so you two could openly speak, I heard you tell John to Google Major Anthony Hunter and Vanessa Connor-Hunter. So I did.”

“And?”

“Your mother died on the eight of November, 1982, correct?”

“Yes,” Violet clutched the tumbler so tight, her knuckles turned white.

“The weather that day was sunny and clear skies.”

Violet blinked. Then she shook her head so rapidly, the dark brown curls hit her face. “No… that’s not right. It was cold. Snowing… the road was icy.”

“That was the weather on the day of your mother’s funeral, three days later.”

Violet pushed a hank of hair out of her face. “No, that’s not right. That’s not how I remember it.”

“Memory and emotions can play tricks on the mind, which is why I have striven for a life devoted to logic and rationality.” Sherlock tucked his hands into his trouser pockets and stared at his bare feet. “You know I have an eidetic memory. Yet… the old burning pain flared in his chest again, pooling into his gut. “I have no memory of what happened in the grove That Day…”

The familiar and not entirely unwelcomed prickle of need and want made the crook of his elbows itch and sting.

“With the Earl,” Violet kept her voice hushed.

“I remember every repulsive act he committed against me after That Day,” Sherlock kept his eyes on his toes. “I remember what we were doing in the grove before…” he swallowed hard again. “We were making paper boats and floating them down the creek. He showed me how to seal them with paraffin wax so they wouldn’t get damp and sink. Then… he…well, asked me to do something no respectable adolescent or grown man would ask of a child. I became afraid, I ran. He caught me and… then it’s nothing. There is a gigantic black hole, then I remember it growing dark, the sun was going down and I was bleeding.” He lifted his eyes to Violet. “It is my mind protecting me from whatever horror I had endured during those fifteen minutes. Just as your mind is trying to protect you by misremembering the conditions of your mother’s death,” he informed her. “You were just a little
girl and miserably ill at that. You did not have a cold or even the stomach flu. You had the chicken pox, which is a normal childhood ailment. However, you were not merely unwell as most children are when they have the chicken pox. You had spiked a dangerously high temperature in the short time when your school teacher noticed your malaise and lack of appetite, then observed the small red bumps on your arm to when the school nurse contacted your mother. There was concern about the possibility of Reyes’ syndrome."

“I don’t…” Violet unconsciously scratched her arm. “Remember.”

“Of course not, you were a severely ill child. You were still in kindergarten, not a proper primary school,” Sherlock used the German term for nursery school. “You don’t remember your mother’s funeral?” When Violet shook her head, Sherlock informed her, “Because you didn’t attend it. You were in hospital for high fever and dehydration. You were too ill to go. You saw the snow falling from your hospital window.”

“How…?”

“Your school records, your hospital records. I know what room you stayed in at when you were in hospital. That is how I know you saw the snow falling. Just as I had deleted the memory of what happened to me during those Fifteen Minutes, you cut-and-pasted details from one memory to another, to improve the narrative. To rationalize your mother’s death, to be able to soothe yourself by telling yourself, It wasn’t my fault Mummy died. It wasn’t my fault I became ill and the school nurse called Mummy to fetch me. The roads were icy. Unfortunately the coping mechanisms that save a child’s sanity damages the future adult’s ability to deal with reality.” When Violet didn’t respond, he pressed on, “When you created the lie about your mother’s death, subconsciously you added the detail about your mother losing control of her car. In reality, your mind was trying to tell you when had really happened, was trying to warn your conscious self of what was yet to come.”

“What was yet to come?” Violet parroted, arching an eyebrow.

Even in the midst of the worst deduction of his life, Sherlock still couldn’t fail to notice she had dyed her eyebrows the same dark brown as her hair. Two blackish-brown slashes.

Her attention to detail had been one of the things that attracted her to him.

Yet, she refuses to acknowledge this one fundamental fact, this glaringly obvious fact…

“The women on your mother’s side of the family tend to die relatively young, do they not? Usually in some sort of accident, for example, your great-grandmother tumbled from a horse and broke her neck when she was only forty-six.”

“Falling is not hereditary.”

“It is when it’s caused by a progressive neurodegenerative disease.”

Violet blanched then whispered, “Great-Aunt Verity.”

Sherlock waited.

He knew who Verity Connor was because he had thoroughly researching Violet’s family tree.

“She was the Connor wild child.” Violet’s lips had turned white. “Nobody talked about Verity because she hooked up with a black guy during the Forties. But that wasn’t even the worst part in the Connors’ eyes. She married him and had his kids. It caused a big rift in the family, my great-grandfather disowned her and no one ever spoke about her again or heard from her again. I didn’t
even know she existed. My great-grandparents and grandparents had died before I was born. I doubt my mom knew about Great-Aunt Verity, this all happened before she was born. It was like she no longer existed once she chose to follow her heart. Michael was the one who found out about her what had happened to her. He did a paper in college about ancestry and he tracked Verity down. She and her family had moved to California after World War II… but she died shortly afterwards… from…” she choked out “Lou Gehrig’s disease.”

She studied her hands. Then she waved them around as she shook her head again. She pressed her palms to her aching head and emphatically said, “NO. No, ALS is not hereditary.”

As she stumbled out of the kitchen, still futilely waving her hands and shaking her head in complete denial, Sherlock leapt over the couch and cut her off. He seized her hands, “There are two types of ALS,” he informed her. “Sporadic ALS and familial ALS; while familial ALS is rare, it is hereditary.”

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“Hand tremors are not a symptom of ALS,” she jerked her hands out of his.

“But clonic spasms are,” Sherlock grabbed her shoulders, afraid she would bolt, disappear and do something incredibly reckless during her emotional distress. “Along with muscle weakn-oooff!”

In a blink of an eye, Violet had taken a step in, her right foot parallel to Sherlock’s while all of her weight was on her left. Then she had lifted her left arm up and clamped her left hand down on Sherlock’s shoulder. After that, she clocked him with a right jab to the chin and when he turned away to nurse his bashed jaw, she followed up with a right punch to the solar plexus.

Sherlock wheezed and nearly dropped to his knees. Instead, he staggered to the couch, leaning against it as he tried to catch his breath.

“Does that feel like muscle weakness to you?”

Head ringing, Sherlock sucked in two whooping breathes before gasping out, “Make…a … fist.”

Violet immediately balled her right hand into a fist.

Sherlock shook his head, hand still to his chin. “Your… other… hand…”

Violet started then had to stop. Angry tears stood out in her eyes as she glared at her left hand as the fingers perceptively curled shut far more slowly than her right.

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She held her left fist to her chest. “This doesn’t mean anything. You’re not a doctor.”

“But,” Sherlock rasped as he straightened up. “John is.” He fished his mobile out of his trouser pocket. “The day he was abducted by Holy Peters, he was at the Medical Library Royal researching your symptoms, trying to determine what was wrong with you. This,” he held up his mobile, “Is the voice mail he left me before Peters took him.”

He turned the volume up as loud as it would go then hit Play:

John’s slightly panicked voice sounded tinny though the tiny iPhone speakers. Despite that, it was clearly audible:

“Sherlock, please call me back right away. Whatever you and your brother and Violet are planning, you need to stop it. You need to stop it right now and get Violet to hospital immediately. She’s seriously ill. Fuck, I don’t want to leave this on your bloody voice mail… Sherlock, she’s showing symptoms of ALS. It’s almost text-book. We all missed it because of the Copper Beaches and
everything… call me, OK?”

Sherlock turned the voice mail off and let his arms fall limply to his sides.

Violet hadn’t moved but had only paled more. She looked almost greenish-tan, thanks to the self-tanner she had not been able to completely wash off. She still held her fist to her chest but her legs had started to sway.

Sherlock witnessed the moment the light died in her eyes, the windows to her soul losing all color and turning black.

Slowly, she drew her fists to her face, covering her eyes, rubbing them like an inconsolable child. Her shoulders hitched up to her ears as she curled into herself. A choked sob slipped out.

Her knees hit the plush carpet before Sherlock could catch her. The sob mutated into sometime grittier than a wail, more primal than a scream.

The consummate survivor had finally met the challenge she could not outwit or outrun.

Or outlive.

The queen was defeated.

Checkmate.
Swindle

Chapter Summary

Swindle

1. A ruse by which a player in a losing position tricks his or her opponent, and thereby achieves a win or draw instead of the expected loss.
2. It may also refer more generally to achieving a win or draw from a clearly losing position.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-eight: Swindle

24 April 2016
Four Seasons Hotel Chicago
Chicago, Illinois
Sunday morning
4:20 AM Central Standard Time

Lisbeth Salander swiped her keycard. When the tiny light next to the doorknob turned from red to green, she pushed the door open.

All the lights were off, except for one softly glowing lamp. She could see the back of Sherlock’s curly head.

With one more furtive glance behind her, Lisbeth let herself in. She twisted the deadbolt and slid the chain lock in place.

She had other safety measures to set up, but those could wait. She wasn’t tired.

She started pulling hair pins out of her wig as she crept towards the couch. “You should have checked to see who was coming in,” she mildly scolded Sherlock.

“I smell your perfume,” Sherlock quietly informed her. “Or rather, Irene Nesser’s perfume. Also,” he waved a hand towards her laptop, sitting open on the coffee table, “I’ve been keeping an eye on things as well. I confess, I saw you coming before you reached the door.”

Lisbeth peered at the screen and grunted in approval. She had hacked into the hotel’s security cameras so the feeds would come directly to her computer. She tossed her wig onto the coffee table and started taking off her gold earrings. She looked down and saw Violet curled up in Sherlock’s lap, her face slack with sleep, yet still troubled.

“She knows?”

Sherlock ran a hand over Violet’s disheveled curls. “She knows.”

“How did she take it?”
“As expected,” Sherlock rumbled, still stoking her curls.

Lisbeth did not offer platitudes. They did not have that sort of friendship. “It’s better that she knows. If she didn’t, it would have blindsided her.” She tossed her earrings into her giant handbag. Then she rooted around in it and produced a pack of Marlboro Reds and a Zippo lighter. “Fag?” she held out the red and white box.

Sherlock shook his head. As Lisbeth trod across the luxurious carpet towards the magnificent balcony, he asked her, “Was your venture productive?”

“Yeah,” she lit her cigarette before throwing open the glass doors. The suite had a magnificent view of Lake Michigan but in the caliginous hours of early morning, nothing was visible except for a stretch of slate gray in the skies, a stretch of inky black where a lake should be and pockets of light here and there from the homes and cars of night owls and vampires.

“Pray, do not keep me in suspense, do tell.”

“She didn’t kill him, but she fucked him up pretty bad,” Lisbeth pulled out a deck chair and sat in the doorway, her back to the murky Lake Michigan. “Shattered his scapula,” she grunted, cigarette firmly clamped in her mouth. “There will be nerve damage for sure, especially with the back-alley surgery he underwent to avoid the mandatory police report that would have generated had he gone to hospital.” She blew a plume of smoke over her right shoulder, dainty and whole.

Sherlock closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. Recalling a different shoulder injury. A starburst mass of ruined tissue on a different shoulder…

*Are you alright, John?*

*Hm, oh yeah, I’m fine. It just likes to tense up when the weather gets damp, that’s all.*

*Ah, of course. Would a heating pad help? Or a massage or…?*

*What? No. No, no… thank you but no, it’ll sort itself out on its own…*

Hurt that he had been rebuffed, Sherlock had slinked off to sulk in his bedroom. His childish pout devolved into righteous anger when he realized that John had misinterpreted his offer, had thought Sherlock was trying to trick him into an experiment. Maybe he even thought he was making a pass at him, even after only weeks prior to that he had explicitly explained to John that he was married to his Work… but John hadn’t been observing as usual…

*I just wanted to be nice to someone for once…*

The refusal still stung, after all this time.

“Being shot in real life is nothing like the films,” Sherlock unconsciously rubbed his own chest, where a pinkish-peach scar smaller than a penny was.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Lisbeth said dryly, crossing her arms so she wouldn’t touch the scar on her head, now mostly concealed by her short, spiky hair. “Thank God my arsehole father had terrible aim and only a pitiful little .22, a fucking toy, really.”

Unable to help herself, she touched where the third bullet had caught her, a small spot about an inch above her left ear.

The first bullet had hit her hip, causing her to lose balance as she fled from her despicable old man.
The second had struck her left shoulder, just as a sniper’s bullet had pierced John Watson’s. The difference was that Lisbeth had been shot in the back and John had been unwittingly facing his assailant.

The third bullet had drilled through her skull, stopping only two inches from her cerebral cortex.

Pitiful as the weapon may have been, her father’s Browning .22 caliber pistol had nearly ended her. No more Sally, no more Wasp, no more click!

Sherlock grimaced, remembering how grievously injured Lisbeth had been and by the one man who should have loved her unconditionally. Still, he needlessly mumbled, “John was also shot in the shoulder when he was in Afghanistan…”

He wanted to find the insurgent and thank him for shooting John, who provided the bullet that had changed the trajectory of John’s entire life, leading him into Sherlock’s.

After thanking that same insurgent, Sherlock then wanted to murder him.

He did, after all, try to kill John.

“The wound became infected, even after receiving proper medical attention. Like you, like me, John was incapacitated for months after being shot. He told me stories about the physiotherapy he had to endure afterwards just to regain simple motion in his arm and hand, to pick up a cup, to button up a shirt. He found the simplest tasks laborious and he was a surgeon.”

Sherlock flexed his hands. How we take simple things for granted…

He steepled his fingers but instead of assuming his “thinking pose”, he pressed his palms together. He lifted his hands to chest level, spreading his fingers as he pulled his elbows up, mindful of Violet’s head still in his lap. It was a common stretch for violinists wanting to limber up their hands and wrists before playing.

But Sherlock always felt a dull ache in chest that wasn’t quite a pain, just an uncomfortable reminder of what Mary did to him. Brushing thoughts of Mrs. Watson aside, he rumbled, “Obviously, Peters is not receiving the same level of care we three did when we were shot.”

“Nope,” Lisbeth said before exhaling plumes of smoke from her nostrils. Deciding to look on the bright side of life, she added, “So there’s still an excellent chance Peters could kick the bucket. At the very least, your friend probably ended his assassination career. At any rate, we managed to take out one of Moriarty’s knights.”

“That makes our game of sans voir chess easier,” Sherlock hummed as he lifted his arms over his head to stretch out his sore shoulders. Violet stirred as he moved, her brows wrinkling. Sherlock draped an arm over her waist and resumed stroking her hair with his other hand.

Lisbeth studied them both with unblinking eyes. “You like her.”

“Very much so.” He peeled a strand of hair stuck to her cheek.

“Do you love her?”

Sherlock opened his mouth, shut it, thought for a moment, then muttered, “I wanted to.”

Lisbeth nodded, understanding. “That’s how it is with me and Mikael.”
“The journalist?”

Lisbeth nodded. “Thought I was in love with him. Maybe I was, a bit, but it was a long time ago, I was very young and fucked up back then. He was old enough to be my dad. We worked well together and I really liked him and I liked going to bed with him, but…” she sighed with a weariness beyond her years. “It wasn’t love.” Her eyes twinkled, “Not like you and the doctor.”

Sherlock’s pale cheeks pinked a trifle. “I tried,” he whispered defensively. “With her, I tried.”

Lisbeth felt desperately sorry for the socially awkward Englishman and pity was not an emotion she felt often. She felt his pain, knew his pain intimately: the stabbing despair of Not Fitting In. Being judged and found lacking because of odd mannerisms, ridiculous clothes and an oversized intellect. Being bullied and abused because when they were small children because they were little and thin and easy prey.

They could have been sister and brother, she and Sherlock.

Grudgingly, she was grateful he had turned down her offer of sex all those years ago.

She stood up and expertly flicked her cigarette butt over the railing. Shivering now, she stepped back inside with some alacrity. Shutting the glass doors behind her, she added, “I tried with Mikael too, I even bought the jerk a Christmas present,” she shook her head at her foolishness as she started kicking off her ridiculously expensive boots. “But we’re still friends, me and Mikael.” She sighed with relief when the first boot went sailing across the room. “Good friends.”

She didn’t mention that after seeing Mikael with his on-again, off-again lover Erika Berger after she had bought him a Christmas present, she had given him the silent treatment for well over a year. Only when he obdurately insisted on saving her life as well as keeping her out of prison for three murders she did not commit, had she agreed to mend fences.

“You can be friends with her too. I think… I think she’d like that,” she wiggled her newly freed toes with absurd delight as the second boot went flying. Before the conversation grew sloppy, she added, “Anyway, you haven’t slept in two days and we’ve got another big day ahead of us. We’ve got the Sons to deal with tomorrow. Plus we need to go over the plans with her,” she gestured towards Violet with her hands, “About what happens after we get her out of Chicago.” She now gave him one of her rare crooked grins, “Go to bed, take the bedroom, the bed is big enough for two, but not three.”

Sherlock tucked one arm under Violet’s knees and another around her back. As he clumsily rose, wobbling as he tried to keep her in his arms, he asked, “What about you?”

“I need a shower. I need to wash this crap off my face as well, so you better use the loo before I get in there. But first, I want to set up some additional surveillance items efore I crash. I can take the couch, it’s not so bad. Plus, with Peters out of commission and your friends patrolling the hallways for us, I think it’s safe for us to lie in a bit.”

Sherlock grunted and carried Violet into the bedroom. He removed her filthy boots and slightly damp socks without hesitation before tucking her in. He quickly used the small yet opulent bathroom before Lisbeth monopolized it. After relieving his bladder and cleaning his teeth, he returned to the bedroom and stripped down to his boxers. Shivering a little, he contemplated going back out into the living room to fetch another blanket when he heard a weak voice, “I lied about wrecking my motorcycle.”

He turned his head around, but said nothing.
When he didn’t immediately answer, she added, “When you were kidnapped, I had an accident on the A-1. I told John and Mycroft I did it on purpose, to shake the MI-6 tail Mycroft put on me but it wasn’t on purpose. I lost control of my bike just like my mother lost control of her car.”

Sherlock slowly pivoted then sat on the bed next to Violet, his ruined back facing her. “I know,” he said softly, looking at her over his shoulder. “I watched the CCTV footage. I knew you lied, but I couldn’t deduce why… at first.”

“Mycroft’s goons wouldn’t back off,” her voice was hoarse, which was to be expected after the prolonged crying jag she went on once she realized she couldn’t deny reality any longer. “The Professor made it very clear that John and I were supposed to find you by ourselves. So I sped up to get away from them. I thought I could outrun them. Then I felt my left arm just go… I could feel it there, but it was completely numb. I couldn’t move my fingers, I couldn’t hold onto the handlebars. I knew I was going to crash so I laid the bike down as safely as I could. I had no idea I’d cause a pile-up on the A-1. I was just trying to… you know… not die.” She laughed bitterly at the irony. “I lied to John and Mycroft about crashing my bike on purpose. Mycroft because, well, he’s Mycroft.”

“Wise decision.”

“John because… because he would have insisted I stay behind and go after you by himself.” Violet rolled to her side. “I think… I think I always knew something was wrong with me. I just didn’t want to deal with it, didn’t want to deal with one more goddamned problem.”

“Ignore it and it will go away?”

“Exactly,” Violet sighed. “This isn’t a bad dream, is it? I’m going to wake up tomorrow and you’ll still be here instead of London living happily ever after with John and I’ll still be sick, right?”

“Afraid so,” Sherlock couldn’t keep the sadness out of his voice.

_You feel, you observe, you absorb and you are affected by what you’ve seen._

“So,” Violet sat up, pushing her shaggy curls out of her face. She scooted closer to Sherlock and rested her chin on his shoulder, “You going to save me, Mr. Holmes?”

“Nope.” He pressed his forehead against hers. “I’m going to show you how to save yourself.”

***

24 April 2016
The Devil’s Foot MC Clubhouse
Southside Chicago, Illinois
Sunday morning
4:55 PM Central Standard Time

“Stick!” Chibs boomed gleefully as Sherlock entered the clubhouse, with Violet and Lisbeth following close behind.

“Stick?” Violet arched an eyebrow while Lisbeth snorted with laughter.

“Shut up,” Sherlock hissed at her.

Before anyone could say anything else, Chibs had embraced Sherlock in a manly hug, complete with the requisite three masculine slaps on the back. “Great to see you, lad,” he beamed.
“You as well,” there was genuine warmth in Sherlock’s voice. “Who else is here?”

“Stick, man,” Trager bounced out of the back room with his arms spread wide in welcome. “How the hell are ya?” Turning his head, he quickly explained to Rat Boy, who had followed him out to the bar, “Friend of the club.”

“Cool, got it,” Rat Boy nodded his head as Green and Vibart abandoned their pool game.

“Mr. Trager,” Sherlock extended his hand for him to shake.

“Mr. Trager, get a load of this guy,” Trager chuckled as he enthusiastically shook Sherlock’s hand. “Didn’t answer me though, how the hell you’ve been?”


Just as Violet again was thinking how out of character Sherlock looked in jeans, a black T-shirt, a black leather jacket (sans scarf) and the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow darkening his face, Green slipped beside her. “So, he’s the one under house arrest?” he breathed as Trager introduced Sherlock to Rat Boy.

Violet nodded, “Supposed to be.”

“Mm,” Green eyed the tall, thin man interacting with the Sons.

Green thought “Stick” looked like a homo, not an international criminal.

Then from out of the corner of his eyes, he looked down at Tony’s daughter and reminded himself that appearances can be deceiving.

So,” Chibs crossed his arms, all business now. “Which one of these hens is the one causing all the trouble?”

Lisbeth pointed at Violet at the same time Violet pointed at herself.

“Really?” Trager tilted his head in confusion as a befuddled Rat Boy first looked at a sour-faced Lisbeth with her visible piercings and hair dyed jet-black and her heavy eye make-up. Then he looked at the calm, older woman, unremarkable in her appearance other than dirty clothes and a helluva shiner blossoming around her eye plus bright salmon pink scrapes blotting her cheek. Even with the bruises and scrapes, her injuries could have come from a pissed off boyfriend.

Something about her lifeless eyes told him that no boyfriend had hit her in the face. Abused women usually looked scared. She looked…apathetic, as though she was just a spectator in the world instead of an active participant.

A quiver of nervousness shot through Rat Boy. Despite the deeply entrenched sexism of the MC subculture, his instincts told him to be wary of this woman.

After all, Jax Teller’s mother had been downright terrifying…

*Are you sayin’ you’re afraid of my mom?*

*We all are…*

Rat Boy shut down that line of thinking, couldn’t afford to think about Jax right now… even though he knew he’d never stop mourning him.
“Gentlemen, shall we take this into a more private place so we may discuss the matter in hand?” Sherlock put his hands behind his back, as if he wore his Belstaff and bespoke suit.

“Follow me,” Vibart gestured with his beer bottle.

As they walked to the back of the clubhouse towards the “chapel”, Rat Boy muttered to Trager, “So, does the Limey talk like that all the time? All formal and shit?”

“Yeah, it’s annoying at first, but then you get used to it,” Trager shrugged.

Violet knew better than to sit down at the enormous table in the middle of the room with the *mc emblem* carved into it. Only members could sit at the table. It was a minor miracle that she and Lisbeth had been admitted into the inner sanctum of hyper masculinity. She wasn’t sure if Lisbeth also knew better but was relieved when she hovered by the door instead of sitting down.

Sherlock did not sit either but stood at attention on Chibs’ left while Chibs sat at one end of the table and Green the other. Vibart sat on Green’s left, Trager on Chibs right. Rat Boy sat next to Trager.

Violet found the power dynamics in the room mildly interesting. Despite the crushing sense of despair that had been numbing her since last night, her interest in psychology managed to surface just a little.

“Right, let’s get to it then,” Sherlock inhaled and then in his usual crisp, detached manner, explained their predicament.

The Sons and the MC stayed silent as Sherlock spoke. The only sounds were Sherlock’s voice, the click of a lighter and the tamping of cigarettes on ashtrays. Chibs only interrupted once, “Did you kill that Senator, madam?”

“No,” Violet did not quail under Chibs’ interrogative glare. “I’m no angel, but I didn’t kill anyone.” She frowned, then shrugged, conceding, “On American soil anyway,” she mumbled on purpose, waiting for the reaction. When she was sure every Son and MC stared at her in disbelief, she added blithely, “Besides, even if I was stupid enough to kill a US congressman,” she covered her right hand over her left. “I can’t. I’m…”

Her eyes dropped to the floor.

“She’s not well,” Sherlock leapt to her rescue. Mercifully he did not go into the details of Violet’s medical condition. Instead he dryly informed the other men she had a condition that not only prevented her from committing murder but also precluded her from the active participation of rescuing Mitton.

“You knocked up?” Trager tactlessly asked.

“No,” Violet fixed him a cold glare and Trager held up his hands.

“No disrespect meant.”

“None taken,” Violet lied.

Rat Boy’s mind was elsewhere, “Your brother’s kind of a dick, ain’t he?”

“That’s a word for it,” Sherlock agreed. He had not told the Sons and the Devil’s Foot that his brother was essentially The British Government, but he did inform them that his brother had powerful contacts in British and American government that could make all of their lives easier or
miserable, depending on Mycroft’s whim.

He also left out the bit about the Moriarty Code. The less people knew about that, the better.

“So, let me get this straight,” Trager leaned forward, fingertips pressing on the oak table. “You want us to help you get a fed out of a black site?”

“He’s not with the Federal Bureau of Investigation; he’s with MI-6, but, yes.”

“Stick, I love you, but,” Chibs shook his grey head dolefully. “That’s something we can’t do.”

“It’s too much heat, brother,” Trager agreed.

Violet and Sherlock exchanged a look.

*My turn,* she silently informed him.

*You have the floor,* he took a step back.

“It’s actually in your best interest,” Violet purposely kept her voice neutral, as if she were delivering a bland sales pitch to a board of directors at a respectable corporation.

“You threatening us, missy?” Chibs chuckled, more amused than nervous. Most of the men chuckled, including Rat Boy. A few of the men leaned forward, assuming alpha-male poses, flexing their muscles, cracking their necks. Green crossed his massive arms over his barrel chest, wondering when exactly Tony’s sweet little girl stopped being so sweet.

Trager didn’t crack a smile or assume any male posturing. He studied her intently now, taking her seriously. He learned a long time ago a painful lesson to get *all* the intel before acting.

“No. I’m not the threat, the Midnight Crew is.”

She never raised her voice, but she now had everyone’s absolute attention.

“What do you know about the Midnight Crew?” Vibart growled.

“The FBI considers them domestic terrorists because of their neo-Nazi rhetoric and ties to more prominent hate groups but until now, they didn’t have enough funding to do anything other than cause chaos on social media. Now, they’ve gone from a minor annoyance to completely encroaching on your territory and undermining all your legitimate businesses. They’ve also severely reduced your numbers and they’ve crossed the lines by intimidating wives and kids,” Violet quietly informed him in her dry, dispassionate voice, her professional voice she used when she used to be a field agent giving reports to a section chief. “Even with the merger with the Sons, you still might cease to exist as a presence on the Southside,” she paused again for dramatic effect.

She had practiced this speech with Sherlock on their drive from the hotel to the clubhouse.

“Oh or to exist at all.”

“What makes you so sure?” Chibs no longer chuckled. His scarred cheeks and dark, angry eyes made him look like one of William Wallace’s fearless warriors ready to leap into battle.

“But because I, we,” she swiveled her head to look at Sherlock then Lisbeth. “Learned who was bankrolling the Midnight Crew and… well, I’m not going to bullshit you guys, it’s bad. I recognized his name from back when I was still with the Bureau.”
“Who is backing that band of white trash?”

“Ethan Zobelle.”

The reaction was immediate but different. While Vibart immediately hissed out, “Shit.” Chibs leaned back in his chair while softly uttering a despondent, “Jesus Christ.” Meanwhile Trager bolted out of his seat, roared, “Fuck!” as he kicked his chair, sending it sprawling. The rest of the men muttered amongst themselves, none of them happy. Even Rat Boy knitted his dark brows in concern and he hadn’t even joined the Sons when Ethan Zobelle and his clan of white supremacists had descended upon Charming.

“Are you sure?” Chibs sat back up, leaning forward, face grim.

“Positive,” Sherlock interjected himself back into the conversation. “As I had informed your then president Clay Morrow, I was tracking down an international consulting criminal syndicate. Mr. Zobelle had reached out to them when he needed a speedy exit from America. Mr. Zobelle’s trail of terror and involvement with the Red-Headed League led me to Charming which, as you two,” he nodded towards Chibs and Trager, “should recall, is how we made our acquaintance.”

Trager continued to pace, his hands on his hips, the chain attached to his wallet rattling as he walked back and forth. He shook his head while muttered, “Zobelle, goddamn Zobelle, we should have cut his fucking head off when we had the chance.”

“Tiggy,” Chibs murmured and Trager stopped pacing. But he stood behind Chibs, hands still on his hips, ready to fly into action if necessary.

Violet continued explaining, losing some of her clinical detachment: “According to FBI files, Zobelle not only got himself in trouble with you guys for stirring the shit in Charming but also with Whitey McWhiteface when they figured out the only color he really cared about was green,” Despite the invectives, Violet still sounded cool and unruffled. “He’s not stupid enough to return to the US since the feds, the bikers and the racists all want a piece of him. But he is bankrolling the Midnight Crew to ahhh… strongly encourage any undesirable elements to vacate Fuller Park because he has big plans for gentrification.”

“Shit, this is Charming Heights all over again,” Trager groaned.

“Shut up,” Chibs growled, wanting to listen.

“Right now, you don’t have the money or the manpower to get rid of the Midnight Crew. They have burrowed themselves deep into this neighborhood like a tick on a dog’s skin,” Violet flatly informed them. “They are also guarding whatever is in that abandoned fire station, where Mitton is being held. Help me, I can help you.”

“How?”

“I have money,” Violet baldly informed Chibs. “A lot of it, too much, which is why I’m a target.”

“Sixty-mil, right?” Vibart purred, obviously thinking she was stupid to disclose that amount.

Which, she wasn’t, of course. Only Sherlock knew she didn’t act precariously but Lisbeth and Green were catching on. “Give or take,” she shrugged.

He laughed, “We can just take it, you know.”

Violet rolled her eyes so dramatically, it must have hurt. “Does it look like I’m carrying sixty million
“dollars on me? That amount doesn’t exactly fit in a purse.”

“We can make you transfer the money to our bank accounts, you’re good with computers.”

Lisbeth snorted. Both Sherlock and Violet threw her a dirty look.

“You can’t make me do anything,” Violet kindly informed him. “This is a business transaction, with substantial risk but the possibility of a win-win for everyone if-”

“You know what,” Vibart stood up and strode over to Violet. “I’m tired of dicking around. I don’t give a shit who’s little girl you are, you’re a fucking fed, you’re a goddamn cop, you’re trash,” he drew his gun and pointed it at Violet. “We should have taken you out when we first saw you.”

Sherlock drew in a breath. *Violet, don’t…*

But Violet did. She walked closer to Vibart, almost strolling, until the barrel of the gun grazed her sternum. “Browning 1911-380, nice,” she nodded in approval. “I always preferred Sigs. By the way,” she dropped her voice to a whisper. “The safety is on.”

“Oh no, honey, I ain’t falling for that. That’s how you disarmed the prospect,” Vibart sneered. “Transfer the money to our accounts or I will fucking shoot you.”

“A bullet through the chest would be far more merciful, trust me.”

“I can arrange that.”

“Jules, enough,” Green stood up, hands balled. “You made your point.”

“She’s bluffing.”

“No,” Sherlock jumped in, his heart in his throat. “She’s not.”

*This… this is exactly why I put off telling her…*

“Put the gun down, lad,” Chibs drawled laconically but there was steel in his eyes, “We all know how huge your cock is now.”

“And we don’t point guns at women,” Trager angrily added.

Then there was another click, another safety being turned off.

“Unless the bitch is crazy,” Trager sighed when everyone realized Lisbeth was also carrying.

During the dramatic stand-off, Lisbeth had skulked unnoticed around the table. Her tiny body had been completely blocked by Vibart’s frame.

She jammed her Kimber Pro Carry II into the small of his back. “Put it down, creep.”

He lowered his arm, “The safety actually was on,” he mumbled as Rat Boy marched over and took the gun away from him.

“My’s not,” Lisbeth whispered.

Sherlock glowered at her and mouthed *Put it away*. Lisbeth pouted and lowered her arm.

“*Enough,*” Chibs roared, slamming the flat of his hand against the table. “None of you obviously
appreciate the seriousness of the situation. Ethan Zobelle is a monster. He will seek and destroy everything you love and hold dear. He will burn us all to the ground if he thinks we’re an obstacle to his precious condos and cigar shops. There is nothing he won’t stoop to; blackmail, extortion, kidnap, murder, rape and he gets away with it because he wears a smart suit and talks nice and proper. He nearly wiped us out and got one of our brothers killed. If he is paying off the Midnight Crew as well as in debt to the Red-Headed League, we are all up shit creek lads.”

“You all heard what he had done to Jax Teller’s mom,” Trager added.

Lisbeth and Violet didn’t know the story and no one else in the room seemed inclined to share. But even Sherlock looked disturbed by the memory.

“Besides, if you shoot her,” Chibs pointed his finger at Violet. “Nobody gets paid. You need to rearrange your priorities, brother.”

“Sorry,” Vibart plopped back into his chair, fuming.

“Also,” Sherlock recovered himself, “you weren’t able to hide a hundred thousand dollars on your own, what made you think you could hide sixty million?”

“OK, fuck, I’m sorry,” Vibart snapped then peevishly answered, “And the safety was on.”

“You’re still a creep,” Lisbeth sniped.

“Listen you little dy-”

Green opened his mouth to roar at Vibart again but Chibs undercut him.

“I said enough,” he ordered, his voice now deadly quiet. “We are friends. We are brothers. We are outlaws. We work together, agreed? Because if we’re not in agreement, boys, SAMCRO can take SAM-CHI off the table right quick and let you lot fend for yourselves.”

That got the Devil’s Foot’s full attention again.

“Right, Stick,” Chibs turned his head towards Sherlock, “What’s the play?”

Chapter End Notes

The "William Wallace" remark was a tongue-in-cheek reference to the actor who played Chibs in Sons of Anarchy was also in Braveheart. ;^)
Chapter Summary

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Giuoco Piano
Italian: "Quiet Game", it is a chess opening beginning with the moves:
1. e4 e5
2. Nf3 Nc6
3. Bc4 Bc5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

24 April 2016
Papa Bella’s Ristorante
Little Italy, Chicago, Illinois
Sunday evening
7:20 PM Central Standard Time

The locals nervously joked about Giuoco “Papa Bella” Bellucci being a mob boss. For starters, he just looked too cute to be a Mafioso. Bald as a cue ball, clean-shaven round rosy cheeks and perpetual smile, He looked like a shorn Santa Claus with his big belly. Along with the perpetual smile and big belly was a booming laugh. Generous to a fault, all the kids somehow instinctively knew that it was his house that gave the best and most candy at Halloween. There was also an unspoken rule that if kids were exceptionally well-behaved and polite if they went to Papa Bella’s Ristorante, they got two big scoops of gelato.

He always had time for a joke and a smile when he made his rounds at his restaurant, making sure his customers were happy and well-fed and was quick to fix any mistake with the food as well as not charging them for their mishandled meal, even if the customer protested that it really wasn’t that big of a big deal.

He had been a faithful member of The Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii ever since he had immigrated to the United States. The only times he had missed Mass was when two of his five children had inconveniently been born on a Sunday. He paid the traditional yearly tithing of 10% of his income (his declared income at any rate.) He had also played Santa Claus at the church’s Christmas pageant with relish ever since his first child was four years old.

Since they were in the restaurant business, Monday night had been his “date night” with his wife, Angela, who had been born in America, but spoke fluent Italian, thanks to her immigrant parents. Once the kids were out of diapers and money wasn’t stretched as thin as it was in the beginning, every Monday, they would take the El to Downtown and enjoy a quiet meal by themselves. He had also always had flowers sent to her, every week, on a Friday, when things tended to get hectic at the restaurant.

The flowers were a tradition he had continued even after her death, eight years ago.

All five of his children were grown and educated, three of them with children of their own. All five of them went to college on the East Coast. His eldest son, Sylvester, was a hot shot stockbroker in
Manhattan, married, no kids but two dogs. His eldest daughter, Serena, was a trauma surgeon at Rush University Medical Center with two daughters and a third on the way. His third child, another daughter was also in New York. Aria lived with her big brother and sister-in-law, in their spare bedroom while after graduating Julliard, trying to break into show business. She did all right: she recorded a few radio jingles, was in a few off-Broadway musicals, she sang at bar mitzvahs and weddings and got great reviews, but hadn’t had her big break yet.

His youngest children, twin sons, had finished their education and returned home to help their father with the restaurant after their mother had passed away. Paul and Ernesto were the only ones interested in the family business. Paul and Ernesto also were married with kids, Paul had twin girls starting first grade and Ernesto just celebrated the birth of his first child, another girl.

The locals adored Giuoco Bellucci, considered him a treasure. Their American tongues never able to wrap around the Italian name, neighbors cheerfully called him “Papa Bella” when they passed him on the street, in the supermarket or visited his restaurant, which as far as they were concerned, had the best cavatelli in Chicago. Period.

But when he or his sons or any of his family were out of ear shot, they would good-naturedly chuckle, “He’s off to whack somebody for sure.” It was a joke made because it was so unlikely that the hard-working, jovial, roly-poly man could ever be a gangster.

It was also a joke never said to his face, which was probably wise. Because Papa Bella wasn’t just a crime boss, he was the crime boss of Little Italy. If Professor Moriarty was the old lion, Papa Bella was the old wolf, protecting his pack and his territory.

Nothing went on in his neighborhood that he didn’t know about. All the restaurants and pizzerias and bars paid a hefty protection fee as well as the loan-sharks. Human traffickers and pimps were run out of Little Italy with a warning to ply their trade elsewhere, if they were lucky. If they were found to be peddling underage ass, they simply disappeared.

The modern day gangs respected his authority. They tended to skirt Little Italy, moving the drug trade farther south. A few managed to continue to sell weed to the more liberal leaning people living in Little Italy, but they co-existed peacefully with Papa Bella’s Family as long as they provided a cut of their sales to them, of course.

Papa Bella also made political connections and donations, learning from his predecessors how much to shrewd give, how to subtly influence and when not to be so subtle.

He also wasn’t foolish enough to try for any hostile takeover of territory. He was an old man, the last of his kind, the last Don of Chicago. He was content to rule his own kingdom but at the same time, willing to ruthlessly defend it.

The willfully blind locals thought only the two youngest boys were interested in the family business. Truth was that all of his children, except for his youngest daughter with aspirations of stardom, were in the Family Business.

It was tacitly agreed that Aria would be useless in The Family Business. She was too starry-eyed, too nice and also was actually very talented. She wasn’t a great actress yet, but her clear, bell-like singing voice was well as her amazing range promised great things for her. She didn’t want Hollywood. She wanted the New York Met. She wanted to be prima donna of a great opera.

The Bellucci Family had learned from the Moriarty Family and what had become of Richard Brook when they tried to hold him back. The Belluccis decided to let Aria to spread her wings fly instead of keeping them within their fold, risking turning her into a liability… but they also agreed to let her fly
only so far. She had room to fly, provided she stayed in her gilded cage, which is why Sylvester generously offered to let his precious baby sister live with him rent-free.

Both Sylvester and his wife, a daughter from one of the New York Five Families, helped his father launder money as well as with insider trading and Wall Street speculation. On the surface, Paul had his degree in Event Management at the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration and Ernesto received his chef’s training at the International Culinary Center in New York. Paul did not just run the front of the house and Ernesto was not just head chef. They were also their father’s enforcers.

Serena was the family doctor and The Family Doctor. Little did any of the diners below know, enjoying their fettuccini and their cannoli, that the storage room above the restaurant, where all the linens and paper goods were kept, had been turned into an impromptu hospital room.

As Dr. Serena Bellucci-Ciccone finished changing his bandage after inspecting then cleaning the still weeping wound, an involuntary groan slipped from Holy Peters’s lips.

“No much longer, champ,” Dr. Serena mumbled in her thick Chicago accent, completely on auto-pilot now. Her calves and feet ached after a long shift at the hospital plus she had a raging case of heartburn and her latest bundle of joy was jumping up and down on her bladder.

“Hurts,” he grunted as sweat beaded his brow.

Like Sherlock, like John, like Lisbeth, Peters knew that being shot was nothing like the movies. He had been shot before, occupational hazard. But he had never been shot like this before.

Everything had been going so smoothly. He had entered the United States with no problems. He had found his treacherous ex-wife and dealt with her with no fuss, no muss… OK a little muss… actually, a great big mess, but it was cathartic watching as her heart essentially exploded and then dismembering her.

Then he was back in Chicago on schedule. He found that cunt Hunter’s miserable little studio apartment in Chinatown easily enough. It was only a matter of time that he had tracked down the bitch herself.

He should have known better. He shouldn’t have fucking waved at her. He should have surprised her, knocked her out from behind as she exited the El.

He had underestimated her again, which had gotten him in deep shit with the Professor in the first place. Except… except he had done his homework on her this time, he had prepared. He knew she was sneaky, he knew she hid in plain sight. He knew she didn’t make scenes…

Except this time, she did.

She fucking pulled the emergency brake and then she fucking shot him.

He knew that if the train hadn’t been swaying so goddamn much, if the floor beneath her had been steady, he would have been a dead man. Hunter hadn’t intended to wound him. She was going for a kill shot.

Bitch bitch bitch… he wearily thought as the heavily pregnant Dr. Serena Bellucci helped him (as much as her big belly would allow) get as comfortable as possible on the lumpy cot that served as his hospital bed.

He didn’t complain. He knew he was damned lucky that the old wolf was friends with the old lion.
Papa Bella never hired the Red-Headed League to get him or his crime family out of a jam, but shrewd old Papa Bella also knew the value of connections and friends.

So did Professor Moriarty. That was why the Red-Headed League had a comfortable business partnership with the one of the last surviving families of the Chicago Outfit. Without them running interference, he probably would have woken up from surgery hand-cuffed to the hospital bed with two federal marshals guarding him.

But he wasn’t daft enough to think his current situation was ideal. However, this bolt-hole was certainly better than prison or the grave.

“Hurts,” he grunted again as Dr. Serena arranged the enormous pillows she had brought from her own home to help him recline enough to rest without putting undue pressure on the raw, angry wound. “When’s the next jab?”

“Now,” Dr. Serena assured him as she waddled towards the desk. As she reached into her doctor’s bag, the tumbler in the door lock clicked. She jerked her head up then visibly relaxed as her father walked in, Paul following behind him. While the same height as his twin brother, he was considerably thinner and a bit more sophisticated and far more meticulous with his grooming, his hair always neatly styled and face clean-shaven. Now he wore an apron over the nice suit he always donned when working front of house as host. Trailing his portly father, he carefully carrying a covered tray.

“How is he?” he asked as he re-locked the door.

Dr. Serena shook her head then resumed filling the syringe with morphine.

“Hungry, bud?” Paul held up the tray, “Only the best for you, chicken broth and ice chips.”

“Bet Ernie still managed to make it gourmet,” Peters attempted a grin.

“Better not be gourmet,” Dr. Serena glared at her brother. “It needs to be bland.”

“Ernie’s not stupid, sis,” he snapped, his accent just as thick as hers. “Don’t need to be gourmet to be good. This shit’s fresh, not out of a can. The chicken was still clucking this morning.”

“Enough,” Papa Bella said firmly but softly. Unlike his children, his accent was nearly non-existent. A few trills and a sibilant hiss was all that was left of his Italian accent after almost sixty-five years in the United States. “Help your sister, then both of you meet me in my office.”

Twenty minutes later, they sat in the room across from the storage room. It looked like any other restaurant office, plain furnishings, shelves filled with all trappings and artifacts a restaurant acquires after it’s been in business for nearly three and a half decades. On the wall hung the usual family pictures as well as the first dollar bill ever spent at the restaurant.

“Well?” he asked, never raising his voice. Papa Bella was not a man who raised his voice.

“It’s not good Dad,” Dr. Serena didn’t mince words. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. She wanted out of her scrubs and her Asics sneakers and into a hot bath. Paul bolted up and grabbed a box filled with delivery menus for her to prop her feet up on. She smiled gratefully. Despite their constant squabbling, they really were fond of each other. “Thanks bro.”

“Forget about it,” he brusquely told his big sister. “But she’s right, Dad. The Reverend looks like shit. I don’t think soup and morphine will cut it.”
“He needs to be in a hospital,” Dr. Serena wrapped her arms around her belly, trying to convince herself she did not need to pee again. “He’s running a fever and there’s pus in his wound. I can write a script for a broad-spectrum antibiotic, that won’t raise any red flags but this place isn’t sterile. Plus, I can’t tell how bad the damage is without X-rays or—”

“No hospitals,” Papa Bella snapped.

“I know,” Dr. Serena struggled to control her temper. But after a long day at the hospital, now this not to mention she still had to go home and put two very active and giggly girls who hated bedtime to bed, she found it difficult to stay calm. “Can we move him to the Onion Field site?”

Papa Bella leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking. He rubbed his chin, thinking.

“Dad, I don’t think we have a choice,” Paul gently pushed. “They’ve got a clinic, we don’t. Plus, what if he croaks here? Then what? How are we going to get him out? He’s a big dude. They take forever to dismember, plus finding a place to dump the parts without the cops findin—”

“Basta, basta,” Papa Bella lapsed into Italian as he held up one hand, shutting his son up. He pulled his cell phone out of his trouser pockets, thumbing through his contacts. “Let me see what his boss says.”

“It’s gotta be, what? Two in the morning across the pond?” Paul checked his watch.

“The lion don’t sleep.” Papa Bella put the cell to his ear. It only took two rings before the Professor picked up. In rapid Italian that his children couldn’t follow (they only had a rudimentary knowledge of the language,) Papa Bella explained the dire situation to the Professor. “Boh, let me ask,” he suddenly switched to English with ease. “How soon do we think we can move him?”

“He needs to go tonight,” Dr. Serena immediately interjected.

Paul shook his head, “He’s weak as a baby bird, sis. He can hardly sit up much less make it down those stairs. Ernie and I had to carry him up the stairs and we nearly dropped the fucker.”

“Hey now,” Papa Bella frowned at his son. “If your mother was still alive, she’d wash your mouth out with soap, grown man or not.” He turned his gaze to his daughter. “Will he survive one more night, do you think?”

“He needs those bandages changed regularly and we need to get him started on the antibiotics plus make sure he stays on schedule for his pain meds or else he’s going to find out what hurt really means.” Reluctantly she added, “I can stay through the night…”

Papa Bella immediately waved that away. “No, you go home, you’ve done enough. We can find someone else to nurse the Reverend. You need rest up before my grandson is born.”

“Dad, we told you, it’s another girl. The ultrasound confirmed it.”

Papa Bella ignored her. “Go home to your family, zuccherina.” He ordered affectionately.

“When will he need his next shot?” Paul asked.

“Every three hours.”

Paul looked at his expensive watch again, “Ronnie’s off at ten,” he said, referring to one of their many cousins. “I’ll text him and see if he can come here instead.”
“Do we want to involve Ronnie in Family Business?” Papa Bella frowned, still on the phone with the Professor, who was probably listening to every word.

“Ronnie’s a good kid, he won’t ask questions. He knows better. Besides, other than Sis, since he’s an EMT, he’s the only other one with medical know-how and Serena’s about to drop.”

“Text him,” he brusquely ordered Paul. Then effortlessly he switched back to Italian and told the Professor it would be tomorrow before they could bring Peters over.

Three thousand, nine hundred and forty file miles away, The Professor asked as he lounged in his recliner, cup of tea in his other hand, “What time? I need to let my men know when to expect him and to have enough staff on hand to treat his wounds.”

“Paulie,” the old wolf resumed speaking English. “How soon can you and Ernie get him to the Onion Field?”

Paul stifled a sigh. He hated it when his father called him by his old childhood nickname, especially since he tried very hard not to look like the Italian-American stereotype. When the show \textit{Jersey Shore} had been on MTV, he had personally wanted to murder every one of those “guido” idiots. “I know we’re closed on Mondays, but if Ernie doesn’t spend some time with the baby tomorrow and let his wife catch up on her sleep, she’s going to murder him.”

“Send someone else,” Serena said irritably. “He should go first thing in the morning.”

Paul shook his head. “The Rev’s got too much heat on him. If we don’t handle this personally and some rookie makes one fuck-up, like getting pulled over for a busted-out tail-light, this blows back on all of us. Ernie and I can be here at six, then the Onion Field at six-thirty.”

Meanwhile as the pregnant doctor argued with her little brother, Lisbeth Salander listened intently to their conversation.

It had been laughably easy to plant a bug in Papa Bella’s office. Once Sherlock had deduced that Holy Peters had mob ties, Lisbeth staked out the popular Italian restaurant while Sherlock chased down the elusive Violet Hunter.

Lisbeth still wasn’t sure if she liked Violet yet or not. On one hand, she was A Cop and Lisbeth didn’t talk to cops. Also, if Violet was still a federal agent, she would be slapping handcuffs on Lisbeth for her less-than-legal activities. But on the other hand, she was a woman getting screwed over by several bastards. Lisbeth did not like women being screwed over by bastards.

So she grudgingly canvassed Little Italy, had lunch at Papa Bella’s Ristorante and found to her pleasant surprise, that the food was very good. She also learned everyone’s routine.

She learned that Papa Bella left at ten o’clock on the dot, Paul at eleven and that Ernesto was a shameless adulterer. She also knew that at eleven o’clock, the kitchen no longer served full meals, but would serve appetizers until one in the morning, catering to the drinking crowd. At eleven, Ernesto would switch responsibilities from head chef to bartender, presumably because the kitchen didn’t really need a head chef to direct them how drop fries and cheese balls into the fryer. In reality, it was so he could hit on all the pretty customers.

Just as Sherlock had finished bragging to Violet how he deduced she escaped from Washington DC to Las Vegas, “Irene Nesser” walked into Papa Bella’s Ristorante. She asked for a glass of white wine and made a big show of checking her phone, and looking more and more desolate. She ordered several glasses of wine, careful to only drink a little and dump the rest discreetly.
It was not odd for a woman who was alone and had several drinks to take her glass with her to the bathroom, after all. She had to protect herself from being roofied and after three glasses of wine, probably had to piss like a racehorse.

As flies to honey, as piranhas to blood, Ernesto started to flirt shamelessly with “Irene Nesser.” He and Paul were not identical twins. Ernesto was short, stocky and barrel-chested. But he had beautiful golden-brown eyes and a seductive smile whereas his brother had boring brown eyes and a sly, almost simpering smirk. Ernesto also had dimples in both cheeks when he smiled, which even Lisbeth had to admit, was positively adorable.

However, after doing a bit of online research, she knew about his wife and new baby. So she was able to resist his charms.

They teased and toyed with each other until well after two in the morning. As one of the bar-backs went to hang up the Closed sign, Ernesto leaned over the bar and huffed in her ear that he knew a great hotel. “Irene Nesser” had leaned forward, showing ample cleavage and breathed that she couldn’t possibly wait that long for him. When he suggested the office upstairs, she had purred to bring the wine.

It had been stupidly easy to roofie him. Men never expect to be the ones date-raped-drugged.

After they had drunk a toast to each other, she had guided him to his father’s chair then straddled him. She let him kiss and fondle her until he passed out, which, mercifully, didn’t take long. Quick as a flash, she hopped off his lap and dug into her purse, taking out what looked like a power strip.

Of course, it was not any ordinary power strip, but one that had a powerful listening device inside of it. She had purchased this fun little toy off of a Chinese black market web site. She was a little sorry to lose it. It had not been an inexpensive purchase.

With a grunt, she had pushed Ernesto to the side, the chair rolling away from the desk. Ernesto had emitted a loud snore, but otherwise didn’t move. Crawling under the desk, Lisbeth switched out the power strip with hers, unplugging all the various computer and printer cords then plugging them back in. The bug embedded within the power strip was voice-activated and also ran off of the power strip’s power yet also had its own battery that would last up to five days if the power strip somehow got unplugged.

She had crawled back out from underneath the desk then pushed Ernesto back in front of it. She mussed his hair, unbuttoned his shirt and undid his belt and fly so he would think he had a good time when he became conscious. She had fretted a moment about the wine, until she saw a venti Starbucks cup in the trash can. She dumped the wine in the cup, wiped her fingerprints of the wine bottle as well as her prints and lipstick smudges off of the wine glass.

Then she ruffled her own hair, smeared her lipstick and untucked her shirt, just to give herself that good just-got-fucked look.

Seizing the venti Starbucks cup, she had strutted out of the restaurant as if she hadn’t just bugged a Mafia boss’ office.

Now wearing her own clothes (black jeans, motorcycle boots and a black T-shirt with a picture of Johnny Cash giving the photograph the bird screen-printed on the front,) she sat in the MC’s van, her tiny hands clasped over the giant headphones.

Rat Boy appeared to be lounging in the front seat of the van, but his languid brown eyes were deceptive. He watched everything as every nerve in his body was alert and tingling.
He had been involved with some crazy shit ever since he had patched in with the Sons… but… the 
fucking Mafia?

He jumped slightly when Lisbeth snapped her fingers at him. “Text Sherlock,” she ordered him as 
she hunched over her computer, starting to type furiously. “Tell him we’ve got to get Mitton 
tomorrow night and we’ve only got a two-hour window to get Mitton out and to shut the black site 
down if we’re going to do this at all.”

“And this shit just keeps getting better,” Rat Boy mumbled as he pulled out his burner phone.

Meanwhile, back at the Devil’s Foot clubhouse, only a few bikers milled about. Vibart chain-smoked 
in front of the television set, watching ESPN play highlights from the earlier Cubs’ game. Green and 
Chibs played a friendly game of pool. Sherlock sat in the corner by himself, arms crossed, eyes 
closed, appearing to be sleeping but in reality, deep in thought.

Trager was belly-up to the bar, chatting with Violet. “You know,” he pointed at her with his beer 
bottle while she wiped the bar down with a rag, “If you were any other kind of fed, there’d be a 
bullet in the back of the skull, you know that, right?”

Violet arched an eyebrow. She stopped cleaning the bar to prop her scraped chin on her hand and 
drawl, “Well, aren’t you just smooth with the ladies?”

“Hey, my old lady is satisfied,” Trager informed her indolently. “You leave Venus out of this. “In a 
more serious voice, he asked, “So, this guy we’re risking our asses for, is he really worth it?”

“He’s MI-6. He doesn’t give a shit about American biker gangs.”

“That ain’t what I’m asking, sweetheart.”

“He’s a good guy who also getting the shaft,” Violet informed him solemnly. Then, with a quirk of a 
smile, she added as she started wiping down the bar again, “After this, he has great potential to go 
outlaw.”

“Why’d you become a fed anyway? Was the job emptying port-a-potties taken?”

“Yeah, I gave up a career in shit to pursue…. A career in shit,” she snorted. Then she shrugged as 
she resumed cleaning the bar, “Same reason why you and the rest of the guys joined the military. I 
love my country and wanted to serve it.”

“Why didn’t you join the military like your old man then?”

“I look terrible in fatigues. Olive green does nothing for me.”

Trager laughed, then added, “Yeah…. But, seriously though…”

“Seriously?” Her hazel eyes darted over towards the corner, where Sherlock slouched. “Being a 
soldier didn’t appeal to me. I’m like him. I love unraveling mysteries and solving crimes.”

“Ah, I get it. It’s a rush for you, like him.”

“That and the part where I get to put some real pieces of shit in prison. That’s fun too.”

“Would you have really put us in prison?” he batted his bright, Windex-blue eyes at her and pouted 
slightly.

“Did you commit any federal crimes?” Violet asked playfully but she heard the underlying threat in
Trager’s voice. Heard it and duly noted it.

“Us? Nah, we’re just a bunch of mechanics who are Harley enthusiasts.”

Just then, Sherlock had pulled his mobile out of his coat pocket. Reading the message from Rat Boy, he suddenly sprang to his feet.

“If we’re going to rescue Mitton, it has to happen tomorrow night.”

Chapter End Notes

So... I've kinda sorta REALLY sucked at keeping to a "Post on a Monday" schedule, but I've been working some late nights and tomorrow night is going to be no exception. So I am switching back to posting on Sunday nights.

Hope everyone had a lovely weekend and everyone has a great week! :^)
Emotional Move

Chapter Summary

Emotional Move

A sub-optimal forcing move played with the intent of seizing initiative at any cost, usually following a setback. Pointless checks are an extremely common type of emotional move.

Chapter Notes

Feels...

#sorrynotsorry

Happy Sunday! Have a great week :^)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty: Emotional Move

25 April 2016
Devil’s Foot Clubhouse
Southside Chicago, Illinois
Monday afternoon
11:59 PM Central Standard Time

During the brief time she had rented the spare room at the clubhouse, Violet decided not to think about all the vile goings-on that most likely occurred in that room, on that bed. She positively refused to dwell about all the bodily fluids that had been spilled, the STDs exchanged.

She decided to look on the bright side. She decided to be grateful there was a sturdy lock on the door, a bed that wasn’t terribly uncomfortable and a tiny bathroom, complete with a shower stall so ridiculously small, a Barbie doll probably couldn’t fit into it.

But she did find her own apartment as quickly as she could. The studio in Chinatown wasn’t much larger than the club’s spare bedroom but at least it had been sanitary and quiet. There had been nights she couldn’t sleep because of the carousing going on in the bar, not to mention the drunk people trying to blunder their way inside, thinking it was unoccupied.

More importantly, the Chinatown studio had been safe.

Or so she had thought.

After he had announced that that they had to rescue Mitton tomorrow, Sherlock had gone back to Violet’s studio. Violet had argued to come with him but hadn’t really put much effort into her argument. However, when Sherlock informed her that the blond, muscled Bevington and the short,
beefy Stirmon would be accompanying him back to her old studio, she had wearily relented. Her greatest concern had been Sherlock’s safety and the two bikers would be more than adequate bodyguards.

With that the last bit of adrenaline coursing through her veins drained away. A heavy, leaden exhaustion filled her up instead. She had mumbled OK and shuffled off towards the spare room that had been her off and on home while she had been in Chicago. She had felt his penetrative gaze boring into the back of her head, but it was a buzzing annoyance, not a burning irritation.

She had dragged herself to the back bedroom and flopped onto the rumpled bed. She had curled up into a ball, massaging her tingling left hand as she tried to force herself to sleep.

She had dozed fitfully until Sherlock and the two Devil’s Foot members returned nearly two hours later. Sherlock had brought along with him her battered old messenger bag as well as a dilapidated gym bag she had purchased at a Salvation Army. He had taken everything from her sorry studio that he had deemed necessary, which was basically, her clothes and personal care items. Sitting next to her in the gloom of the dank bedroom with the pine plank walls and Hooters Girl calendars and a giant American flag hanging above the bedframe, Sherlock had muttered darkly that her place had indeed been broken into and ransacked.

Violet had sat up then, her hair a frizzy mess. Sherlock’s news hadn’t surprised her in the least. She had strongly suspected Holy Peters had been the one snooping around her place, but now found she felt strangely lethargic, as if she didn’t have enough energy to be afraid. She felt oddly above it all, hovering above the melee, a forced participant, like someone who had to sit way up in the nose-bleed seats at a really shitty rock concert.

She had merely slid out of bed and grumbled at Sherlock it was time to get to work.

After Sherlock, Stirmon and Bevington had returned from Violet’s Chinatown studio, and everyone had stayed up late, strategizing. Then the Sons returned to their budget motel and the Devil’s Foot to their homes for some much-needed shut-eye, except for Bevington and Stirmon. Those two along with Sherlock and Lisbeth devised a watch schedule, generously allowing Violet to sleep.

Violet had made another feeble token protest, but after being on the receiving end of disapproving glares from both Sherlock and Lisbeth, she retreated to the back bedroom.

Now as she slowly woke up, she blinked stupidly as bright sunlight filtered in through the cheap, thin curtains. She sat up, wearing the same clothes she had been in for the past two days now. Even though Sherlock brought her clean clothes (as well as the giant T-shirt and boxers she wore for pajamas,) she never changed. She had just collapsed onto the germ-infested bed and fell into blessed unconsciousness. Now, she dumbly wondered why no one had commented on her appearance. She sniffed her underarm then twitched her nose, not liking what she smelled.

Her left hand felt tingly and numb. Yawning widely, she idly shook her left arm, thinking that it was still asleep, or maybe she slept on it wrong.

Then she woke up fully.

She looked at her hand, her treacherous hand then tried to ball it into a fist.

The fingers agonizingly slowly curled towards her calloused palm. She found she actually had to concentrate to complete the task.

Just as slowly, she spread her left fingers wide, then her right. Holding her hands up to her face, she
stared at them like she had never seen them before. Easily she balled her right hand into a fist. Her right arm felt fine, felt normal.

Her left fingers felt cold and prickly, as if she had plunged her hand into a glass of ice water.

It hurt.

“It’s from the scrapes,” she mumbled, wanting to believe her own lie.

No, it’s not, a gleefully cruel voice in her head immediately called her out.

“Stop it, you’re not dead yet,” she ordered herself as she slid off the bed.

But you’re going to wish you were… the gleefully demonic inner-voice crooned.

“Not before I take a shower,” she wearily grumbled, still too exhausted to fight the demons wreaking havoc in her head. Despite finally getting caught up on the sleep she had been deprived of these past few stressful days, she still felt foggy and slightly out of it.

Even though she had slept in a soft, comfortable bed in an expensive, secure hotel two nights ago, her sleep then had been fitful and unsatisfactory. Last night’s rest hadn’t been much better, but at least it had been uninterrupted unconsciousness.

As she locked the bathroom door and turned the shower on, she groggily wondered, *Did Sherlock drug me?* As she stripped off her dirty clothes, she decided she would be more surprised if he hadn’t drugged her. When she stepped under the stream of boiling hot water, she realized instead of being enraged at Sherlock for possibly drugging her, she merely felt inconvenienced.

She scrubbed away the remaining traces of the self-tanner with a little more effort than necessary. Part of her psychology training that tried to rise above her self-protective apathy murmured that she may be scrubbing her body raw in order to feel something other than lethargy and fear.

She ignored her id. And her ego. And her common sense. And her spidey sense.

When her body felt as flayed as a freshly skinned carcass, she quickly washed her hair, grimacing at the bottle of the 2-in-1 Head and Shoulders. Careful not to slip on the slick linoleum, she stepped out of the shower after turning it off. The rusty handle groaned in protest as it had when she turned it on, but the water flow turned into a trickle, then nothing. She dried off perfunctorily then wrapped a thin, scratchy towel modestly around herself. She wrapped another thin, scratchy towel around her wet hair into a turban.

She stepped out of the bathroom to find Sherlock sitting cross-legged in the middle of the double-bed, going through her back-pack.

“Still a snoop,” she rolled her eyes.

“Still my business to know the business of others,” Sherlock withdrew a paperback book, obviously second-hand, “Sign-language?”

“Needed something to occupy my mind when I wasn’t running for my life,” she drawled. “Plus, I hadn’t ruled out the idea of being mute for my next cover story. Since you’re already digging around in there, can you toss me the clothes in there?”

With a wicked glint in his eyes, Sherlock pulled out a pair of white boyfriend briefs and a plain black bra. “Usually, we’re doing this in reverse.”
“Tell me you didn’t come all the way to Chicago just to get laid,” Violet snatched her under-things out of Sherlock’s hand.

“Of all the reasons to fetch you, that would be the most idiotic,” Sherlock scowled.

“Glad to see you have your priorities straight,” Violet stepped into her underwear without removing her towel.

“Always,” Sherlock intoned loftily as Violet put her bra on over her towel. As she jerked the towel free, Sherlock pulled out a pair of dark blue cargo pants and a black long sleeved shirt.

As she got dressed, again she noted how strange it was to see him out of his usual suits and heavy winter coat. He wore dark jeans and a gray T-shirt. He also hadn’t shaved yet. She also observed that he had let his hair grow out again, the curls well past his ears.

The casualness of his clothes actually suited him. He still looked like Sherlock, but a stripped-down version, the bare bones. An acoustic, unplugged version of himself, with nothing to hide, the gray T-shirt and dark jeans emphasized the paleness of his skin as well as his wiry, athletic build. His legs were endless in the jeans, the muscles in his chest and arms clearly defined.

She had not forgotten how his opponents underestimated his physical strength because of his slender build.

She had forgotten how intense his stare was when she was the one in his sights.

She had gotten used to it when they had lived together but now…

Suddenly conscious of the blooming black-and-blue-and-greenish-yellow splotches decorating her injured leg as well as the red swollen lump on her knee, she dressed quickly,

“You’ve lost weight,” she immediately deflected. She knew the best way to stave off a brutal deduction was to nip it in the bud before it blossomed. A trick she had learned from John.

Sherlock did not fall for her gambit however. “A bit, but mostly because American fast food doesn’t agree with me. I’m not starving myself. And we need to talk.”

“I know the plan forwards and backwards and inside-out,” she grumbled then diverted the conversation again. “Did you eat yet? There’s a good deli not far from here.”

Sherlock wasn’t having it. “We need to have an overdue discussion about what happened at ‘church’ last night.” He lazily tossed the book back into her backpack.

“Since when do you like talking,” she grumbled, running her fingers through her damp curls, wincing as she tried to work through the tangles. Shampoo-conditioner combos never worked for her thick curly hair.

“Violet, you deliberately stood in front of a loaded gun.”

“The safety was on,” Violet rolled her eyes as she continued to finger-comb her knotted hair. “Did you remember to grab my mousse from the apartment?”

“He could have turned the safety off in 0.2 seconds,” Sherlock ignored her frivolous question. “Stop redirecting the topic. We’re having this conversation.”

“He wasn’t going to turn the safety off and pull the trig-”
“Yes, he was,” snapped the Most Observant Man in the Entire Goddamn World.

“Well,” Violet swallowed hard then shrugged. She started digging through the messenger bag that sat on the flimsy dresser. “That would have solved a lot of problems and saved a lot of time then, wouldn’t it?”

“This,” Sherlock uncrossed his legs and all but vaulted off the bed, “Is exactly why I delayed in telling you of my suspicions of your health, prior to having all the data. This fatalistic attitude of yours is unacceptable, madam.”

“Fatalistic?” Violet squawked, anger starting to spark deep inside her. She whirled around, holding a hairbrush in one hand and trying to hold onto her can of mousse in the other. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Indeed not,” Sherlock’s voice was deliberately and dangerously calm. “I did not risk my liberty and my safety to travel across the world to retrieve you only to have you endanger your life in the most moronic ways possible because you think there’s no hope left.”

“Endanger my… oh look who’s talking! Pot, kettle, black,” Violet spluttered. “Mr. Death-wish is lecturing me?”

“I do not have a death-wish,” Sherlock’s voice was still cool and conversational but Violet saw the tiniest twitch of muscle in his cheek, a micro-expression of his that she recognized. An involuntary action that let her know she was getting underneath his skin.

“Bullshit,” she contradicted him airily. “Shall I pull up John’s blog and show you all the stupid ways you risked your life and for what? Your fix, your substitute for the coke and the morphine,” she shamelessly needled him now, childishly glad she could inflict pain.

Maybe if I hurt him enough, he’ll go away. He’ll go back to London and leave me to…

… die, I guess...

(jesuschristldon’twanttodielnnotreadythiscan’thehappeningsome….)

Feeling the underlying, paralyzing fear trying to burst through the haze of apathy, she took a deep cleansing breath through her nose. She turned away from Sherlock again. Told herself she felt nothing, ordered herself to not react to emotional stimuli and act only on logic and fact, as Sherlock did.

The fear, the abject terror receded… for now.

Control regained, she steeled herself for Sherlock’s next parry as she ran her tongue behind her teeth. She focused on holding onto the can of mousse, focused on the smooth, metallic canister, how cool it felt against her prickling, tingling skin…

…Ignored the fact that her left fingertips felt completely numb.

“Yes, I take risks,” Sherlock replied, his voice losing the carefully constructed calmness, but still not rising about a normal conversational level. “I take enormous risks, but they are also calculated risks. When I enter a dangerous situation, I have already determined a minimum of ten possible outcomes with the profound understanding that something could still go terribly wrong, because there is always a chance that I miss something. I can only control my mind and my actions. I cannot control the actions of others any more than I can the weather. If the wind had been blowing any softer or harder the day of the Fall, the results may have been gravely different.” When Violet didn’t respond, he
grinned, “What? No credit for the awful pun?”

“What about your overdoses?” she said coldly. “I saw your scores for chemistry before you had dropped out of college. I watched some of your experiments at Baker Street. I read a few of your publications in the *Chemical Society Reviews*. You knew how much was too much.”

Sherlock’s nostrils flared but to Violet’s surprise, he did not seem affected by her cruelty. “Since you’re throwing my drug addiction in my face, is this where I get to point out that you were quite the party-girl when you were a teenager? Just I chose drugs to mask the pain of my childhood trauma as well as to alleviate the boredom of always being the most intelligent person in the room and therefore unable to relate to anyone; you dove head-first into alcohol after your father had perished in the First Gulf War. Had it not been the intervention of your grandmother and the love for your little brother, you may have turned out to be just as much of an addict as I am.” Lightly, he added, “Perhaps you are. Perhaps you need the rush and the fix as much as I do.”

“Not that it’s going to matter anymore anyway,” Violet muttered darkly, turning her back on Sherlock. In the process, she dropped the can of mousse. It slid easily out of her grip as if it had transformed into water. Her lips thinned then she kicked the can, sending it spiraling always from her. Then she spun away from Sherlock again and started yanking her hairbrush through her hair in a jerking motion that brought tears to her eyes.

As she worked on a particularly uncooperative knot, she heard him quietly say, “It matters”. She stopped brushing her hair, holding the brush to her scalp but not dragging it through her hair.

Tears still burned in her eyes, but it wasn’t from pain.

She waited for him to finish his thought, not moving until he spoke.

Finally he whispered, “It matters to me.”

Her arm fell, the hairbrush hanging limply in her right hand. She lifted her eyes back up to the cracked mirror and saw his reflection in the mirror.

He observed her looking at his reflection so he repeated himself: “I do not have a death wish. When I was younger, when I was strung-out… yes, I admit, I may have mistakenly believed that the next logical step in my life was to end it, but… it wasn’t. That wasn’t me telling me that. The drugs were supposed to blunt the sharp feelings that incessantly stabbed me but the drugs had also dulled my wits and common sense as well.”

“Have you been taking notes from John about how to puke out purple prose?” Violet dryly asked but she started to brush her hair again, more gently this time.

“I like my life,” Sherlock stubbornly persevered. “I worked very hard to make my life and worked even harder to get it back when it was taken away from me. I fought for my life.”

In the mirror, Violet watched Sherlock’s Adam’s apple bob as he paused.

Then she watched him step closer to her. She didn’t resist when he plucked the hairbrush out of her hand. Or when he lightly clasped her shoulders and turned her towards him. She closed her eyes though when he placed his fingertips on her face, one finger running over the crescent moon scar on her cheekbone.

She pressed her lips tight together. Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry…

“I have no death wish,” he rumbled, his voice the lowest bass note a cello could produce. “I am a
chemist. If I wanted to die, I needn’t overdose on cocaine or jump from a tall building. I know what household chemicals I can combine then inject for a quick, painless final exit,” he sounded pleased with this ability, almost amused.

Violet risked opening her eyes and arched an eyebrow at him.

Realizing he sounded like a braggart, he hastily changed subjects. “It didn’t happen overnight, my new outlook on life, after I had purposely overdosed when Victor rejected me in favor of his obscenely wealthy yet depressingly vapid bride. A lot of that I owe to Lestrade, without his irritating interference, I would have never found my life calling, my Work. Then I met John and… everything sort of fell into place, like dominos. I had my Work. I had my… my friends. Not very many friends, but I do value all six of them, seven if you count Gladstone.”

Her throat tightened again and she felt her nose start to tingle, as if she had to blow it. Her vision became blurry.

*Of all the things to cry about, you cry about a damn dog,* she clenched her teeth now yet a traitorous tear still slipped out and dripped over Sherlock’s fingers.

“If you’re feeding him people food…” she tried to sound mean but sounded shaken instead. She now stared at the popcorn ceiling, holding her eyes open wide so no more tears would leak out.

“John and Mrs. Hudson do, I don’t.”

“Liar,” Violet sniffled with a laugh. Then she screwed her eyes shut and pulled away from Sherlock’s touch.

“Violet,” Sherlock’s voice hardened. “Look at me.”

Her eyes still squeezed shut; she tried to school her face to be expressionless. Then she realized it would be an act of futility. She did, however, drag her middle finger under her lower lashes, flicking away tears before opening her eyes.

This really was a stripped-down version of Sherlock. She had never seen his face so vulnerable and open before. His eyes held a softness that she only saw when he spoke of John.

“I am painfully aware that I am quite deficient regarding the quantity of friends I have,” his voice was graveded. He held his hands behind his back, as he was prone to do when he felt fidgety but didn’t want to reveal his restless hands. He looked at the floor as if he were a schoolboy about to be chastised. “So I would like to retain the few friends that I have, if and whenever possible,” he lifted his eyes up. “I’m… out of my depth here and John is not here to help me navigate these strange waters. I honestly don’t know what you want from me now. I thought I knew what you wanted last December. I only know what I want and I want you to come home.”

*John…*

Violet ruthlessly pounced on Sherlock’s greatest vulnerability. “And where is John with this?”

“He agrees with me,” a bit of the arrogance returned to Sherlock’s face and voice. “He believes the top priority is to get you back home. We can sort out the tedious emotional entanglements when you are no longer being pursued like a fox trying to outrun hunting hounds.”

“You… talked to him?” Violet scrunched her eyebrows together in confusion.

“Yes.”
“About… me and you?”

“Yes,” Sherlock now sounded mildly perturbed.

“And… and about you and him?”

“Ye-e-e-sss,” Sherlock dragged the word out, now sounding extremely perturbed. “What?”

“Nothing, just…” Violet rubbed her temple. “Trying to figure out exactly when I entered into an alternative universe.”

Sherlock brightened, “Ah, the theory of the multi-verse. Before I had settled upon chemistry as my main course of study while at university, I had flirted with physics. After all, isn’t how the universe works the greatest mystery of all? Also, there is no concrete evidence that alternate universes do not exist within a multi-verse, but alas, the vice-versa is also true. Physics sadly merely served to frustrate me instead of challenge me as I could only theorize but never properly prove any of my theories, therefore being able to convert my hypotheses into proper scientific laws.” Pettishly, he added, “Not to mention for some reason, no one trusted me around a particle accelerator…”

“Sherlock,” Violet couldn’t help but smile a little.

“Hm? Oh. I’m doing the scientific babbling thing again, aren’t I?”

“A little,” She crossed her arms and rubbed her hands up and down her arms. “Sherlock, even if I wasn’t…” her throat tightened again. She still couldn’t bring herself to say the words I’m sick out loud. “Assuming that John is right and … I’m American. I belong here, not England.”

“That’s not what you said in December,” Sherlock muttered, on the edge of sounding like a petulant school boy. “Last December you said you wanted to visit America, then come back and live with me.”

“And how the hell am I going to be able to climb sixteen goddamn stairs when my legs stop working?” she snapped.

“Seventeen,” Sherlock sulkily corrected her.

“Whatever,” she waved his nitpick away. “That was before I came back here. I need to be here.”

“And how the hell am I going to be able to climb sixteen goddamn stairs when my legs stop working?” she snapped.

“Seventeen,” Sherlock sulkily corrected her.

“Whatever,” she waved his nitpick away. “That was before I came back here. I need to be here.”

“Doing what, precisely?” Sherlock delicately asked but his brows were furrowed, as if he knew exactly what she wanted to do.

Which, he probably did.

“Well, the ultimate goal would be to get my job back at the Bureau.”

Sherlock exhaled a great, dramatic sigh. “Why?” he exploded.

“Why?” Violet gawped at him. “Because… because it was my life. It is my life!”

“The FBI betrayed you.”

“No,” Violet glared at him, balling her fists now. Or rather, balling her right hand into a fist and curling her left hand into something resembling a fist. “Men, not the institution betrayed me and my team. Three men betrayed us, one of them is in prison and the other two are dead.”

“By your hand,” Sherlock reminded her.
“I didn’t kill the Senator.”

“But you did murder Jack Woodley. Were you planning on disclosing that when you turned state’s evidence? That you killed him in cold blood and not self-defense.”

“I put him out of his misery.”

“After he was mauled by your dog.”

“That you gave the ‘kill’ command to…” Violet stopped herself.

“So, you were going to lie,” Sherlock smirked in triumph. “You would not have disclosed John or my involvement in Woodley’s death.”

“No one is necessarily crying over Woodley’s death.”

“The Senator did. He was his beloved nephew. Unfortunately, his death was the catalyst to all of this,” Sherlock made a giant circle in the air with his arm. “The Senator wanted vengeance for Jack’s untimely death. But that’s not the only bone La Ligue des Roux has to pick with you. There’s the money you had stolen from them, not to mention the other people you had killed during your exile in England.”

“I killed Sebastian Moran to save your ass,” she gritted her teeth. “Two were in self-defense. The others…”

“The accident you caused on the A-1 when you lost control of your motorcycle.”

“They haunt my dreams,” she whispered. “It’s not always being water-boarded by Jack Woodley I have nightmares about. Sometimes I see them so clearly, the two SUVs colliding with another then rolling, the glass in the windshields exploding because they hit the pavement so hard.” She clamped her hand to her mouth. “There were kids in one of the cars,” her voice cracked. “One of the victims was a little girl, a baby, still in diapers.”

But Sherlock was frowning, doing the math. “Before you executed Jack Woodley, you told him your current kill count was up to eleven, indicating that he was to be the eleventh man you murdered. You killed two men in self-defense. Then there were the three men we left in your flat before it exploded. Then there was Moran then you killed Woodley,” he ticked off the numbers on his long fingers. “But there were only two people killed in the car crash on A-1 that day, which you blame yourself for. Who are the other two?” When Violet unconsciously touched the scuffed gold wrist watch on her right wrist he said, “Ah, Michael, of course. You blame yourself. But the math is still off.”

“Well,” she gave him a lopsided smile. “It’s off because one of the deceased came back.”

“Oh,” Sherlock’s mouth dropped open then he rolled his eyes. “If you hadn’t cooperated with Richard Brook, he would have murdered you and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“That doesn’t make me completely blameless either.”

“Ah!” Sherlock’s eyes glowed whenever he made a brilliant deduction. “You want to return to the FBI as penance. “He gloated, “To atone for your misdeeds by capturing other criminals.”

“Maybe, I don’t know. I didn’t think that far;” Violet looked around for her hooded sweatshirt. “I also actually really liked my job too. I was good at it.”

“Violet,” Sherlock became somber. “Once the medical diagnostics tests are run and if it is discovered
that John’s theory is fact, they won’t let you be a field agent.”

“I know,” she said peevishly as she spotted her hoodie hanging from a hook near the door. She hurried to fetch it, feeling a chill in the air now, probably due to her still damp hair. “I know, I told you, I just didn’t think that far. I was only thinking about rescuing Mitton and clearing my name and beyond that…” she jerked the hoodie on. “The last eight years has been all about saving my own ass. I need… I want to do more than survive. I want to live. I want to serve my country. Yes, I know, we’re loud, we’re obnoxious, we’ll never be as civilized as the United Kingdom,” she used her faux British accent when she said United Kingdom. Then she reverted to her true voice. “But its home and I swore to defend it against all threats, foreign and domestic.” She pointed out the door. “And there is a foreign threat on domestic soil a few miles south of here. Yeah, my name, my accent might change, but I haven’t,” she pointed to herself now. “I know you want nothing more than to whisk me away to 221B to protect me and… and I don’t think you get how huge…” helplessly she flailed her hands around. “That is. But I helped create this mess. Eight years ago, I went against my instincts and people died. Good people. Good people who just wanted the same thing I did, to serve their country to the best of their ability. I am not going to abandon Mitton like MI-6 did or like the corrupt Deputy Director Hammermill signed off on the burn notice on me and my team like he was some third-rate Bond villain.”

She had been steadily raising her voice as she spoke. Now she was nearly shouting.

“I know you don’t get it, or maybe you do and you just don’t fucking care. But there still is such a thing as duty and service and taking responsibility for your shit. I know I did terrible things and maybe I won’t be reinstated into the Bureau because of the shit I’ve done or because… because I’m sick or maybe both. I’ll jump off that bridge when I get to it. But I’m not dead yet and I can still do something about this.” She pointed down to the ground. “Whatever act of terrorism the goddamn Professor Moriarty has planned is not going to happen if I have anything to say about it and why the hell are you smirking?”

Sherlock wasn’t smirking. He had, to state it crudely, a shit-eating-grin on his pale, narrow face.

“So, we’re in agreement. While you have every right to be depressed about having a terminal illness, you shall not take any idiotic and unnecessary risks that could potentially end your life because there’s work for you to do.”

Violet’s jaw dropped open. Swiftly she shut her mouth. “You riled me up on purpose.”

“Obviously.”

“God, you’re an asshole,” Violet covered her face.

“But you feel better now, don’t you?”

She dropped her hands. “Well… not great. I mean, there’s the whole my body might become my prison thing, but…” she heaved a sigh. “OK, standing in front of Vibart’s gun was stupid.”

Sherlock lifted his bushy brows.

“And careless.”

“And terrifying,” Sherlock tilted his head down at her.

“I’m sorry,” her freckled cheeks flushed a little. “I didn’t mean to scare the shit out of you. I wasn’t thinking… I was…” she trailed off as she ran her fingers over her mouth, then held them there for a moment, thinking. “I think I’m still in shock,” she finally said when she lowered her hand. But she
still held it up to her chest, tracing her collarbone with her thumb. “I think I checked out for a little bit, went on auto-pilot. I didn’t…” she swallowed hard. “I still don’t want to admit how bad this is, because then I have to admit how fucking scared I am,” her voice sounded strangled, she put the heels of her hands to her eyes.

Any other human being would have rushed to embrace her. Sherlock was not any other human being. He waited as he watched her very carefully.

She lowered her hands and stared at him helplessly, shaking her head, “I don’t know if I’m… capable… or strong enough to… to live… like… that. I’ve never been a sit-still-and-read-a-book kind of girl. Even when I packed on like thirty pounds because I was stuck in an office most of the time when I transferred to DC, I still did… things. I…” she looked down at her hands again.

“I still moved,” she wrung her hands together. Not like a melodramatic Victorian heroine pleading to be saved, however. She studied her hands as her fingers slid over her palms as if she just realized for the first time that she had hands.

Convinced of her honesty, now Sherlock approached her. He reached out and stopped her small, calloused hands from twisting and turning by placing his giant hand over them. She looked up at him as he furled his long fingers around both her hands.

“I won’t insult your intelligence by sugar-coating the situation. While I also won’t offer false hope, I can offer a sliver of hope.” He squeezed her hand. “John didn’t examine you nor did he run any tests to confirm his diagnosis. Also, while the occurrence is rare, sometimes… I am wrong.”

“Oh great, so it could be something worse,” Violet deadpanned.

Sherlock held his free hand against the side of her face again and this time Violet leaned into it, her lips pressing a ghost of a kiss on the edge of his palm. She slipped her right hand from Sherlock’s, reaching up to grip his wrist for dear life.

She felt his mouth against the top of her head. “I shouldn’t have let you get on that plane.”

“I should have stayed to help you find John,” she whispered back. Lifting her eyes up at him, she asked croakily. “Do you think it’s wrong, your deduction and John’s diagnosis?”

He moved so she could see his face. He held his mouth tightly as he shook his head.

“K,” she moved away from him now. She puffed out her cheeks then blew out a breath. “I have a lot of things I need to figure out then.” She crooked a half-smile at him. “Assuming we survive the next twenty-four hours.”

“Violet,” Sherlock growled at her.

“If I die tonight, the police will classify it as a homicide, not suicide,” she rolled her eyes. “There’s still a chance that I could just get run over crossing the street.”

“What a boring way to go,” Sherlock droned but he smiled as well.

The crisis was past.

For now.

There was a rap on the door. “Guys? You decent?” Trager asked from the other side.
“Why, did you want to join us?” Violet couldn’t resist poking the bear.

Sure enough, the door flew open. The excitement drained from Trager’s bright blue eyes the minute he perceived Violet and Sherlock were upright and fully clothed. “Teases,” he grumbled.

“What is it Alexander?” Sherlock asked.

“Hey now, only my old lady gets to call me that, pal.”

“Apologies,” Sherlock did not sound apologetic at all. “How is Miss Van Dam?”

“Oh Venus is great, just great,” Trager beamed as only a man deeply in love could. He dug into the back pocket of his jeans. “She just did some new pictures for her website, you’re gonna love them…” He took out his cell phone and started scrolling through pictures.

Violet stood on her tiptoes on the other side of Trager to look at the pictures. She expected to a picture of the stereotypical busty blonde on a bike.

She got the busty part right.

Violet lifted her eyebrows high when she saw a picture of a man with long, glossy brunette hair and cheekbones to rival Sherlock’s wearing a corset that served only to show off breast augmentation of epic proportions, sitting saucily on a Harley-Davidson, his lean, long legs kicking up high to reveal fishnet stockings and high-heels.

“Uhh…” Violet tilted her head to look up at Trager, wondering if this was some sort of sick joke. Biker gangs were not well-known for their tolerance. At all. “That’s your old lady?”

She struggled to keep the disbelief out of her voice.

“Yeah, that’s Venus, that’s my baby,” Trager wore a big dopey smile on his face.

Violet flicked her eyes towards Sherlock. Sherlock looked as pure as the driven snow, or he would have if he wasn’t fighting to keep a smirk off his face.

Violet looked at Trager again and realized that he gazed fondly at the picture of Venus the same way John looked at Sherlock when he thought nobody was looking.

Something stirred a little in her gut. Not envy exactly… but something unsettling. A grief for something lost. A strange homesickness for a place that was never hers….

Not a place… she flicked her eyes back up at Sherlock.

Then back to Trager as she said, with complete sincerity this time, “She’s really pretty.”

“Yeah she is,” Trager crooned.

“Anyway,” Sherlock was positively twitching, about ready to go into convulsions from all the sentiment. “What did you need, Tig?”

“Oh yeah,” Trager tucked his phone away. “Green’s old lady brought sandwiches and chips from Jimmy John’s. It’s gonna be a long night, brother. You better eat. You too, Frankie,” he told Violet even though he knew what her real name was.

“Thank you, Tig, we’ll be there directly.” Sherlock nodded regally.
After Trager left them, Sherlock tut-tutted Violet. “You should be more open-minded.”

Violet’s jaw again dropped open. “Me?”

Sherlock chuckled as he pivoted and started exiting the bedroom.

Violet was right on his heels, “Hey Sherlock? Tell me more about these alternate universes…”

*Because I still think I might be in one…*

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**Chapter End Notes**

For those who have watched "Sons of Anarchy", I am an unrepentant Tig/Venus shipper.

For those who don't/haven't watched yet... the Tig/Venus arch is another reason to watch and I swear, I didn't spoil very much. Talk about massive feels though...!

Thank you for all the kudos/recs/comments! XOXOXO
Plan

Chapter Summary

A strategy used by a chess player to make optimal use of his or her advantages in a specific position while minimizing the impact of his or her positional disadvantages.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Thirty-One : Plan

2 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Thursday morning
4:49 PM

“… so after a thrilling rescue and exhilarating chase through Chicago, we met at the rendezvous at Midway Airport, all parties present and accounted for. After that, we began our journey to Florida. You know, you never did make tea, brother dearest.”

Mycroft blinked, nearly tumbling out of his seat. He had literally been sitting on the edge of his seat, balancing precariously on the Client’s Chair, hands on the umbrella’s hook, chin resting on his hands. Despite himself, he found himself riveted by Sherlock’s narrative. Sherlock’s aside about tea shattered his concentration.

He had also been trying to observe his brother, to glean as much information from him as possible, to learn what Sherlock wasn’t telling him.

To his utter frustration, Sherlock looked like the lazy housecat he always had been…

… except why was he hiding his hands? Mycroft frowned.

They were still stuffed inside his trousers’ pockets.

Hiding something, of course, but what? Mycroft’s frown deepened.

“You are deliberately omitting information, Sherlock,” he leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs, doing his best to look imperious. Sometimes he longed for the good old days when they were still children, back when he could easily overpower William and box his ears whenever he acted like a little brat.

“You are deliberately omitting tea,” Sherlock slowly withdrew his right hand from his pocket and flapped it towards the kitchen. “I ordered some of that nice Great White Grape Tea you served the last time I visited you at the Diogenes Nursing Home.” Resting his hand on his flat belly, he added, “And there’s cake. Mrs. Hudson made it. Some sort of sponge. I don’t know, I wasn’t paying attention, she was nattering on about Mr. Chatterjee’s many injustices towards her.”
Mycroft’s mouth watered. While his stomach didn’t growl, it definitely ached a bit, wanting to be filled. He had skipped breakfast and lunch had been a disappointing bouillabaisse and a light green salad drizzled with boring vinaigrette. Mrs. Pringle had asked for the week off so there would be no nice Yorkshire pudding and jam roly-poly waiting for him tonight.

“Fine, I’ll be ‘Mother’,” he relented through clenched teeth. Standing up, he leaned on his umbrella, as if it were a broad sword rather than an ordinary brolly. “Before I proceed, I insist you tell me what the merchandise was.”

Sherlock’s insufferable smug expression evaporated. Something dark and haunted shadowed his face instead. “I think I shall wait until after tea. I’d hate to have you lose your appetite, even though it would do you good to lose five or six more pounds.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft dug the point of his umbrella into the ugly area rug.

“Children.”

“Beg pardon?”

“You heard me quite clearly,” Sherlock’s eyes flashed as his visible hand now curled into a fist. “The Red-headed League never stopped human trafficking. They just moved their operations from London to Chicago.” His eyes slid shut as he uncurled his fist. Very deliberately, he rested his hand on his stomach again, splaying his fingers out. “Violet, of course, re-acted with her usual decorum and practicality…”

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25 April 2016
Fuller Park, Chicago
Thursday afternoon
4:05 PM Central Standard Time

“We’re not leaving them.”

“My dear Violet, you are being blinded by sentimental-”

“WE’RE NOT FUCKING LEAVING THEM!”

***

2 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Thursday morning
4:53 PM

“Yes, I’m quite sure she acted with the usual tact and dignity reserved to Americans,” Mycroft sneered as he clutched the hook of the umbrella tighter now. “I see.” He cleared his throat, discomfited. “Were the children meant for black-market adoption or more… nefarious and unspeakable purposes?”

“Still euphemizing child abuse,” Sherlock’s full lips pursed then twisted into a small, cruel smile. “How telling, how very telling,” he drawled, dropping his voice an octave.

“Perhaps,” Mycroft found himself fidgeting with his umbrella handle now. “We could do with something stronger than tea in order to discuss this unpleasant subject?”
“If you require liquid courage, John always kept a bottle of whisky in the cupboard above the cooker, on the left,” Sherlock sneered. “I would personally prefer tea.”

Through his lashes, Sherlock watched his brother retreat into the kitchen. Soon he heard the homey rattling and clanking of mugs and plates being taken from the cupboard and placed on the counter and the kettle being filled then switched on.

“You need to get your tap repaired, it’s still dripping!” Mycroft called out from the kitchen.

Sherlock closed his eyes fully as he listened to Mycroft rummaging through the kitchen, looking for a knife to slice the cake, which Sherlock very well knew was a nice lemon sponge with chocolate drizzle. Shame he had to share it with Mycroft; he had planned on ringing John and asking him to come to Baker Street for tea.

*John….*

He could feel his stomach tighten and his heart start to race.

It had been 56 days since he last saw John in person. This separation had not been nearly as painful as the Great Hiatus. Not only was this separation shorter, they had been able to keep in touch, thanks to Mike Stamford’s neglected email.

But oh, he had hoped to actually see John before Mycroft. Not only for selfish reasons either, not just to clap eyes on that familiar, wonderful animated face of his. To stand close enough to count every smile line and all the crow’s feet, close enough to see the small ring of hazel around John’s irises that, in the right light, made his expressive eyes look dark brown instead of the deep blue they really were. Close enough to inhale and get drunk off of that patented *John* smell: Earl Grey tea, old paperback novels, hand sanitizer and gun oils…

Close enough for a kiss…

*Delete…. no, not delete. Cut-and-paste to a different file, save for later…*

As much as he desired to see and to touch John, the need to talk to him was far more vital. In order to begin the endgame, he needed to fill in John completely on what had happened to him and to Violet while they were in America. John would not be able to assist in the final stages of the plan if he didn’t know what was going on.

But, that could come later…just, not *much* later.

Sherlock planned on telling John everything, whereas he planned on telling Mycroft only what Sherlock decided Mycroft needed to know.

His heartbeat sped up a bit when he heard the kettle whistle.

*Running out of time…*

The request for tea was a pure stalling tactic. He needed time to think because of course he had been omitting information-- vital information such as how he had made a cross-country trip across America with a felonious hacker and had conspired with biker gangs to retrieve an exiled MI-6 agent.

He also left out the part about Violet’s deterioration. Mycroft would not feel sympathy towards Violet at all. He knew Mycroft would view her illness as an advantage to exploit.
Sherlock also knew Mycroft would swoop down upon him like a hawk spying a terrified rabbit frozen in fear alone in an open field. He had hoped in vain Mycroft would have circled above for a few more days, gathering more information before going in for the kill…

Unless he thinks he already has all the information he needs...

Sherlock’s eyes popped open as a soft oh escaped his lips.

Mycroft normally knows the answers to the questions he asks. He’s trying to trip me up.

He craned his head slightly, trying to watch Mycroft as he pottered around the kitchen like an old woman. Dear God, even Mrs. Hudson isn’t as pedantic as he is, Sherlock groaned to himself. Mycroft never had been young at heart. Even as a child, he had behaved more like a fussy old lady than like a young boy. Late middle-age suited him well enough but old age would fit him like a comfortable old shoe.

Sherlock returned his head to the Union Jack pillow that usually sat on John’s Chair, the smug smile again creasing his lips. No matter how old Mycroft was, either seven or forty-seven, Mycroft loved games. More importantly, he loved winning games.

I love games too. More importantly, I’m willing to cheat.

He closed his eyes again, concealing his eager anticipation to finally foil his brother.

He smelt the tea and the cake before Mycroft set it within arm’s length on the coffee table. He also smelt the slightly sharp tang of whisky. He fought against smiling, knowing that Mycroft had doctored his own tea with John’s Macallan. His tea would taste like complete shit but it emboldened Sherlock, knowing that his elder brother actually needed a drink to continue the interrogation.

He listened to the scrape of the fork against ceramic as Mycroft began eating his own slice.

He ignored his own cake and tea.

“Sherlock, as delicious as this sponge is, I do have other tasks to attend to; I would appreciate it if you picked up from where you left off.”

“Hm? Oh yes, where was I?”

“En route towards the illegal black site code named Onion Fields with your as-of-yet nameless companions, whom I’m sure you’ll reveal to me in all due time.”

“Oh,” Sherlock drawled as he slowly opened his eyes. “Instead of waiting for me to tell you, wouldn’t you rather deduce what happened next, brother mine? It has been a while since we’ve played Deductions, after all.”

“I am not in a gaming mood, Little Brother, nor am I in a jesting one either.”

“Oh, but you already so cleverly figured out that I had sent you and your best agents on a wild goose chase across Europe while an imposter stayed here at 221B in my stead,” Sherlock goaded him. Slyly, he added, “Of course, it took you a little more than two months to deduce that. Slipping at last in your dotage, dearest brother? Tell me, does Type 2 Diabetes affect mental capacity? I simply cannot remember.”

When Mycroft’s nostrils flared, Sherlock knew he had taken the bait.
“Very well,” Mycroft leaned forward to place the plate of half-eaten cake back on the coffee table. He picked up his mug and frowned mightily at image of Snoopy dancing with Woodstock painted on the enamel, as if the two Peanuts characters had just called him a disgusting and rude name. “Do you not own a proper tea set?”

“John took it when he moved out the second time,” Sherlock lied. Truth was there had been a rather unfortunate experiment with the nice tea set and battery acid. John had been livid and refused to purchase another set, one of the few times Sherlock had thought John had behaved unreasonably. It wasn’t as if he had given John a cup of battery acid after all…

But then, John always had a bit of a temper.

“I shall get you a proper set for your birthday instead of a scarf,” Mycroft leaned back in his chair again, a predatory smile quirking up his thin lips.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” Sherlock let his eyelids droop again, as if dropping off to sleep.

“So, you, Maid Marion and your merry band of men decided to embark on a suicide mission to rescue Mitton, which you defied the odds and survived.”

“Yes, I realize it irks you how I keep surviving suicide missions.”

“Not really. It makes Christmases easier to bear when I don’t have to tell Mummy that you are no longer amongst the land of the living.”

“Bully for you.”

“Because it was an illegal black site not officially sanctioned by the United States, it is an elementary deduction that it was heavily guarded.”

“Quite elementary.”

“However,” Mycroft took a long sip of tea/whisky as he thought. “However with the death of the Senator, they lost their funding. According to the information dump masterminded by Violet, and do not try and convince me it wasn’t Violet who hacked into the Senator’s computers.”

“Very well, I won’t,” Sherlock said amicably.

“According to the information dump masterminded by Violet, I recall a bill he had written, HR. 1013, or rather, the Homeland Defense Research and Development Act, whereas additional moneys can be allocated to the Pentagon for research and development of new and exciting weapons without the approval of Congress or the President if there is a clear and present danger. The Pentagon askth and receiveth.”

“You know I don’t pay attention to politics, especially American politics. I was still surprised to learn we didn’t have a king.”

“Yes, well, HR 1013 had an amendment, a backdoor…. Wait, hang on. You didn’t know we didn’t have a king?”

“Honestly Mycroft, I had deleted the fact that we still had a monarchy. John reminded me that we did during his stag party.”

“Deleted the…. Sherlock Holmes, you’ve been to Buckingham Palace! Nearly naked!” Mycroft spluttered. “How did you not know we had a monarchy? Who do you think lives in Buckingham for
“I don’t know. Old people? Thought perhaps it was a posh nursing home?”

“A posh… BUCKINGHAM PALACE IS NOT A POSH NURSHING HOME!”

“Well, the Queen did just celebrate her Diamond Jubilee so…”

“HR 1013 had an amendment, a backdoor,” Mycroft repeated himself as his face slowly continued to turn into an interesting shade of brick-red, “Allowing the CIA to take funds from the money meant for military R and D during acts of terrorism and/or war.”

“Hm. Neat. And no one noticed?”

“Not until the information leak appeared on the Internet. When that happened, the Senate Minority Whip, a gentleman,” Mycroft’s lip curled indicating that he did not think the man really was a gentleman, “Called Frank Underwood, cried foul and demanded an immediate repeal.”

“Good of him.”

“No, he is merely trying to get on the good side of the Democratic Presidential Candidate. Rumour has it that Underwood is tapped for Secretary of State if Governor Garrett wins.”

“Again, don’t give a fig about American politics or American politicians.”

“Because HR 1013 has been repealed, Operation Onion Field lost a great deal of money.”

“Ah, yes, the Moriarty operative working within the CIA could no longer funnel money from the military in order to properly protect the Onion Field project, well spotted. But I assure you, it was still well protected. Just, not by military men,” Sherlock purred.

“No. La Roux men and local gang members.”

“Right in one.”

“Dangerous men, but not military trained men, not precise like a military operative.”

“Indeed.”

“You were outnumbered.”

“Obviously.”

“But not outwitted.”

Sherlock snorted, not deigning to reply.

“The Trojan Horse ruse, obviously,” Mycroft said triumphantly. He then closed his eyes, as if watching the entire scenario play out as a film within his mind as he narrated, “For her safety as well as your tendency towards minor misogynistic acts, Violet was sent to deliver the children to safety in one of the escape vehicles. You and two or three of the… ah,” Mycroft snickered dryly, “Best and brightest of your cohorts hijacked the delivery van. You drove it to the Onion Field black site and allowed yourself to be captured. Moriarty’s pawns were lured outside on a wild goose chase that allowed the black site to be undefended. Then your associates moved in to strike. Rescued Mitton and destroyed the black site to cover your own tracks as your American associates are clearly of the criminal element since you are loath to name them, and you did not argue nor correct me when I
called them a “merry band of men,” which is what Robin Hood’s gang of outlaws were called. Not to mention the necessity to cover your own backside since one of the conditions of your parole was not to leave Engla-

“My parole? When I was I ever tried?”

“You would have been convicted and left to rot in prison if Magnussen’s murder had ever seen the light of a court room.”

“You would have rotted in a cell right next to me, since MI-6 plotted to exterminate Magnussen after he threatened to out the “royal minor’s” dalliance with Irene Adler and had been manipulating the monarchy as well as Parliament ever since. MI-6 would disavow knowledge of the plot and throw you to the wolves to cover their backsides, if there would ever be an unfortunate leak to the media.”

“You… would sell me out?” Mycroft actually gaped at Sherlock.

“Tit for tat,” Sherlock snipped back. “Seeing how you sold both me and Ford out. How is the Earl of Winchester by the way? I noticed that he’s still breathing. Tick tock, Big Brother, tick tock.”

“I was hoping,” Mycroft gritted his teeth. “You would have talked Violet out of that ridiculous condition of hers.”

“Why?”

“Sherlock, my entire career, my… life depends on plausible deniability. I cannot do what I do if people think I’m actually capable of murder.”

“Every single human being is capable of murder, it all depends on motive. Anyway, what life? You rotate between Westminster, secret boardrooms, posh bolt-holes and Mother and Father’s house. I have more of a life than you do, and that is saying something. Oh, incidentally on my flight home, I read online that Lady Smallwood has a new beau. The Earl of Rufton, I believe? At any rate, good for her, moving on and all. Certainly hope her new lover isn’t something unpleasant like an assassin.”

“Returning to the important subject,” Mycroft snapped in a heated voice. “I’m right, aren’t I, about the Trojan horse ruse?”

_Not quite, _Sherlock thought triumphantly._

He had used the Trojan horse ruse. He had brought along the three brightest of the bikers along with him. He did have the other bikers surround and overtake the black site once the La Roux minions were sent off on the snipe hunt.

But he certainly had not sent Violet away with the children.

That would have been an idiotic waste of a good resource.


Chapter End Notes

The Earl of Rufton is a character from ACD's "Cardboard Box" story:

Have a great week everyone! :^)
Chapter Summary

Decoy

This is a chess tactic used to lure a piece to an unfavorable square.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-two: Decoy

25 April 2016
Fuller Park, Chicago
Thursday afternoon
4:45 PM Central Standard Time

A maroon, beat-up van slowly rolled down the street and parked kitty-corner from the old fire station in Fuller Park known in certain circles as “The Onion Field.”

The Devil’s Foot lovingly called the dented vehicle “The Chester the Molester-mobile.”

“Charming,” Violet had grunted as she snatched the keys from Vibart.

Then she tossed them to Rat Boy, realizing it would be highly irresponsible for her to drive.

Everyone was now in position. Violet (along with Rat Boy and Lisbeth) was the eyes and ears while Chibs, Trager, Green and Sherlock were inside the fire house.

Violet wished like hell they had proper video surveillance, ear pieces and microphones, like the ones they had at the FBI. As she sat on a milk crate behind the driver’s seat, she bit her lower lip in the way Sherlock hated while she fretted. She didn’t like relying on Lisbeth’s black market equipment but beggars couldn’t be choosers. It’s better than nothing, she reminded herself. At least we can maintain communication with everybody…

“This is such bullshit,” Rat Boy muttered in front of her as the vehicle hummed, breaking her thoughts.

“Shush,” Lisbeth said sourly, sitting next to Rat Boy in the passenger seat, her hands clamped tight on the headphones that were plugged into her laptop.

“We all have jobs,” Violet reminded them… and herself.

She cast a nervous eye at the neatly stacked pile of bright yellow milk crates across from her, tightly secured with ratchet tie-down straps.

Only those crates didn’t hold gallons of milk.
She checked her watch, the working one on her left wrist, not the broken gold one she wore as a bracelet on her right.

4:40.

Sherlock, Trager, Chibs and Green had driven the delivery van inside the fire stations exactly ten minutes ago.

Come on guys… she moaned to herself.

Just then, Lisbeth’s pre-paid phone hummed. She flipped it open and read the text. “The General’s out of Fuller Park,” she informed them. “He’s heading towards downtown.”

Both Violet and Rat Boy exhaled. “OK,” Violet nodded encouragingly. “That’s good news. That’s great news.” She lifted herself off the milk crate and duck-walked over to crouch between Lisbeth and Rat Boy. “No matter what happens today,” her freckled face twisted in disgust, “Getting the merchandise away from these bastards is a win.”

No one had expected to see five terrified children, their ages ranging from ten to thirteen, huddled in the back of the van when the Sons and Devil’s Foot had intercepted them. The worst part yet was that none of them spoke English. Or Spanish. Or French. Or German. Or even Russian.

They also didn’t speak Swedish or Norwegian, so Lisbeth was no help either.

Finally Violet the linguist had confessed, “I don’t know what they are saying. It’s Middle Eastern… I think? I mean, I had just started studying Farsi and Chinese right before coming to England and that was eight years ago.”

“Just started studying?” Sherlock had arched an eyebrow.

“I had taken a semester of Farsi at Georgetown on the Bureau’s dime,” Violet admitted. “And I had just ordered my books for Mandarin Chinese so I could get a leg-up after I finished my Farsi courses, because I was thinking about transferring to the Anti-Terrorism Division.”

“Well, that’s a lovely trip down Memory Lane,” Chibs drawled in his thick Scottish accent. “But what are we going to do about the wee ones,” he pointed at the kids, dirty and dressed in tattered jeans and T-shirts. The children, three girls and two boys, cringed and scooted away from Chibs’ pointing finger. “Jesus Christ,” Chibs dropped his hand. “We can’t even tell them we’re not going to hurt them.”

“Leave them?” Vibart had suggested. “Maybe the cops will find them?”

“Gangs’ll find ‘em before cops do, at least in this neighborhood,” Stirmon had scowled at him. “C’mon VP, pull your head out of your ass.”

“Hey, how about some respect for a superior officer?”

“Pull your head out of your ass, sir?”

“We’ll leave them there,” Sherlock had pointed to an abandoned building. “Then we’ll fetch them after we retrieve Mitton.”

“No,” Violet had snapped as Lisbeth shook her head.

“They won’t understand to stay put,” Lisbeth had pointed out. “They’re scared. They’ll run.”
“They’re petrified,” Sherlock countered, growing irritable as time ticked past. “They won’t run.”

“We’re not leaving them.”

“My dear Violet, you are being blinded by sentimental—”

“WE’RE NOT FUCKING LEAVING THEM!”

Finally, one of the original founders of the Devil’s Foot, a grumpy old man named Gordon but lovingly referred to as “The General” pulled rank. “Listen, just put the little bastards in the back of my old service van.” The General, when he hadn’t been running guns and causing chaos, had also been a plumber. He had retired from plumbing five years ago. He had retired from running guns when the Sons of Anarchy had demanded that the Devil’s Foot go legit in order to patch over. But he was still very good at causing chaos. He had happily helped block the street when the Red-Headed League’s delivery van had been carjacked by the Sons and the Devil’s Foot.

A short, square man with a silvery buzz cut, the General had frightening prison tattoos all over his arms and knuckles. He had also been held in a POW camp during his tour in Vietnam so he still had scars from that ordeal, internal and external. He also had a pronounced limp and constantly complained of back pain, but he could still ride, which kept him in good standing with the club.

In short, the General didn’t put up with much shit. Trager had wistfully stated that the General reminded him of one of the Sons’ fallen comrades and founding members, Piney Winston.

The old man had huffed. “I’ll dump them at the nearest cop shop then meet you all at Midway like we’ve planned. It’ll be fine.”

“You’re supposed to be the distraction as we make our getaway, to lead the Bellucci twins away from us when they come with Holy Peters!” Bevington had reminded him.

The General had scowled at the beefy man and reminded him, “Dumbass, you have a moving van,” he pointed at the Penske truck, “Full of bikes. Draw straws and decide who’s going to make the sacrifice play. Most of us got kids. I’ve got grandkids and one of ‘em just had a grandbaby, so now I’m a great-grandpa. The slash is right,” he had jerked a thumb at Violet. “We ain’t leaving ‘em.”

“Thanks,” Violet said dryly, heartily tired of the machismo of the biker world.

Yet the paradox of the biker world still baffled her. Immediately after the old man had called Violet a disgusting misogynistic slur, he had limped towards the van, taking off his kutte and rolling his sleeves down to hide his prison tattoos. His grizzled face had softened into kindness as he knelt in front of the back bumper, smiling gently at the terrified immigrant children. He had dug into his sagging jeans pockets and produced fistfuls of candies, peppermints and butterscotches, candy meant for his own grandchildren.

He ended up carrying the smallest boy in one brawny arm and holding the hand of the smallest girl as he lead them towards his plumber’s van, just as tenderly as if they were his own kids.

Now that same foul-mouthed criminal and war hero barreled down the road, speeding in his battered old van, with the “merchandise”, trying to put as much distance between himself and Fuller Park as possible.

Less than two blocks away, Stirmon manned the one remaining get-away vehicle. Bevington was a little ways up the road, running interference in the large moving van. Inside the van, as the General had reminded everyone, were the Sons’ and Devil’s Foot’s motorcycles. After his task was complete, Bevington would join Stirmon. They were also on look-out as well, in case someone or something
tried to surprise them on the back-end, which was always possible.

The other bikers, led by Vibart, slowly and stealthily surrounded the old fire station. Most of them were veterans of some kind, from Vietnam to the current Gulf War. All of them were criminals with long rap sheets with considerable stints of prison time under their belts.

Lisbeth was able to pull a schematic of the fire station, partially because of Violet’s surveillance of the site, but also because of Violet’s hacking into the late Senator Woodhouse’s computer. Lisbeth gave Sherlock and the bikers directions to the room in which Mitton would most likely be kept.

The plan was simple: get in, get Mitton out then put the black site out of business.

Still Violet chafed at being left out of the main action. She knew she wasn’t the only one.

An hour and forty minutes seemed like a long time, but Violet knew it really wasn’t.

She started nibbling on a hang-nail, her stomach twisted up in hard knots.

Lisbeth put her feet on the dash and took a pack of Marlboro Reds out of the pocket of her leather jacket. Violet opened her mouth to yell at her not to light it, but she merely drew out a cigarette and twirled it in her small fingers. Violet shut her mouth, drawing back, deducing that Lisbeth was just as nervous as she was.

Rat Boy drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “We’re sure there’s only the two guards on the main floor, right?” He tried to sound casual, “Just those two guards?”

“How positive?” Rat Boy demanded.

Lisbeth hedged. “Positive-positive.”

“What the fuck does that mean? ‘Positive-positive’?” When Lisbeth didn’t respond immediately, just kept fiddling with the cigarette, Rat Boy burst out, “Listen you little Swedish freak-”

“It means 95 percent positive,” she spit out at last, her dark eyes narrowing.

“Jesus Christ,” Rat Boy gripped the steering wheel tightly now. “You mean,” he shouted at Lisbeth, “This wasn’t a for sure thing?”

“Enough,” Violet’s dry voice cut through the air. “We all knew this wasn’t a For Sure Thing. The only For Sure Thing was that if we did nothing, Zobelle was going to use the Midnight Crew to mow the Devil’s Foot down like grass and the Sons would lose their Midwest connections. If the Sons don’t expand their legitimate businesses beyond the West Coast, your profits will plateau then dwindle, which may tempt some of the old school members of other Sons charters to return to their criminal enterprises. After all the losses SAMCRO has endured, financial as well as emotional and personal,” she paused to make sure Rat Boy was listening.

He was.

He wasn’t happy, but he was listening.

She drew a breath then continued, “You can’t afford that.”

Rat Boy didn’t respond but he swallowed hard as he stared out the windshield with narrowed eyes, stroking his goatee.
Confident she held his attention absolutely now, she added, “I personally think 95 percent are great odds. Also,” she looked down at her hands. *Shake it off,* she ordered herself. *You’re not dead, yet. I’ve faced worse odds and I’m still here."

“Comforting,” Rat Boy grumbled but he had loosened his grip on the steering wheel.

“Yeah,” Violet reached up and touched the scar on her cheek then ran her hand down her neck, her fingertips resting on the scar on her throat. “I think so.” Then inspiration struck her. “Lisbeth, put Sherlock on speaker.”

She hoped it would soothe everyone’s rattled nerves if everyone and not just Lisbeth could hear what was going on inside the fire house.

Right before they all had left the Devil’s Foot’s clubhouse, Lisbeth had wired Sherlock for sight and sound. Along with a mic taped to his chest, Lisbeth had given him a black baseball cap with that contained a hidden camera. The hat looked ridiculous crammed onto of Sherlock’s rat’s nest of curls, but the hidden camera hat allowed her to watch what happened in the fire house from Sherlock’s point of view on her laptop. She had been listening through her headphones as well but at Violet’s request, pulled the cord and turned the speakers up, cranking up the volume as loud as it would go.

A strange voice crackled from Lisbeth’s tiny speakers. “Go ahead, shoot him! I don’t give a shit about him.”

“As well you shouldn’t since he’s sleeping with your sister.”

“What?”

Inside the fire station, Sherlock emerged from the van like a conquering hero, never being able to resist adding a dramatic touch to the situation. “Oh yes, and he’s not treating her very well either, Mr. Latimer,” he added quite conversationally as he hopped off the van bumper. He was sorry he wasn’t wearing his great coat. It would have added another theatrical flair to have it fan around him as he jumped down. He strolled around the van, his eyes dark and dangerous. His full lips twisted up into a mean, condescending little smile. “Obvious by her depleted bank account and the bruises she tries to hide when she goes to the shops.”

“He’s lying!” The driver burst out but Trager dug the barrel of the gun tight against his temple. “Shut up,” he snarled. “Or I’ll fucking rip your ear off with my teeth.”

“And that’s no bluff, I’ve seen him do it,” Chibs called over his shoulder. “Twice.”

“Seriously?” Green curled his lips and scrunched his big nose up in disgust.

“He has anger management issues,” Chibs chuckled as he turned to follow Sherlock, his shotgun trained on the young white supremacist called Latimer now. With his blond hair and blue eyes, wearing neatly pressed khaki slacks and a long sleeved black shirt, Latimer looked like he should be on the cover of LL Bean, not guarding an unauthorized black site run by the Cult of the Consulting Criminals.

“Perhaps,” Sherlock put his hands behind his back, his eyes raking over Latimer’s wholesome, boyish good looks, “If you would cease and desist in blaming people who have more melanin in their epidermis than you for all your self-created tribulations and take accountability and responsibility for your failures, (and you, Mr. Latimer are nothing more than a giant disappointment, obviously by the belt and shoes you chose to wear with those trousers and that shirt,) then not only would you have observed the idiot behind the wheel mistreating your sister.”
“My… my belt and shoes?” Latimer spluttered.

“An elementary deduction,” Sherlock scoffed. “Only an idiot would skimp on quality belts and shoes after spending money on expensive clothes because he was too stupid to budget accordingly. Belt, clearly second-hand, apparent from the wear on the sides of the belt for all the times it’s been taken on and off, looped through the trouser loops, but the loops are not as worn. But ah, could the belt have been an old one that you had possessed previously before purchasing those expensive trousers? No. Clearly you bought the belt from some sort of thrift shop. You have an 87 centimeter waist. The belt is clearly meant for someone who has a 93 centimeter waist. Now as for the shoes…”

“Oh, stick?” Chibs interrupted Sherlock’s deduction. “Daylight’s burning, mate.”

“Right,” Sherlock sounded a bit annoyed he couldn’t finish his brilliant deduction. “Long story short,” he rolled his eyes. “You’re an idiot with money and you’re lazy, which was why you failed out of university. Instead of blaming your own ineptitude, you joined this gang, which has taken advantage of your willful blindness.” Sherlock turned his mean little smile towards the man he had accused of sleeping with Latimer’s sister, an older man called Moser who looked like a stern yet lovable high school principal, with his navy blue polo and black trousers.

Moser felt his guts turn to water as Sherlock continued to smile at him.

The Brit’s moonlight-white face radiated amused malevolence.

He reminded Moser of those Slender-man comics he caught his kids looking at on the Internet a few weeks ago.


“Don’t listen to him, Latimer!” Moser bleated helplessly.

Sherlock glowered at Moser for interrupting him. “Your first and second-in-command as well as Zobelle are working with the very people you hate in order to make more money for themselves. Not to share with you,” he reached out with his absurdly long arms and pointed at Latimer.

“It’s a lie,” Moser tried to sound menacing but his legs were shaking.

Latimer stared at Moser then back at Sherlock then back at Moser, “He… figured out I flunked out of college by looking at my fucking belt!” He bristled. “It was a lie, wasn’t it? All of it! You… “ He goggled at Moser, “You and the Scowrers Family fucking used us! You don’t give a shit about the cause; you only care about the money!”

Sherlock cocked his head like an inquisitive bloodhound when Latimer said Scowrers Family. He filed the name away in his Mind Palace for further and future contemplation.

Meanwhile, Trager was laughing and his bright blue eyes danced. “Yeah, ain’t that a bitch,” Trager chortled. “Finding out that the only color these guys care about is green.”

“I just want my kids to live in the right neighborhood,” Moser whined.

“Did he say right or white?” Trager playfully asked Chibs.

“Dunno, all this stupid in the room is clogging my ears, makes it hard to hear.”

“Welcome to my world,” Sherlock muttered under his breath.
“Although, I kind of wish T.O. could have joined us for this little road trip.”

“Hm?” Sherlock turned towards Chibs.

“Oh, Jacky-boy changed our bylaws about membership before he stepped down as President. You remember T.O., he was the President of the Grim Bastards?”


“Yeah, he’s good people,” Trager said, forcing Moser to his knees. “Anyways, his charter fell apart, too many of his guys got killed or jailed. So we patched T.O. in. He’s,” Trager kicked Moser in the thigh just for spite, “One of us now, asshole.”

Moser wailed as the steel-toe of Trager’s boot connected with his meaty thigh.

“Oh yeah,” Chibs piped up over Moser’s cries of pain as if he had just realized something. “Your employers also plan on making you lot the patsies if the cops came sniffing around. So how about you all just cooperate and stay nice and quiet. Do that for us and we might let you live long enough to re-evaluate your life choices.” He pursed his lips, pretending to think, then added, “Maybe.”

Meanwhile, back in the Chester-the-Molester mobile, Rat Boy leaned over the arm of the driver’s seat to stare at Lisbeth’s laptop, “Are they all seriously just like making small talk and catching up and shit in there?”

“Yep,” Lisbeth sighed, eyes glazing over in boredom.

“Damn, Stick is in love with the sound of his own voice.”

“Welcome to my world,” Violet sighed.

Back in the fire house, as he was being tied up by Green, the driver asked in a high, reedy voice, “Where is the merchandise?”

“Being delivered,” Green jerked the zip-ties around his wrists extra-tight, “You sick fuck.”

“It’s for science,” Moser protested weakly as he watched Chibs and Sherlock hog-tie Latimer. The driver of the van, now bound and gagged, was thrown in the back of the dry-cleaning van as if he was just a giant sack of flour. “It’s just a bunch of glassware and chemicals, nothing illegal. You’ve got nothing on us.”

“Funnily enough,” Sherlock drawled, “I’ve used that excuse as well but it never works, especially when I accidentally start the microwave on fire. Of course,” his voice hardened, “I don’t experiment on children.”

“What?” Moser wheezed.

“Yeah, arsehole,” Chibs grunted as he and Green lifted Latimer to his feet. While Trager came and slapped a large gray square of duct tape over Latimer’s mouth, Chibs explained, “Your friend the driver explained it all to us. See, they mixed up the deliveries. We were expecting packages as well, which is usually what you get at the 4:30 delivery. However, there’s a midnight delivery, isn’t there?”

“I… don’t know… I don’t work the graveyard shift,” Moser whimpered while he watched Chibs and Green drag Latimer towards the van.
“Of course you don’t,” Sherlock’s voice dropped in temperature. “You’re a family man, you have two children, girls. Mr. Latimer has two nephews. Neither one of you were assigned to the midnight shift because of your sentimentality towards children.”

“Sorry to burst your great big white balloon,” Trager pulled a red bandana out of his pocket. He blew his nose, opened it, examined the contents then wiped his nose again. “But this joint ain’t got nothing to do with building a Caucasian nation and everything to do with human trafficking.”

“I-I-I didn’t know,” Moser babbled. “I didn’t… I just… I wanted a better world for my kids.”

Trager rolled his eyes and shoved his dirty bandana into Moser’s mouth then helped Green drag Moser to the van and toss him in like a bag of garbage.

Sherlock closed the van door with a slam. “Well, that was tedious.”

“Tedious?” Chibs’ mouth quivered in amusement.

“Indeed,” Sherlock droned. “Except for an experiment I ran to see if epidermis decays at a slower or faster rate dependent on the amount of melanin it contains, skin colour bores me. An individual’s mental prowess and capabilities are the only things that interest me and the people I encounter are woefully deficient in that regards.”

“Present company excluded, right?” Green quipped.

“Time to start Phase Two,” Sherlock mumbled, swiftly turning away from the bikers.

“He was joking… right?” Green whispered to Chibs.

“Sure, laddie,” Chibs slapped Green on the shoulder. “You go ahead and believe that.”

“That asshole,” Green muttered.

Just then the stairwell door flew open.

“Mr. Sherlock Holmes, we meet at last,” a thin, cruel voice with the faintest Cockney accent softly announced.

As Sherlock stared at the man standing in the doorway dead in face, Violet, Rat Boy and Lisbeth stared at the image in the screen.

“Who is that?” Lisbeth’s dainty face scrunched up in confusion.

“No idea, but Phase Two is go,” Rat Boy put the van in gear, pulled away from the curb and drove around the block, the tires squealing.

Steadying herself as she gripped the driver and passenger seats, Violet muttered under her breath, “Vatican Cameos.”

Chapter End Notes

SO I was feeling a LITTLE sorry for myself last week because I didn't understand why I wasn't getting many comments... until I realized I completely blew off posting because
of the holiday last weekend.... whoops! lol :^D

"Latimer" and "Moser" were names used in the ACD canon "Frances Carfax" story. Also "The General" was inspired by "General Gordon" from original The Cardboard Box... and by inspired I mean: "Hey, The General would be a good nickname for a biker."

The "Scowrers Family" is from *spoilers* 0:^)

Also, I forgot the mention in the last chapter I'm a *wee* bit obsessed with "House of Cards" (American Netflix version) right now (especially now that Season 5 is how...) so I couldn't help but sneak Frank Underwood in... I know that the timelines are completely and totally wrong.... but #artisticlicense. :^)

Have a great week everyone!
Alekhine's Gun

Chapter Summary

Alekhine's Gun

A formation in which a queen backs up two rooks on the same file.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-three: Alekhine's gun

“This way,” the stranger smiled at Sherlock and gestured with his hands towards the door, a dainty gesture, in juxtaposition to his accent.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes, making rapid-fire deductions:

Thirty-five, non-smoker, single, celibate, causal drinker, owns tropical fish, can smell salt water yet we are in the middle of America, miles and miles away from any ocean. English, obviously, but not Cockney, one of his parents grew up in Cheapside, most likely mother. Public school educated, which is why he’s not using the Cockney rhyming slangs and his vowels have the slightest roundness of the RP English accent. Poor oral hygiene. That has nothing to do with being English but because he is a disgusting man who doesn’t like to brush his teeth, no strike that. He has advanced gingivitis, his gums are so sore he cannot tolerate brushing his teeth, therefore making him tetchy, so tread lightly Holmes. Skin-condition, possible photosensitivity but also could be polymorphic light eruption, but definite aversion to the sun, hence the pale skin, he avoids daylight as much as possible. Also, judging by the cut and material of his suit, not only does he have a skin condition that is irritated by harsh fabric he has an appreciation for the finer things in life… very very fine things, since that is obviously a bespoke Brioni Vanquish II suit. Deceptively thin, like me. Wiry build, has some martial arts training, obviously by the stance of his feet. Armed, two guns and a knife… damn… Damn damn damn. Disarming him not an option. This is going to be trickier than I thought.

“Of course,” Sherlock demurred, lowering his head, pointed the hidden camera tucked away inside his black ball cap directly at his newest nemesis.

“Tell your boys to drop their guns,” the strange Englishman in the overpriced suit politely demanded. His hair was so thin; his pinkish scalp could be seen through it.

“Gentlemen,” Sherlock murmured as the Englishman stepped aside so a line of men started streaming from the stairwell. All clad in black, most of them were young, some of them probably should have still been in high school.

As Green, Trager and Chibs lay their guns on the cement floor and kicked them away from themselves, Sherlock watched the line of “soldiers” line up. He made damn sure to get a really good look so Lisabeth could see what they were facing.

“…. Nine, ten,” Lisbeth announced as Rat Boy and Violet made their preparations in the back. “Ten
“Oh, is that all?” Violet quipped as she loaded a shotgun but her mouth had gone dry and her stomach felt hard as a rock, tense from anxiety.

She looked at her left hand, wrapped in white gauze, squeezing and releasing. *Keep your shit together, hand. For at least the next hour or so, OK?*

She jerked her head up when she heard the unmistakable sound of the gun safety being released and the gun itself being cocked.

“OK,” Rat Boy opened the van door facing the sidewalk just wide enough to slip out.

Violet nodded and swallowed hard, her face stern.

She always hated this part of any mission, be it an FBI task or an undertaking to save her own fugitive skin. She never liked the final minutes before the mission actually began.

The deep breath before the plunge.

She knelt, as if she were genuflecting, wincing as she went down.

The muzzle rested across her thigh, her right finger hovered close to the trigger, her left hand gripped the smooth barrel. The gun was a nickel-plated Benelli Nova, a tactical shotgun, not meant for hunting. It was lighter than some of the other shotguns she had handled in the past, but that also meant that the recoil was going to be a bitch. If (*when*) she fired it, she knew she would have a hell of a bruise on her shoulder the next day.

*Perfect, one to match the ones on my leg,* she swallowed a sigh as she wistfully remembered the injection of ketoralac John had given her after she had wiped out on her motorcycle. It had killed the pain but didn’t make her feel high nor get her addicted.

Her bruised leg wasn’t the only thing giving her fits either. Her scraped hands had still ached and her skinned face burned. Against her better judgment, she took a tramadol tablet Green brought her earlier that morning, after her talk with Sherlock.

“My old lady messed up her back last winter when she slipped on the ice. Said it was my fault for not sanding the sidewalk,” he admitted sheepishly. When he noticed her hesitation, he had added, “It’s only one 50 mg pill. You know my old lady’s a nurse, or was, until she got busted for stealing oxy, anyway,” he ran his hand over his smooth bald head. “She told me to give this to you. You ain’t gonna get addicted and you need to control the pain.”

Sherlock had then materialized like a vapor, “It might help with some of your other… issues,” he breathed in her ear then had gently grasped her tingling left hand, gave it a squeeze then let go. In a louder, cheerier voice, he had added, “If you don’t take it, I will.”

Violet had swallowed the pill. Then she wrapped her wounded hands in gauze and iced her aching leg until it was time to go.

Now she worried if her jitters were one of the drug’s side effects.

Sherlock could function high. She couldn’t.

“They’re coming,” Lisbeth’s hushed voice broke into Violet’s paranoid ruminations.
“Rat Boy,” Violet muttered, looking at him through the van door, still cracked open.

Rat Boy nodded and shut the door.

They hadn’t driven far. Far away enough that they weren’t immediately visible from the fire station but close enough where they could be found. And close enough to their back-up, all the other bikers strategically stationed surrounding the fire station.

Lisbeth was so small she could tuck herself onto the floor in front of the passenger seat. She knelt in front of her laptop, as she took out her handgun, turning the safety off. She placed the gun next to the laptop for easy access as she opened two more screens. She had also wired two cameras to the van so they had eyes all around them. She had one ear-bud in so she could still listen to Sherlock while she watched the three screens on the monitors and Rat Boy also maintained visual as well.

Violet just continued to kneel. The only difference now was she moved her finger so it rested right on the trigger. She blew out a breath, compartmentalizing now, pushing everything out of her head that did not directly affect her in these next few moments, as if closing files and putting them in cabinets inside her mind.

She didn’t even allow herself to think about Sherlock inside the fire house. He was doing his job. She needed to do hers.

She focused on the smooth steel of the shotgun, growing warm under her touch.

Inside the fire house, Sherlock, along with Green, Trager and Chibs followed the man down the narrow stairs to the basement. Behind him was another “soldier” dressed in all black, pointing a semi-automatic weapon at their backs.

“Bit dramatic, don’t you think?” Sherlock hummed, itching to get the ball rolling. Superstitiously, he checked his watch.

5:02.

One hour and twenty-eight minutes before the Bellucci twins arrived with Holy Peters. They had to be gone before they arrived.

They simply didn’t have enough time or manpower to fight off both the *La Ligue des Roux* and the Mafia.

One they reached the bottom of the stairs, they all faced a white cinderblock wall with a shiny metal door. Sherlock immediately noticed the wall and door were much newer than the rest of the building. Next to the door was a keypad. To Sherlock’s bafflement, the strange colorless Englishman did not shield the pass code so Sherlock saw exactly what the pass code was.

There was a loud click then a louder buzz then the door swung open.

“Please,” the strange man gestured with his hands again, inviting them in. Seeing Sherlock’s face crinkled in confusion, he laughed, “Oh the pass code. We change it hourly. Besides, knowing the pass code won’t help you inside. The door can only be opened from the outside.”

“What are ya, some sort of jellyfish?” Trager asked as he stopped to stare at the Englishman’s translucent face while everyone else filed in.

“Tiggy,” Chibs started to warn him but the Englishman had popped Trager right on the nose before anyone had a chance to do anything else. Knuckle connected with cartilage and bone and blood
started gushing out.

“Shit,” Trager pinched his nostrils in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. The Englishman laughed and pushed him through the door with a flourish.

“Any colourful commentary you wish to add?” the Englishman gave Chibs an enormous smile that showed off his bleeding gums as Chibs walked past.

“No,” Chibs stood nose-to-nose with the Englishman, “But I’ve got a packet of Certs I can give ya, you toffee-nosed, howlin’ Jessie.”

“Get moving,” the guard pushed Chibs in the back with the butt of his semi-automatic.

Chibs smirked as he walked through the door.

The smile slipped off the Englishman’s face. “No one comes in unless the merchandise and Holmes’ groupies are found.”

“Yes sir.”

“You do not move from that door. If anyone else but me tries to walk out, terminate them.”

“Yes sir,” the man in black nodded and closed the door.

The bikers glared at the Englishman. Sherlock on the other hand, turned his head this way and that, cataloging everything he saw. It was some sort of storage room. A clean storage room…

A sterile storage room…

Metal shelves and white boxes with small, colorful emblems. Sherlock bit the inside of his lip when he recognized the American “Hazardous Medical Waste” symbols.

He put his hands behind his back and forced himself to be still as the bikers attempted to intimidate the strange, pale man.

“You just locked yourself in here,” Chibs made a twirling motion with his hand, “With us. Bad move mate.”

“Welcome to the Onion Field!” the Englishman spread his hands out wide. “I am Brother Morris Scowrers, of the Rouge Dirigé Liguecase.”


“Well, we all know it was the Americans who were the ones who mistranslated our organization’s name. Since we’re in America and since they can’t get anything right, I thought I’d use their name for us instead.”

“Hey,” Green protested while Trager snapped “Fuck you.”

Only with his bloody nose, it sounded like “Fud too.”

“Still, you’re still locked in a room with us,” Chibs reminded him.

“No,” Brother Morris reached inside his very expensive suit jacket and pulled out a small gas mask, just big enough to cover his nose and face. “You’re locked in a room with me.” He pointed up at the
ceiling. “See those vents?”

Everyone looked up. Sherlock inhaled deeply, catching the faintest hints of almond. “Cyanide.”

“You’d be dead before your knees hit the floor,” Brother Morris said regretfully. “But I don’t want you dead, at least, not yet.”

“We could take the mask away from you, dipshit,” Green stood tall and squared his shoulders.

“Oh yes, you could,” Brother Morris shrugged. “But only one mask. Who lives? Plus, you’re still locked in here. No food. No water.” He slowly licked his lips, as if he was about to enjoy a large and satisfying meal. “How long do you think you would last?”

Green took a step back, balling his fists in frustration.

“You know, I was a bit peeved that my merchandise was re-routed, but I think you lot are more than acceptable replacements. Especially you, Mr. Holmes.”

Sherlock arched an eyebrow as Brother Morris approached.

“Assuming of course,” Brother Morris plucked the black baseball cap off Sherlock’s head and lazily threw it aside. He tucked the gas mask back into his suit jacket. He started circling Sherlock. “‘You are Holmes, the meddler.’”

Sherlock smiled.

“‘Holmes, the busybody!’”

His smile broadened.

"Holmes, Scotland Yard’s little bitch!"

Sherlock chuckled heartily. “Well, I always do appreciate a good bluff. The almond scent in the air was a nice touch. But that was just air freshener. With all of these chemicals and medical supplies,” Sherlock now was the one spreading his arms out wide. He was sorry he was not wearing his Belstaff. It would have been far more dramatic. “You would not risk damaging them with poisonous gas. As much as I appreciate this little farce, why don’t you just have your armed guards come out of their hiding spots and we can all get to know each other, have a proper chat. Do you have tea?”

“Glad to see that you’re amused but alas, no tea,” Brother Morris sighed dramatically as three more men in black, carrying Glocks slipped out of the shadows and into the light. As the men in black pointed their guns at the bikers, Brother Morris carried on in conversation with Sherlock as if they hadn’t been interrupted: “However I think you’ll appreciate the work that we’re doing here, since you’re a scientist and all.” In fact, all four of you will be making great contributions to science and society. It’s so nice to have proper lab specimens. It’s so difficult to gauge the dosage for children and they never last long.”

“You dirty bastard,” Chibs growled as Brother Morris walked over to a large laundry basket on wheels. “What are you people up to?”

“Control,” Brother Morris said quite seriously. “Haven’t you noticed how out of control everything is these days? We can fix that.” Then his tone became quite crisp. “Right, now orientation is over. I’ll need you to strip then put your clothes in here.” He patted the rolling laundry basket. “I find that specimens are more pliable when they don’t have their,” he then patted his suit, “Armor on.” He strolled over to Trager again. “Especially the biker boys and their kuttes.” He reached to stroke
Trager’s black leather vest, aiming for the Men of Mayhem patch. Trager made a move as if to punch him but the man in black dug his gun into Trager’s lower back.

“Easy tiger,” the man in black said. Trager’s electric blue eyes flashed bloody murder.

“Alright then,” Brother Morris checked his watch then clapped his hands together, rubbing them as if he was an eager child. “We do have a tight schedule so let’s get cracking.” When he caught Sherlock checking his watch however, he laughed, “Oh and if you think that little Nordic freak with the tattoos and piercing and your precious FBI agent are going to save you, think again, Mr. Holmes.” He walked back to Sherlock, pulling the cart along with him, chortling. “Oh, what a fantastic surprise it will be for our mutual friend to deliver Agent Violet Hunter to him. You should have hidden her better, tucked her away from all of this.” He flopped his hand around, “Ugliness. Why in the world did you send women to do a man’s job?”

“Oh no, he did not,” Violet muttered when Brother Morris’ voice crackled through the speaker of Lisbeth’s Smart Phone.

Little did Brother Morris know that Violet, Lisbeth and Rat Boy were already inside.

As Brother Morris invited Sherlock and the bikers to descend into the basement, Lisbeth paired her mobile with her laptop, so she could at least maintain audio if she lost visual.

As the “men in black” (all rank amateurs compared to CIA agents, military and hardened criminals like the ones in a One Percenter biker gang) streamed out of fire house, they all were led into traps and ambushed. The Devil’s Foot picked them off as easily as apples from a low hanging branch.

“We’ve got company,” Lisbeth muttered from her crouch, peering at her computer and reaching for her gun.

“You know how to use that?” Violet gingerly slipped her bandaged hands into her leather gloves.

Lisbeth gave her a curt nod.

“Shoot to kill then,” Violet swiveled from her right knee to her left, facing the back now. Silently she sent a prayer of gratitude that her body was cooperating as she lifted the shotgun to her shoulder, aiming it at the backdoor. “These are not good guys, OK?”

One dark eye still on her laptop, Lisbeth scooted around so she was still in a crouch but not facing the passenger door. On the driver side, Rat Boy perched on the running board, gripping the rearview mirror with all his might, gun in his free hand.

Three men in black approached the van from the passenger side. Violet rolled her eyes at how noisy they were being, laughing even. Meanwhile, Violet remained frozen, using her yoga training to stay absolutely still as she breathed through her nose. Lisbeth stayed tiny and still, seeming to actually hold her breath. She knew Rat Boy was just as quiet and controlled as they were.

Stupid suburban kids trying to be tough, her profiler’s mind deduced as she heard the crunch of boots around the van. The old practicality and level-headedness of her personality reasserted itself to envelope her in a familiar cocoon of cool rationality. Let’s join a gang, they said, it will be cool, they said. Hope peer pressure doesn’t get these idiot frat boys killed.

One of the men in black looked under the van and didn’t see feet. Then all three of them separated, thinking they were being clever. One was walking around towards the front of the van, two of them around the back. One stopped right by the back van doors while the other continued his journey around the van.
Then all hell broke loose.

“What the shit?” the first man in black yelped when he saw Rat Boy hanging off the van. Rat Boy didn’t hesitate, he pulled the trigger and the first man was down.

At the same time, just as the second man in black passed the passenger side, running to help his fallen companion, Lisbeth lunged forward and threw the passenger door open, hitting him solidly in the back, knocking him down. When he rolled over to his back and started to get up, he lay right back down in the street again when he saw a ninety-pound black haired woman pointing a gun at his head. Meekly he let go of his weapon and raised his hands.

While that was happening the back doors of the van flew open. The third man in black pointed his gun at Violet as she trained the shot gun on him.

“Drop it,” she barked at him.

The man hesitated, lowering his weapon, but he changed his mind at the last minute. He quickly lifted his gun again, but Violet was faster. She shucked the pump and pulled the trigger. The blast inside the van was deafening and the recoil hurt as badly as she had feared. She had swayed and nearly lost balance when the butt of the gun smacked her shoulder but she didn’t fall down.

Violet blew a relieved breath. Then she craned her head to see the corpse outside the van. “God-damnit,” she groaned as she slid out. She yanked the black ski mask off of him as Rat Boy jogged over to her. “Not even twenty-one, I bet.”

Rat Boy shrugged, unimpressed at the dead boy with the gaping chest wound. “That’s how old I was when I started prospecting. And I bet you were about his age when you started training to be a fed. You either make it, or you don’t.”

“Guys?” Lisbeth called. Violet scrambled to her feet, ears still ringing painfully. She and Rat Boy rounded the corner to find Lisbeth still pointing a gun at the surviving man in black’s face.

Lisbeth had pulled his ski mask off. A whey-faced, freckled teenager, probably nineteen at the most, he had tears in his eyes.

Lisbeth, Rat Boy and Violet all found themselves looking down at the boy’s crotch, which was wet as a golden puddle surrounded his hips and thighs.

“Honestly,” the boy’s voice shook as badly as his raised hands. “I really hate these guys. I thought this was something cool, like paint ball or Call of Duty or something but it’s not. It really sucks and I’d like to go home now.”

The hacker, the biker and the federal agent all looked at each other.

“He did piss himself,” Lisbeth pointed out.

“Yeah, there ain’t no coming back from that,” Rat Boy agreed.

Violet lowered her shotgun and waved bye-bye to the boy. He blinked then his good fortune dawned on him. He nearly slipped on his own urine getting up but once he was up, he was running and he did not look back once.

“Jesus Christ,” Rat Boy rolled his eyes as Lisbeth started gathering up the men in black’s guns.

Violet checked her cheap watch. “We got to move,” she snapped, “And I need to re-load.”
She had to step over the dead boy’s body to get back into the van. She didn’t spare him a look as she closed the van doors. But her fingers shook as she tried to load new shot gun shells.

A large hand covered hers. “Let me, OK?” Rat Boy said in a surprisingly gentle voice, devoid of any condescension or mockery. Violet nodded and he handed her the car keys in exchange.

“I.”

“It’s two blocks, you can do it,” Rat Boy swiftly reloaded the shot gun as Violet looked nervously at the yellow milk crates. “They’re secure. They’re fine.”

“We’re running out of time,” Lisbeth was listening to Sherlock’s wire tap again, this time through her smart phone.

“Hang on to something,” Violet crawled into the driver’s seat as Rat Boy followed, hanging onto the arm rests, the left one of the driver seat, the right one of the passenger seat. Lisbeth patted his arm after she secured her seat belt.

Violet buckled her seat belt as well, giving it a good tug. “OK, brace for impact,” she told them as she turned the van back on and put it in gear. Slowly she did a U-turn in the middle of the pot holed street. She inhaled deeply, held the breath for three counts, then exhaled for two.

Then she slammed her foot on the gas, hard.

The wheels squealed and the van hurtled down the street, gaining speed.

The speedometer read 35 MPH, but as Vibart had cheerfully explained, it had been broken for years. Too soon the fire station was in sight. Violet gripped the steering wheel as tightly as she could, her arms shaking from the vibration of the road.

She felt a lump in her throat as she remembered her arm going completely numb on the A-1, the handle bars of her motorcycle, her beautiful Triumph wobbling madly. She had tried to steer with one hand, but the best she could do at that high speed was to fling herself off her bike to the side of the road before flipping head over heels in the middle of the causeway.

She jerked the steering wheel a hard left, sending the Chester-the-Molestermobile careening towards the garage doors of the fire station.

“Hold on!” she cried out right before the van plowed through the doors.

Chapter End Notes

Brother Morris Scowrers is a character from the ACD canon ‘Valley of Fear’.

*Morris’ nasty remarks about Sherlock being a meddler and a busybody is inspired from a quote from "The Speckled Band."

Also, a cookie to anyone who noticed my little Iron Man 3 nod.

Have a great week everyone! :^)

Doyle, A. C., & Morley, C. (1930). The Adventure of the Speckled Band. The
Chapter Thirty-four: Caïssa

If Violet's ears were ringing before, they were playing the gongs now. Feeling the seat belt dig between her breasts, she reached down and undid the buckle. She looked up just in time to see the windshield crumble to bits.

“Anyone dead?” she peeled her fingers one by one off the steering wheel.

“Not today,” Rat Boy had a huge purple lump on his forehead but other than that, looked whole.

Lisbeth had a few superficial cuts on her cheek and chin but her nose dribbled blood. “Oh damn,” she touched her nostril. “My nose ring!” she wailed. “It got ripped off in the crash.”

“Walk it off,” Violet grunted but a sudden rush of adrenaline surged through her. The rush damped the pain. Later tonight, she’d be in pure agony but not right now.

She felt alive. Electric, forceful and powerful.

Rat Boy duck-walked to the back of the van and threw the doors as Lisbeth fumbled for her laptop and smartphone. “Dammit,” she muttered, looking at her smashed laptop.

“Fuck,” Violet rubbed her forehead then pulled her fingers away to find a smear of blood.

“My Smartphone is OK,” Lisbeth unlocked the screen. “But I don’t know where the ear buds are,” she turned the volume up.

“… to deliver Agent Violet Hunter to him. You should have hidden her better, tucked her away from all of this ugliness. Why in the world did you send women to do a man’s job?”

“Oh no, he did not,” Violet muttered when Brother Morris’ voice crackled through the speaker of Lisbeth’s Smart Phone. Meanwhile Lisbeth’s face became mottled with fury.

“Do you know where we need to go to get the boys?” Violet asked, fishing a napkin out of her coat pocket. She tore it in half and pressed a section to her forehead.

“Yes,” Lisbeth took the other half of the napkin when Violet held it out to her. She shoved it up her bleeding nose then tapped her forehead. She clearly remembered what she saw while Sherlock was still able to film where he was being led.
“Let’s go.”

Lisbeth found her handgun and followed Violet out. The other Devil’s Foot bikers were filing in now, through the hole Violet had created with the Chester-the-Molestermobile.

“Rat Boy,” Violet held her hand out for the shot gun. “I need you.” She looked at Lisbeth. “We’ll cover you.”

Without hesititation, Lisbeth walked across the fire truck bay and towards the door where Brother Morris had led Sherlock and the bikers.

“Get the packages ready,” Rat Boy called over his shoulder. “We’re running out of time.”

He jogged after the two women. He caught up just in time to hear Lisbeth. “There’s an armed guard standing outside the door, but only one.”

“We’ll cover you,” Violet promised.

They crept down the stairs, trying to hurry but trying desperately to be quiet as well. Violet then abruptly stopped and put her finger to her lips. She handed her gun to Rat Boy then dug into her coat, producing Chapstick. She rolled her eyes, hoping for something better or heavier but it would have to do. She threw it over the banister, towards the guard. Staining her ears, she listened for footsteps but her ears were still dulled from the shotgun blast and the van crash. However Rat Boy handed her the shotgun back and nodded. She lifted the gun, protecting Lisbeth as they rushed down the steps.

The guard was just straightening up, staring at the tube of Chapstick when Lisbeth, Rat Boy and Violet reached bottom. He started to raise his weapon then realized he had three guns pointed at him. He dithered then remembered he had a semi-automatic that could mow them all down. But he wavered too late. Lisbeth squeezed the trigger. He stood upright for a moment as the bullet ripped through his brain. Then he fell forward.

“Damn girl,” Rat Boy’s mouth hung open just a little.

Violet saw a bigger problem. “We needed him to unlock the door,” she pointed at the keypad.

“Nope,” Lisbeth tapped her forehead again. “I saw the code.”

*She has a photographic memory*, Violet realized with a jolt. She also knew this was not the time to bring it up. “OK,” she held the shotgun up again, standing in front of the door. “Cover me.”

Her left hand felt prickly. *Oh come on, just a few minutes more please.*

“Do it now, Lisbeth,” Violet sucked in a breath, holding the shotgun up as Rat Boy stood behind Violet, staring over Violet’s shoulder at the door.

Lisbeth punched in 1976.

There was a loud click then a louder buzz then the door swung open.

She heard male voices echoing from inside: “… are you waiting for, the cavalry?”

“Precisely,” Sherlock informed Brother Morris, watching the door opening over the shoulder of the pasty-faced Englishman with the odd accent and horrific halitosis.

Then he saw Violet standing in the doorframe, pointing a shotgun at the group. He reached over,
roughly grabbed Chibs by the shirt collar and jerked him down to the floor as he ducked.

Of course Sherlock observed and therefore moved faster than anyone else. As Sherlock took Chibs to the ground, the guards stared in bafflement. Two seconds too late, the room reverberated with the unmistakable sound of a shotgun being pumped.

Brother Morris watched in horror as the man who had been guarding Chibs before Sherlock dragged him to the floor grabbed his gut in horror, groaning and falling to his knees as blood dribbled out of his mouth.

Green and Trager, upon hearing the shotgun blast, immediately ducked for cover as well.

Then there was a series of pop-pop-pops! The other three guards collapsed like rag dolls.

Violet walked into the room, pumping the shotgun again to expel the empty shells. Her eyes were fixed on Brother Morris who was whipping his head around in disbelief, looking at his fallen guards. Her brows were two black slashes over fiery greenish-gold eyes. She held her mouth so tightly, Sherlock was positive she was probably grinding her teeth.

He also saw Rat Boy and Lisbeth enter right on her heels. Lisbeth looked as she always did, which was mildly pissed off at the world. Rat Boy however appeared to have seen the Mother Mary and the Baby Jesus.

Then Sherlock flicked his eyes down at their guns. Only Sherlock observed a small trace of smoke wafting from Lisbeth’s KimberPro. Rat Boy never had to use his gun.

As Violet drew closer, Sherlock laughed silently through his nose as he pushed himself up and back on his feet.

“So what’s this shit about sending in women to do a man’s work?” Violet glowered when she reached Brother Morris, resting the barrel of the shotgun over her wrist.

“I don’t have a problem with women doing men shit,” Trager spluttered, his nosebleed slowing. He slowly got to his feet. “Just, you know, for the record.”

Everyone else got to their feet, well, everyone who was still living.

“Nice shooting, laddie,” Chibs clamped a hand on Rat Boy but he shook his head.

“It was all her, man,” Rat Boy pointed at Lisbeth.

All the bikers stared at the tiny woman.

“No shit?” Green asked, faintly awed.

“So,” Trager wiped his bloody nose. “One of brothers back home in Charming? Name’s Happy. I think… I think you two would really hit it off.”

Lisbeth studied him then gave him one of her crooked smiles.

Violet however, continued to glare at Brother Morris. Then she fluttered her eyelashes at him as she informed him sweetly, “Now this precious FBI agent would like to know exactly what the fuck you’re doing here.”

“You’re dead,” he lunged for her but Sherlock caught him and twisted his arm behind his back.
“Good God,” Violet pressed her hand to her nose. “Jesus, do you know what a toothbrush is?”

“He’s a modern-day Dr. Mengala,” Sherlock informed her. “They just keep the supplies down here. The,” his nose crinkled as his lip curled, “Specimens are kept upstairs, where the sleeping quarters used to be, which is where I believe we will also find Mitton.”

“OK,” Violet nodded her head as she frowned. “So we don’t need him anymore.”

“Nope.”

“’K,” Violet flipped the shotgun around and jammed the butt of the gun into Morris’s crotch. Every single living man in the room visibly cringed.

“Like I said,” Trager held his bloody hand up, as if to ward off evil, “I ain’t got no problem with women. At all.”

As rational and logical as Sherlock was, even he had winced as he watched Brother Morris slump over then curl up into the fetal position. “Right,” he squeaked, then cleared his throat. “Right. We have,” he checked his watch. “Forty-two minutes before the Bellucci brothers arrive with Holy Peters. We need to tear this place apart, find Mitton and any other possible victims of this,” he toed the barely conscious Brother Morris, “Sadist.”

“The other guys are here,” Rat Boy told his president and VP. “Getting ready to light this place up,” he started to tuck his gun away but Sherlock shook his head.

“We don’t know if any members of the Red-headed League are hiding here. Stay vigilant. I’ll be up in a minute. I want to take a quick peek down here.”

“I’ll be up in a second too,” Violet told the bikers and Lisbeth. When Lisbeth glared at her while the bikers started to exit, she whispered to Lisbeth, “Just want talk to Sherlock alone for a quick second, OK? I’ll be up in a minute.” She took a chance and gave Lisbeth a quick hug, just a squeeze around the shoulders then letting go. “You were fucking amazing, by the way.”

Lisbeth gave her a blank stare. Then a flush pinked her cheeks as she produced a genuine smile of pure pleasure instead of one her sardonic half-smirks.

Once alone, Sherlock flicked his eyes over her then rushed to her, pulling out his handkerchief. “You’re hurt. Not just this. Your shoulder, you’re favoring your right shoulder.”

“I’m fine,” Violet pressed the snowy white handkerchief to her brow. “I’m going to be sore as hell and I’m half-deaf, but I’m OK.”

Sherlock ran his thumb over her chin. “You enjoyed yourself.”

“Well… yeah,” Violet admitted, still feeling alive but also feeling the fatigue starting to seep in. “So, what’s going on in that big brain of yours. You didn’t stay down here for a peek.”

“No,” Sherlock stared a set of metal shelves stocked with plastic boxes. “I know exactly what I’m looking for. Go on, go find Mitton, but be cau-”

“STICK!” Chibs yelled. “FRANKIE!” He jogged back into the supply room, out of breath. “We found the MI-6 agent.”

“Oh my God, is he OK?” Violet pressed her hand to her chest.
Chibs looked solemn, “You two better come. Now.”

“’K,” Violet tucked Sherlock’s bloody handkerchief into her coat pocket. She started to follow Chibs but stopped when she realized Sherlock was not following her. “Sherlock, come on.” When he held up a pointer finger, she relented, “OK, but hurry. It sounds bad.”

Sherlock hummed. Violet turned on her heel, chasing after Chibs but starting to limp.

Sherlock walked towards the shelves of neatly stacked boxes. The innocuous plastic boxes reminded him of fishing tackle. He flipped the latches up with a snap and flung the lid open.

Curious, he studied the tiny bottles inside. He pulled a vial out, noting that it was glass not plastic and that it was kept at room temperature. He held the vial up to the light, his brows crinkling at its clarity. It looked like water but of course it couldn’t be water.

He plucked five vials out then looked around, frowning. Then he strode over to another set of shelves. Found cotton wadding and a plastic bag meant for medical disposal. He padded the vials the best he could then zipped them up in the plastic bag. He tucked the bag into this coat pocket and started walking out of the large supply room, but stopped. Turned around and took one last look, his eerie eyes flicking down to the whimpering Brother Morris curled in growing puddles of congealing blood.

He looked up at the vents.

No… not cyanide. Something worse, something far far worse.

He pressed his large hand over the coat pocket that held the mysterious five vials. Looked up at the vents again and tilted his head, arching an eyebrow.

“I wonder…” he hummed.

As tempted as he was to scale the shelves to reach the ceiling and examine those vents, he turned swiftly and walked out of the supply room. He needed to find Mitton. Not just to extract him from this horrible place, but also to confirm his suspicions on what exactly the Onion Field was working on.

He had a theory but… best to acquire more data before formulating a hypothesis.

He took the steps up two at a time, glad to be out of the cellar. He glanced at the crumpled van, steam still leaking from the grill, both front tires blown out, the windscreen gone. The bonnet was completely crumpled up.

“What me,” he wove around the assembly line of bikers carrying the yellow milk crates out of the crumpled van. The milk crates held all the components to make a bomb, except for the chemicals, of course. It would be suicide to crash a van full of Semtex into a building. Stirmon had the Semtex in his vehicle and he was on his way. Lisbeth would be helping with the wiring so they could use cell phones to detonate.

“How lovely it is when a plan comes together,” Sherlock hummed a happy tune under his breath.

“Elevator is over there,” Vibart pointed the dented sliding doors out for Sherlock.

“Thank you,” Sherlock nodded and hurried towards the dodgy lift. It whinged and whined, but it creaked its way up to the second floor.
He found Chibs and Trager watching Violet trying to pick a lock. “They went old school up here,” Violet straightened, holding out the picklock set to Sherlock. “You’re faster.”

But Sherlock saw how her right hand trembled and how her left ring finger and pinkie didn’t move, all at. Keeping his face neutral, he slipped the picklock set out of her hands. He pressed his ear to the wooden door and frowned.

“You hear it, don’t you,” Chibs crossed his arms over his pot belly, “The moans.”

Violet’s eyes grew round, her hearing affected from earlier.

“Yes, I do,” Sherlock knelt down and made quick work of the lock. He pushed the door open. Violet bolted to the door, but Sherlock grabbed her by the crook of her elbow. “We need to move quickly but cautiously. Mitton and the other test subjects may not be in their right minds when we find them.”

“Torture?” Violet automatically touched the scar on her face.

“In a manner of speaking,” Sherlock sidestepped her question. “Hurry,” he looked at his watch again and frowned as he pushed her into the blackened room, slipping his mobile into her hands so she could use that as a torch.

“Fuck, this reminds me of a horror movie,” Trager groaned.

“Or your last date,” Chibs jibed.

“Hey. Venus ain’t like any other girl I’ve dated, alright? She’s different.”

“Oh,” Chibs said under his breath as Trager stalked into the dark room. “I know,” he dug his own mobile out to use as a torch as well.

“Mitton?” Violet called, shining the meager light over everything. “Mitton? It’s me, it’s Violet and Sherlock. We found you, we’re bringing you home.”

A guttural pain-wrecked moan made them all jump.

“Mitton!” Violet desperately shone the light around, unable to find him. “Mitton, please. Talk to me. Where are you?”

“Hey, I found a light switch,” Trager’s voice cut through the gloom.

“Turn only one light on at a time,” Sherlock’s deeper voice commanded. “Too much light could traumatize the victims if they have been in darkness for so long.”

There was a click then the middle row of fluorescents light up.

“Oh my God!” Violet cried out, seeing Mitton, at the very back of the room.

He wasn’t strapped to a bed or locked in a cage. He was tied to what looked like a dentist’s chair, except it was upright. His skin, normally a unique rich brown color like a good cup of coffee, was ashy and mottled. He had lost so much weight he had also lost muscle tone. His hair, usually neatly trimmed had been completely shaved off as well as his goatee. His head lolled and he squinted in the light before letting his head drop forward.

There was an IV catheter stuck into his hand. A clear fluid flowed from the drip above. A heart monitor was also attached to him.
The chair itself was positioned very close to a drain.

“Jesus Christ,” Chibs said bleakly.

Violet sprinted towards Mitton. “Mitton, Mitton!” She knelt in front of him. “It’s me, it’s Violet, it’s OK now, you’re home,” she placed a comforting hand on the hand not stuck with a needle as she reached to cup his face.

But the minute her skin made contact with his, Mitton began to scream, high-pitched, hysterical shrieks. His head no longer lolled but bounced back and forth and sideways no in logical order, as if he were being electrocuted. His hands balled into fists, his nails dug into flesh, his legs started jackhammering.

Sherlock seized Violet underneath her left armpit and hauled her away from Mitton before he could inadvertently kick her.

Mitton had just given him his needed confirmation.

“The Onion Field is conducting illegal drug trials on human test subjects,” Sherlock explained as Violet pressed herself against him, staring at Mitton in horror.

“So,” Trager ran his hands through his wild hair. “So he’s completely strung out? How the hell are we supposed to transport him if he loses his shit if someone just holds his hand?”

Violet turned to Sherlock, “You’re a chemist, can you figure out what we can give him to tranquilize him?”

“Without knowing for sure what exactly all the components of the drug are, no. It’s too risky to try to counteract the effects of this drug with a sedative. However… however, I think I have seen this before. I think the patient is semi-lucid. I think we can talk to him. He’ll still be properly terrified, but I think we can talk him through the terror.” Sherlock moved Violet aside and shrugged his leather jacket off, mindful of the drugs he had stolen. “If it is what I think it is, I think it’s… well, for the need to be concise, a super-speedball.”

“A super speedball?” Chibs rubbed his goatee. “Like coke and morphine?”

“Sounds like fun,” Trager grinned and Chibs punched his shoulder.

“No, more like cocaine, heroin and-”

“A powerful hallucinogen,” Violet interrupted, catching up with Sherlock. Her hand was over her mouth as she watched Sherlock carefully approach Mitton…

… and remembered finding Sherlock lying on the bathroom rug, shaking so hard, she thought that he was having an epileptic fit. But when she had knelt down to help him, he pushed her away. He then managed to lurch up enough to hover over the toilet.

Her own ragged voice echoed in her ears:

*Jesus, John, can’t you give him anything?*

She remembered John’s hoarse, exhausted reply:

*We don’t even know for sure if there’s only coke and heroin in his system. In fact, I’m pretty sure*
they did cut it with something else, a hallucinogenic or another kind of stimulant or depressant. I readily admit this is not my area of expertise. But I do know that he’s coming down, detoxing far too quickly. He’s withdrawing from something else, not just the coke and heroin... I don’t even dare give him paracetamol...

Woodenly, she told Chibs and Trager, “Whatever this is exactly, it’s a powerful psychotropic drug laced with a potent hallucinogen. Not only does it make you see things that aren’t there, but it…” she bit her lip in the way that Sherlock hated as she watched Sherlock kneel next to Mitton and start speaking soothingly to him as he deftly removed the IV from his bruised hand.

“It makes you live out your worst fears…”

*He’s out there, he’s still free, must deduce his next move before he makes it, before he comes here… before he takes Molly… he can’t take Molly, he mustn’t take her… he’ll bring her to the Earl… he’ll take my child from her … he’ll hurt them both…*

“And relive your worst memories,” Violet folded her lips together, her eyes suddenly watering.

*Mycroft, please… make him stop, please. You said, you would make him stop, you said he’d leave me alone after the first time… please, Mike, please, don’t let him find me again…*

“A blanket,” Sherlock ordered in a soft, controlled voice. “I need a blanket to help safeguard against shock.”

“I’ll get one,” Trager, obviously spooked now, bolted from the room.

Mitton, his arms free now, crossed them across his chest, shivering like mad.

“Sherlock?” he slurred, his eyes rheumy with pain and malnutrition.

“Yes,” Sherlock affirmed. “Yes, I am here. I am real, John Mitton. This is not a hallucination. I know this is going to be difficult to understand, but you must believe me. I am real. I am here now with Violet Hunter. I want you to focus on my voice, yes? Can you do that?”

“No. Mitton, you need to think. Mycroft would not send me to murder you.” He turned his head and beckoned Violet to him. “I need your expertise, Miss Masters-in-Psychology.”

Violet knelt next to Sherlock. Remembering that kneeling was one of his triggers, she slipped her hand into his. She felt the slight tremor, realizing that he was struggling with his own demons. “Sit, you’ll kill your knees,” she whispered to Sherlock before turning her face up to Mitton. “Mitton, look at me.”

“I can’t, you’re dead. You’re a skull,” Mitton whimpered.

“No.”

“They killed you.”

“They lied. They tried to kill me, but they didn’t. I’m here, I’m OK,” she lied, clutching Sherlock’s hand, grateful he didn’t let go. She was also glad he took her advice and was now sitting instead of kneeling. “Listen, this drug they’ve been giving you, it’s a like… a… a never ending panic attack. So, let’s treat it like a panic attack, OK?”
“Panic attack?”

“Yes, a panic attack, so let’s focus on the breath, OK? Breathe in as deep as you can, breathe along with me.”

For a moment it seemed like Mitton had forgotten how to breathe. Soon, but not soon enough, Mitton and Violet were using the yoga breathing technique of pranayama. “Keep breathing. Listen to me, listen to Sherlock. You have a very powerful drug in your system right now. It makes you see things that aren’t real but it keeps you semi-lucid. You’re going to have to fight to stay with us, Mitton, so we can get you out of here, can you do that?”

“I’ll… try…” Mitton sounded like a little boy about to cry.

“OK, now this is going to be hard because you’re seeing things that aren’t there…” she cast Sherlock a helpless look.

But it was Trager who chimed in, “So you’re gonna have to trust us when we tell you if something is real or not,” he re-entered the room fully now, clutching a gray blanket. “My name’s Tig, I’m a friend of St., Sherlock and Violet. I’m gonna help you out of his hellhole and so is my president, Chibs Telford.”

“Hello,” Chibs said faintly, completely out of his depth.

“OK, so I need you to name five things that you see. It doesn’t matter what it is, just list them. If it’s not real, we’ll tell you.”

“Blood, I see blood,” Mitton spit out.

Violet opened her mouth to soothe and tell him now, but Sherlock cut her off, “Yes, Violet had a tumble, she’s bleeding but it’s superficial.”

Mitton held out a shaking hand. Slowly it crept forward until it touched the top of Violet’s hair. Then he pressed the trembling hand to her cheek. “You’re… you’re real…” his voice still shook but he repeated himself. “You’re real… you’re OK.”

“I’m fine,” Violet made herself smile. “OK, so. You see me. I need four more.”

Slowly, painfully, they walked Mitton through the 5-4-3-2-1 coping method. Taste had been difficult but fortunately, Sherlock had found an old cough drop in his coat pocket. The wrapper had been sticky but it helped. Mitton, of course, still was drugged, so therefore still terrified. However, he was at least tractable.

“OK, we really need to get going,” Chibs muttered. “This place is set to blow and I want to get the hell out of here.”

“Are you ready?” Violet asked as she finally wrapped the blanket Trager found around Mitton.

“I’m going with your friend, Tig, right?”

“Yes, you’re going to stay with Tig. He’s a big, bad, tough-as-nails biker and he will keep you safe,” Violet repeated herself for what felt like the millionth time.

When they had gotten to the four things you can touch, Mitton had seized her hand and hadn’t let go the entire time until she had stood up to drape the blanket over him, “I’m sorry I lost you, Violet,” he started to sob. “I was supposed to protect you and I lost you.”
“But I found you and we’re OK, we’re all OK but we need to go. We need to go somewhere where you can rest and get this drug out of you.” She, along with Sherlock, helped Mitton to his feet but he immediately collapsed.

“Find a wheelchair,” Sherlock hissed at Chibs. “Not a stretcher; that might trigger him. Then get him the hell out of here.”

“Done,” Chibs said.

“Violet,” Mitton started to whimper again when he was eased into the wheelchair.

“Breathe,” she reminded him. “5-4-3-2-1. And breathe.”

“Breathe,” Mitton clutched the arms of the wheelchair. “Breathe… five things I can see….” And he started listing things off as Trager pushed him out of the room.

“We’ve got maybe ten minutes left,” Chibs informed Violet and Sherlock as Sherlock pulled his leather jacket back on. “Maybe fifteen if we’re lucky.”

“Where is Lisbeth?” Sherlock demanded.

“Here,” Lisbeth slipped in. In the weak, unnatural fluorescent light, she looked ghostly. “We’ve been looking, me and some of the other guys. We couldn’t find any other victims.”

“No, you wouldn’t, would you,” Sherlock grit his teeth. “They were kidnapping undocumented immigrant children to conduct their tests on. No illegal immigrant is going to call the police to report that their child has been abducted.”

“Right, so I really fucking hate these people,” Chibs growled. “But I really hate getting killed more so we really need to get out of here.”

“I need five minutes,” Sherlock informed him. “I need her and her and directions to the office where the,” he snorted, “Scientists wrote up their findings.”

“I know where it is,” Lisbeth crooked her fingers at him. “And what you need. Get the computer you need booted up. I need my rucksack.”

“Clock’s ticking!” Chibs shouted after the trio as they bolted from the room.

Then he looked around and shuddered.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered as he hurried out.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for missing last week's post... it's been a little crazy in my corner of the universe. This week's not looking to be much better... BUT I've got some vacation time coming to me so hopefully I can FINALLY have time to do some solid writing as I'm getting VERY close to finish writing this fic.
Have a great week everyone!
Atomic Chess

Chapter Summary

Atomic chess:

Capture on any square results in an "atomic explosion" which kills (i.e. removes from the game) all pieces in the eight surrounding squares, except for pawns.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Thirty-five: Atomic chess

Her heavy boots clomped on the chipped cement floor as she sprinted towards what used to be the captain’s office. Flakes of vomit-green paint came off from the floor as she ran, revealing the ugly pewter tones of the cement.

Her nose still hurt from when her nose ring had gotten inexplicably torn out when the van crashed through the garage doors of the “abandoned” fire station.

Lisbeth knew she looked like an idiot, with a wad of tissue still shoved up her nostril, running as if her knickers were on fire.

She didn’t care.

As they say in America: shit just got real.

“Hey,” she burst into the office, gasping, clutching a stitch in her side with one hand and her oversized rucksack in the other. “The Bellucci twins are almost here.” She stormed the office. “And they’ve brought company.”

Lisbeth eyed the office in dread, hand still pressed to her side. That particular room no longer contained a captain’s desk or comfortable chairs for guests. Awards for valor and service no longer decorated the walls. However, unlike the rest of the forgotten fire station, these walls had been freshly re-painted a stark white that hurt Lisbeth’s eyes. The not unpleasant tang of fresh paint still hung in the air, a welcome aroma after enduring the stench of sour perspiration and old blood in the “laboratory” where Mitton and the other victims had been kept.

In the fire captain’s old office there was also a white board covered with obscure mathematical equations, elaborate computer codes and complex chemical compounds. Long plastic tables, ones normally used for picnics and birthday parties, lined the walls in a horseshoe. Laptops littered the tables with the exception of one desktop computer. There were two wireless printers at the end of the tables, one of the printers still churning out pages.

Sherlock was snatching page after page as fast as the printer spit them out.

Violet sat in front of the only desktop, but she wasn’t typing. She was digging through a laptop bag that had gotten left behind.
“Sherlock,” Lisbeth scowled at the rows of laptops. “I’m good at what I can do, but even I can’t fucking hack all these laptops in less than five minutes.”

“We are going to hack the old-fashioned way, my dear Lisbeth,” Sherlock murmured as he continued to grab pages, crinkling them in his haste.

“An old-fashioned hack?”

“We’re going to nick and carry off as many of these laptops as we can.”

“Oh, we’re literally going to steal information,” Lisbeth plopped the rucksack down.

“I got a cell phone,” Violet held a Samsung Galaxy Note7 in triumph.

“Don’t unlock it, it’s flammable,” Sherlock’s brows beetled together as he stared at the print-outs.

“What?” Violet looked at the cell as Lisbeth started snatching up laptops, “Seriously?

“Obviously,” Sherlock said dismissively as he waited for the next page to print.

She tossed the cell phone onto the table as she asked, “Sherlock, did you take a picture of what was written on the white board or do I need to?”

As Violet asked this, Lisbeth took one hard look at the white board. Just in case something happened to Sherlock’s mobile and the pictures were lost. As Violet tossed aside the laptop bag and scooped up a shockingly pink purse, Lisbeth asked, “Were Brother Morris and his bastards the only ones here?”

“No,” Sherlock’s nose crinkled as he held one of the print-outs closer to his eyes. “The Sons and the Devil’s Foot so kindly disposed of the guards that were up here and thoughtfully detained the,” Sherlock snorted again in derision, “Scientists.”

“I’d love to interrogate those sons-of-bitches,” Violet dumped the purse upside-down then knelt to sift through the contents.

“Effective,” Lisbeth snorted as she slid three laptops into her rucksack.

“But useless,” Violet scowled at the usual items that had fallen out of the purse: loose change, a half-used tube of Burt’s Bees Lip Balm, apartment keys, a 30 day CTA pass, a half-full pack of Marlboro Ultra Light cigarettes, a purple Bic lighter, a couple of pens, a Butterfingers bar, a grocery list, and a packet of birth control pills.

“Violet, come here.”

The harshness in Sherlock’s voice made Violet bolt to her feet. “What it is?” she tucked a chocolate curl behind her ear.

“Can you read this,” he shoved a print-out in her face.

Violet’s mouth fell open. “What the…” she swiped the paper of Sherlock’s hand, nearly ripping it in half. “That’s… that’s Farsi.”


A vein popped out of Sherlock’s forehead when he admitted he couldn’t do something.
Violet didn’t notice, she was too busy studying the print-out she had taken from Sherlock. She shook her ugly brown curls. “I… I’m not sure. I told you. I only took a semester and that was over eight years ago, not to mention it was a bitch. I really struggled. The other languages were easy since most of them have Latin roots. And if you know German, you know Slavic languages which means you can figure out Russian if you pay attention but…”

“Try,” Sherlock snatched the last print-out from the printer.

“Um…” Violet licked her lips and fixed her eyes on the computer print-out.

“Don’t mind me, I’m just doing the heavy lifting,” Lisbeth snarled to herself as she trotted to and fro, collecting laptops.

“I’m sorry I can’t… I don’t remember. It’s all gibberish to me,” Violet held the print-out back to Sherlock.

“You’re reading it wrong,” Lisbeth huffed, dropping the laptop bag next to her rucksack. “You read Middle Eastern languages right to left, not left to right.”

“Jesus Christ, you’re right, how stupid am I?” Violet tried again. Her brow crinkling, she envisioned a room full of filing cabinets. She then pictured a drawer pop open and flash cards came flying out, twirling around. On one side of the card was the English word, one side the Farsi script… but when she tried to mentally grab a card, it would flutter away like a piece of rubbish on the breeze…

Until…

“Um… shit… OK, wait… Vuh… Valle, no… um… Valley. Um…” Violet rubbed her forehead, trying to make out the second word. “Valley…. Valley ….” She squinted at the next word.

“What?” Sherlock stood in front of her.

“Fear Valley… no, that’s not right… shit…”

But then all the color drained from her face, making her freckles and her scrapes stand out. Her right hand began to shake, making the print-out ripple.

Her left hand didn’t.

“Oh my God.”

“What?”

“It says Valley of Fear.”

“What?” Sherlock repeated himself, screwing his long face up in confusion.

“It says Valley of Fear;” she lifted her eyes up to Sherlock. In a hoarse, shaking voice, she whispered, “I’ve seen these words before.”

Just then, Chibs stuck his head in the door, a hank of greasy gray hair hanging in his eyes.

“Time to go.”
It was not a request.

Violet thrust the page back at Sherlock. He rolled all the pages up and tucked it inside his leather jacket. He snatched Lisbeth’s rucksack and hoisted onto his own thin back. Lisbeth scooped up the laptop bag and Violet grabbed two of the remaining laptops and followed Sherlock and Lisbeth out.

“Leave them,” Sherlock called over his shoulder.

Violet let the laptops drop without a second thought. As the plastic cases cracked upon impact with the cement floor, Violet drew the Glock she had tucked into the back of jeans. Green had loaned it to her with an amused arched eyebrow, “I want this back.”

She thumbed off the safety, wrapped both hands around the butt, first carefully wrapping her left hand around it first then folded her uncooperative pinkie and ring finger with her ring hand before clenching her right hand around it in a death grip.

Finally she pointed the muzzle towards the floor as she lightly placed her finger on the trigger. Her eyes darted around everywhere, protecting Sherlock and Lisbeth’s back.

They caught up with Chibs and they all started walking with real haste. No one spoke as they ran down the stairs, not risking the elevator this time. Violet’s heart rate ramped up as all their footsteps echoed in the narrow stairwell. As they re-entered the immense garage where fire engines used to reside, they skirted the sadly departed Chester-the-Molestor-mobile.

Violet cast a wary eye at the badly damaged bumper and grill of the destroyed van.

The bomb was inside the van.

_I should be arresting all of these people_, she realized dully.

“C’mon,” Rat Boy stood in the wings, waving them over.

Faint voices with heavy Chicago accents were heard outside, “What the fuck is this shit?”

Her desire to survive overrode her yearning for justice.

She followed the criminals and the consulting detective.

_Technically, he’s a criminal too. He murdered someone…_

Violet shoved that thought back down, glancing over her shoulder as they all jogged run past the giant hole in the garage door, using the battered van as cover.

Moral and ethical dilemmas could be contemplated later. Right now, she needed to run.

Then gunshots peppered the wall behind them, causing them to duck.

“Run!” Violet yelled at the others, ducking as chips of paint and concrete fluttered down onto her hair. She could smell the gunpowder. “Run!”

Lisbeth had actually tripped when she scrambled for cover but Rat Boy had grabbed her by the back of her black leather jacket, heaving her towards the hallway that led to the backdoor.

Violet straightened up and returned fire. When there was no immediate return fire, she pivoted to run, only to have her left leg start cramping up, threatening to fold underneath her.
Not now, not now! Violet bit her lip so hard she actually drew blood. As she dragged her spasming leg, she looked behind her and fired her weapon again when one of Bellucci’s men edged around the crumpled van. To her horror, the gun wouldn’t fire. The bullet had gotten jammed in the chamber.

She tried to clear the jam, but her right hand shook too much and her left hand had become utterly uncooperative.

“Oh God,” she breathed, convinced that this was the moment she was going to die.

_O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven, and the pains of hell…_

Just as the Mafioso raised his weapon to gun her down, two gunshots rang out from behind her. The Mafioso clutched his chest, crumpling to the floor.

Suddenly, long arms wrapped around her torso, raising her up. Instinctively, Violet twirled around, as if dancing. Knowing she was spent, she let herself fold over Sherlock’s shoulder as he knelt down to scoop her up in a fireman’s carry. He wrapped a massive hand around her thigh. Before he could grasp her right hand, she tried to shuffle the gun back to her left hand, but fumbled it, the gun clattering to the ground. Before she could tell Sherlock she lost her gun, he had her right wrist in a firm grip.

As Sherlock stood to this full height, grunting as he lifted Violet up, Rat Boy snatched the Glock and fired until the clip was empty while Chibs continued to cover them, with the rucksack slung over his shoulder. He had scooped it up when Sherlock threw it off to rescue Violet “Go,” the Scotsman ordered them. “I’ve got this.”

Violet let her eyes slide shut, her body jostling against Sherlock’s as he raced down the darkened hallway. Her stomach started to writhe and the last thing she wanted was to puke down the back of Sherlock’s leather jacket. She swallowed down the excess saliva her mouth suddenly produced and tried to wrestle her fear into something controllable.

_I couldn’t move my leg or my fingers…_

_Should have let him shoot me…_ tears slipped out of her hot, itchy eyes against her will.

She heard Lisbeth hiss, “Hurry,” then heard the creak and squeak of a heavy metal door being opened. Her body bumped against Sherlock’s again, harder this time as he bounced down three steps. Feeling fresh air blowing against her face, Violet dared to open her eyes just in time to see Chibs and Rat Boy bolting out of the fire house.

“Ratty, lad,” Chibs tucked his gun into the shoulder holster hidden by his _kutte_. “Your belt,” He ordered as he dropped the rucksack.

“We playin’ priest and altar boy?” Rat Boy quipped as he unbuckled his belt and pulled it through the loops.

“You know I love a good Catholic joke,” Chibs grunted irritably as he grabbed the belt from Rat Boy and looped it around the handles of the swinging doors. “Now ain’t the time, brother.” He gave the leather one last good tug. “That’s not going to hold them long, so we need to move now. Else we’re all going to need priests for last rites.”

“The alley is too narrow for me to carry you,” Sherlock let Violet slide down from his shoulders as Lisbeth, Chibs and Rat Boy disappeared down the narrow path between the fire station and the decrepit building next to it that may have been a walk-in clinic once.
“I can walk,” Violet scrubbed the sweat and tears off her grubby face. She didn’t feel as wobbly and numb as before.

But she still didn’t feel great.

Sherlock naturally deduced this, so after picking up the rucksack again, he took her left hand, draped it over his shoulders while wrapping his other arm around her waist. Moving sideways, he half-carried, half-walked her down the alley. Violet’s toes barely grazed the ground as they moved down the alley. Violet kept craning her head, trying to see if they were followed.

When she heard voices, she tugged Sherlock’s shirt. He reached up to squeeze her fingers resting on his shoulder, letting her know he heard them too and to stay quiet.

They slipped out of the alley and into another one, weaving around the labyrinth of forgotten spaces between dilapidated homes and finally into a street that was more pot holes than pavement. The bright yellow Penske truck full of motorcycles and the gray service van Stirmon had driven waited for them, idling in the road.

Upon seeing them, Bevington tossed his cigarette out the driver’s side window of the moving van. “About time,” he muttered to himself.

“Told you long enough!” Stirmon shouted through the van window.

Trager and Green were in the process of wheeling a motorcycle precariously down the ramp of the Penske moving van.

“We’re going to have company,” Chibs ignored Stirmon’s jibe. “Who’s making the sacrifice run?”

“I will,” Sherlock let Violet go and shrugged off the rucksack.

“You will not,” Violet snapped, wheeling around and almost losing her balance. She leaned against the van, hanging on the rear view mirror. “Not by yourself!”

“Do stop fussing, Violet.”

“I thought her name was Frankie?” Rat Boy asked Trager.

“Try to keep up,” Trager muttered back as he pushed the motorcycle towards Sherlock.

“I’m not letting you go on… on… a suicide run just so you can get your kicks!”

“This isn’t about me getting off on danger,” Sherlock thrust the rucksack at Lisbeth, who staggered under the weight.

“Oh, let me hold this for you, master,” Lisbeth snarled.

“This is everything about you getting your adrenaline fix!” Violet fired back. “You don’t have to play the hero! You don’t have to make the run by yourself!”

“Normally, I’d accept your offer to accompany me into battle but you can barely stand!”

“You don’t know Chicago like you do London! They could box you in!”

“Ladies,” Chibs interjected loudly, “Less arguing, more fleeing the scene.”

“I’ll go with him,” Lisbeth handed the rucksack to Rat Boy and pulled the laptop bag off over her
thin shoulder. Rubbing her sore shoulder, she added, “I’ve been to Chicago before. All the streets are on a grid system. We’ll be OK.”


“Lisbeth,” Violet clumsily reached for the thin girl, as if she could stop her.

But she could stop Lisbeth no more than she could stop a hurricane with her bare hands. Lisbeth took Violet’s hand. Uncharacteristically, she gave Violet’s hand a gentle squeeze. “I’ll protect him,” she nodded decisively. “I promise. I’ll bring him back.”

Violet wanted to laugh at the sight of this slip of a woman, promising to protect the six foot tall, leanly muscled Briton with a mind that Einstein and Edison would have envied and Tesla would have admired. But she didn’t, not after witnessing this tiny woman, more girl than woman in build, gun down three men in cold blood just for pointing guns at Sherlock, the Sons and the *MC.*

“Bring him and you back,” Violet whispered. “OK?

Lisbeth gave her a crooked smile just as Stirmon yelled out, “Hey Frankie or whatever the hell your name really is. We gotta go!”

Sherlock had already hopped up onto the motorcycle and turned it on, throttling it on purpose to draw their prey towards him. Lisbeth darted away from Violet and threw her narrow leg over the saddle, wrapping her thin arm around Sherlock’s waist.

Meanwhile, Rat Boy and Trager folded up the ramp and slammed the door shut. Rat Boy threw the rucksack and the laptop bag inside then swung himself into the passenger seat next to Bevington. Chibs followed and shoved Rat Boy to the floor so he sat between the passenger seat and driver seat on the dirty floor.

“What the hell, man?”

“Seniority rules, lad,” Chibs drawled, putting his sunglasses on.

Then he pulled a burner phone out.

“Come on, lassie,” he murmured to himself, watching Violet intensely.

Violet swallowed hard and jerked open the passenger side door as Sherlock drove the bike, black as sin, around the road in a lazy loop then parked it right at the alleyway’s entrance. Taunting their predators, Violet realized with a shudder.

Trager rushed into towards the service van and all but dove into it.

Violet and Sherlock locked eyes.

He gave her a slight nod.

Violet turned to face the Penske moving truck. She moved her aching right hand up in a circle.

“Light it up,” she said faintly, knowing Chibs couldn’t hear her.

Chibs dialed the number to the identical burner phone strapped to a bomb inside the poor dented and damaged Chester-the-Molester-mobile.
Violet slid into the passenger seat just as the bomb detonated.

There was the slightest rumbling, as if thunder threatened to move in, then a deeper, louder *boom*. The darkening skies lit up with brilliant yellows and oranges as flames shot out of the roof of the Onion Field.

Sherlock held his arm over his eyes and Lisbeth ducked her head behind Sherlock’s back. Even though they were a safe distance from the fire house, they could still feel the heat from the blast.

The Penske truck and the moving van started backing up.

“Hang on,” Sherlock ordered Lisbeth. Too late, he realized neither one of them had helmets.

Sherlock and Lisbeth shot forwards anyway, heading towards whatever remained of Bellucci’s people in order to draw them away from the escaping vehicles.

Unable to buckle her seat belt, Violet tugged her gloves off with her teeth. Her bandages ripped off as her gloves came off and her hands bled anew. Agonized, she fumbled with the seatbelt as she watched Sherlock and Lisbeth turn the corner at top sped.

Large hands reached over her seat and pulled the strap across her chest, clicking the buckle. “Hang on, FBI,” Trager growled into her ear as the van started speeding up now that the moving truck was out of their way, still hurtling backwards down the street.

Despite the stinging pain, Violet grasped the armrests of her seat.

Behind her, she heard Mitton moan.

“Hang in there, Mitton,” she called over her shoulder. Then she grunted as the van whipped around in a hard left, then shot forward, away from the inferno.

“He’s fine,” Trager said as the van started hurtling its way out of Fuller Park and towards Midway International Airport.

“You got him to calm down?”

“Nah, punched him in the face. Knocked him out.”

“*Are you kidding me?*” Violet twisted around and sure enough saw Mitton lying on an olive green Army blanket, eyes rolling back, blood dribbling out of his nose.

Green crouched over Mitton, keeping an eye on him. “Told you that wasn’t a good idea,” he informed Trager.

“What? He’s quiet,” Trager pointed out, “He ain’t moving neither.”

“Oh my God,” Violet started to press her palm to her forehead but stopped when she remembered her hands were still bleeding.

She felt Trager tapping her shoulder. She craned her head to see Trager holding out McDonald’s napkins.

“For your hands,” he lowered his voice.

Violet slipped the napkins out of Trager’s hands, noticing he had a thick line of oil and dirt underneath his nails. She knew those stains would never come out.
“Thanks,” she gave him a watery smile.

“He’s gonna be OK,” Trager assured her.

“I know,” Violet pressed the napkins against her bleeding hands.

*But am I going to be OK?*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Real Life keeps stealing me away! Thank you for sticking with this despite my irregular postings! XOXO
Chapter Thirty-six: Edge

25 April 2016
Chicago Midway International Airport
Monday night
9:05 PM Central Standard Time

As a Boeing 747 roared above them, coming in for its final decent, Violet begged over the racket, “Five more minutes…”

“Darlin’, you asked that five minutes ago,” Chibs crossed his arms, the leather of his kutte crinkling as he moved.

Violet started pacing again. Sherlock and Lisbeth were nearly an hour late to their meet-up spot in the Kiss-and-Ride stop at Midway Airport.

Even though she feared the worst, Violet continued to argue with Green and Chibs to give them more time. “Mitton’s flight back to England doesn’t leave until eleven-forty-five. He doesn’t have to be at the gate until ten-thirty, we can wait five more goddamn minutes!”

“But even if we can get into the airport without drawing undue attention, which I highly doubt,” Chibs pointed at the airport. “He’s still got to deal with TSA before boarding. I don’t think he’s going to be able to keep his shit together long enough to make it past security. Not to mention, we’re looking a tad suspicious parked out here. Pretty soon TSA is going to wander out here to take a gander.”

“Mitton can’t fly out by himself,” Violet reminded him, desperation tingeing her voice. “Lisbeth is supposed to go with him. She has his fake passports and plane ticket.”

And my fake passport… she moaned to herself.

“Honey,” Green gently pointed out, his heart breaking for her. “I don’t think your friend is in any condition to fly whether he’s with the freaky chick or not.”

“I will think of a way to get him on that plane if I have to haul him on myself,” a fire blazed in Violet’s eyes, the sharp hazel eyes she had inherited from her father.

Tony, I see so much of you in her, he thought, his heart heavy with guilt.
He had no idea the series of events he would start eight years ago when he called in his last favor with the military in order to give Major Hunter’s daughter the closure she deserved.

Brother, I hope heaven is real and you can see her and see the woman she’s become.

Just then, a motorcycle rumbled in the distance.

“Oh thank God,” Violet leaned on the Kiss-and-Ride sign, her legs giving way as Sherlock and Lisbeth roared up on a black Kawasaki, not the Harley-Davidson they had left the Onion Fields on.

“We need to go, now,” Sherlock spat out the minute he pulled up next to Chibs, Green and Violet, not even turning the motorcycle off. “Take the bikes and the van, leave the truck.”

“What about Mitton?” Violet asked as Green overlapped her, “Where’s my Harley?”

Meanwhile Chibs had turned around and bawled out, “Tiggy! Rat Boy! Unload the bikes. We got to go. Now. You,” he pointed to Bevington, “Give the keys to the van to Shorty over there,” he jerked a thumb at Lisbeth.

“Apologies, I will reimburse you for the loss. Double what it was worth,” Sherlock panted. “However, since it was not your primary bike, as you would have never let me use it, I trust you’re not that terribly upset?”

“Well… no. But what happened?” Green ran his hand over his bald head while Trager and Rat Boy snuffed out their cigarettes and ran to follow Chibs’ orders.

“Long story,” Lisbeth hopped off the motorcycle and caught the keys Bevington tossed her.

“What about Mitton?” Violet demanded as Lisbeth raced past her towards the moving van.

“He comes with us,” Sherlock told her, looking this way and that, watching out for whoever was pursuing them.

“Sherl-”

“The game is rigged,” Sherlock informed her. “He won’t make it through TSA and even if he could, his current mental incapacitation currently prohibits him from enduring the flight.”

“What is going on?” Violet shouted at him.

“Get in the van,” he ordered her with uncharacteristic harshness.

With a scowl, Violet had complied. But her stomach had pitched down to her feet as she watched motorcycle after motorcycle being unloaded from the moving van.

“Right,” Chibs had ordered while putting his helmet. “You Devil’s Foot lads that aren’t going with us to sunny Florida, don’t go home. Round up your old ladies and your kids and any other friends of the club and bring them back to the clubhouse. Put it on lockdown until further notice. This is not a discussion.” Once the bikes were unloaded and everyone had mounted their chrome-plated steeds, Chibs shouted over the roar and throttle of the engines: “Lead the way, Stick.”

With one more desperate look over his shoulder, Sherlock pulled ahead and then out of the parking lot. One by one, the remaining bikers followed: Chibs then Trager and Rat Boy, followed by Green and Vibart. Lisbeth had jumped into the driver’s seat of the van. She threw the van in drive, the tires squealing as she sped up to catch up to the bikers.
Mitton had moaned behind. “Hang in there, Mitton,” Violet beseeched him before snapping at Lisbeth, “What the hell is going on?”

“Baskerville,” Lisbeth had said through gritted teeth.

“What?”

But Lisbeth had refused to say anything else the rest of the drive. She only switched the headlights on, keeping her focus on the taillights of Green and Vibart’s expensive custom Harleys. Then, as if to completely dissuade Violet from talking, she turned the radio on to the NPR station. Pachebel’s *Solitary Hill* filled the grubby little van.

Ahead of the van, the motorcycles roared down the darkened roads, towards brighter skies and sunnier shores.

***

29 April 2016
Daytona Beach, Florida
Friday morning
6:47 AM Eastern Standard Time

His lower lip felt sore and puffy. But his itchy left side of his nose irritated him more.

Not wanting to move, he twitched his nose like a rabbit, not even opening his eyes.

But then his columella started to itch something fierce. Groggily he lifted his hand and rubbed his nose back and forth clumsily before yawning and drifting back to sleep.

Then John Mitton’s eyes flew open when he realized he had voluntarily touched his face for the first time in *months*.

*I’m free...* his heart began to pound as he tried to focus in the gloomy room. Even in the half-light, he could see a simple ceiling fan dangling from a popcorn ceiling. He could also hear a loud rattling, a familiar sound, so he wasn’t frightened, at least, not like he had been ever since Moriarty’s people threw him to the sadists at The Onion Field and resolved to forget about him. But he couldn’t place his finger on where the sound was coming from or what it even was. All he knew that it wasn’t the ceiling fan.

As he watched the fan lazily revolve, he thought, hardly daring to hope… *I’m not tied down. I can move my hands... I can... I can think.*

Because he could think clearly again, his next immediate thought was *Is this is trick?*

He pressed one hand against his sternum while running his other up and down his belly, feeling lax flesh and prominent ribs. He swallowed hard as he rubbed the fabric of the T-shirt he wore, perceiving it was a decent poly-cotton blend, not the scratchy hospital gown he remembered being forced into. He ran his hand down his leg, again, noting the loss of muscle tone as he touched the thinner yet still soft cloth of his boxer shorts.

With trembling fingers he reached out beside him and felt slick, bulky polyester beneath him, the kind used for cheap duvets for low-budget motels.

*Where the hell am I... now?*
He finally realized that the strange vibrating noise was the rattle of an ancient A/C unit that was doing nothing to cut through the humidity in the room.

He smelt mildewed carpet and stale coffee… but more importantly he smelt…

Salt water?

*The ocean!*

*What the bloody hell…?*

Suddenly the A/C seized, emitted a loud clunk then properly died.

Mitton now could hear soft snoring to the right of him.

*Wherever here is, I’m not alone…* he licked his lips, trying to assess his situation. All he knew is he was in no position to fight anyone off.

Then an unfamiliar young American voice grumbled, “God-dammit, not again.”

A very familiar British voice shushed him, “Quiet.”

“I’m not going to wake him up.”

“John Mitton is already awake and is more than likely horribly confused, George. However, I think the lady requires a few more hours of respite.”

Mitton sucked in a breath as tears burned his eyes.

*Please let this be real…*

“It’s alright, Mr. Mitton. This is very real, I assure you.”

On shaking arms, Mitton propped himself up, still trying not to weep.

Still afraid to believe, he didn’t look to his left, where The Voice came from. Instead he looked to his right, staring at the stripes of sunlight shining through the cracks where the heavy curtains didn’t quite meet. Then slowly, he rotated his head, his heart leaping into his throat when he saw a pair of jeans and a T-shirt folded neatly on a small round table in front of the room. Even in the gloom, he could see a gun resting on top of the clothes.

On the chair next to the table, was a pair of motorcycle boots and a black leather vest.

Swallowing hard, Mitton continued to survey the room, taking in the young man with a mop of brown hair and a goatee, stripped down to his boxers. Sweat beaded his pale, sunburnt flesh as he knelt at the register, trying to get the A/C going again.

“Hey,” the young man waved lackadaisically at Mitton. “I’m Rat Boy,” he turned his head to glare at someone over his shoulder. “Not George. Only my mom calls me George.”

“Fair enough,” rumbled That Voice. “Only my mother gets to call me William.”

Mitton glanced at the luggage piled in front of the dresser, rucksacks, suitcases and several laptop bags as well as a large Igloo cooler. A flat-top television was bolted on top of the dresser. Various drink cans and bottles, soda and beer littered the area surrounding the telly.
Then finally he dared to look to the left of him.

Somehow, Mycroft Holmes’ poncy little brother still managed to look imperious, stripped to his pants and vest. He needed a shave and his curly hair defied description. Saying it was a cross between a rat’s nest and an unshaven poodle would be doing it a disservice. He wiped his sweaty hand on his vest before he continued to type whatever it was into his mobile.

But it was the woman who Mitton found himself staring at as she lay oblivious next to Sherlock. The hair was different, of course. Far shorter than he remembered it and a much much darker shade of brown instead of the bright chestnut it had been when he first met her. He fumbled to turn on the small table lamp on the wobbly nightstand separating his bed from the one Sherlock and Violet rested on.

The click of the light switch was deafening to Mitton but he didn’t care. He wanted, needed to see her face, her freckled, scarred face. Since her hair was so much shorter now, he could even see the jagged scar on her throat, where Jim Moriarty pressed a steak knife against her artery, demanding she reveal the names of the people besides John Watson that a high-functioning sociopath loved.

In the clutches of the Devil Himself, the clever girl had lied. She had concealed the Great Detective’s affection for Molly Hooper. She had stared into Jim Moriarty’s mad eyes and lied straight to his face.

And lived.

And now, she was here.

She came back… for him.

“Oh my God,” Mitton folded his lips together, feeling dizzy.

“Rat Boy,” Sherlock hummed, “Dig out the Burger King bag out of the rubbish bin, would you?”

“Uh… why?”

“Mr. Mitton needs to breathe into it.”

“No, no, I’m OK,” Mitton took a deep calming breath. Then he looked at his hands and noticed that his wrists and elbows were wrapped with white cotton bandaging. He had been so overwhelmed by the concept of freedom, he hadn’t even noticed them. “Well, obviously I’m not OK but far better off than I was…” He furrowed his brow then rubbed his mouth, wincing when he touched his lower swollen lip. Then he rubbed his face again, feeling stubble everywhere. “Sherlock… how long have I been missing?”

“It is the 29th of April,” Sherlock informed him as there was a soft knock at the door.

Lithely as a panther, Rat Boy stood and all but leapt to the small table in front of the window, snatching up his gun. He pressed his finger to his lips then peered through the peephole. His shoulders drooped, then he un-did the chain-lock and deadbolt one-handed.

Lisbeth Salander, wearing cut-off shorts and a T-shirt that read “Elvis isn’t dead, he went home”, walked in, carrying a cup-holder containing four enormous iced coffees and a large bag with the word Panera printed across it. A rolled-up newspaper was under her armpit, “Hey-hey.”

Rat Boy swiftly re-secured the door once Lisbeth was inside. “Wondered where you went.”

“Hi,” Mitton cautiously lifted his legs over the side of the bed. He felt weak and wobbly as an hour-old kitten, but his legs did work. “And sorry, I need to back up a bit. April. It’s bloody April?” He puffed out his cheeks. “The last clear memory I have, it was January. Now you’re telling me it’s April? Actually April?”

“You have my most sincere apologies for the delay. I would have gotten here sooner but there were extenuating circumstances.” Sherlock glanced down at Violet. “I deduce that Miss Hunter was very good at playing hide-and-seek as a child.”

“World-champion,” was her muffled response. Then she sat up, pushing a chocolate curl out of her eyes. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Mitton said again, only this time in a broken voice. Pressing his finger and thumb to his eyes, he flicked away inconvenient tears. “Listen, someone needs to tell me what happened before I fall completely to bits.”

Meanwhile, Lisbeth had been passing out coffee. “We rescued you from an unsanctioned black site where psychotropic drugs were being tested on human subjects.”

“I was a lab rat,” Mitton said hollowly, staring at his wrists and elbows, slowly putting two and two together. His wrists were bound because the restraints had chaffed into them and dug into his tender skin. His elbows… “The last thing I remember was being strapped to a chair, like as if I was going to donate blood only they stuck these ruddy big needles into my elbows and hands and…” his mouth hung open for a bit. Then he clamped it shut and shook his head. “I’m not sure if I really don’t remember or if I don’t want to remember.” He licked his lips. “I need something to drink. Maybe some water. I feel… light-headed.”

Violet got up, wearing what obviously was a man’s T-shirt and boxers. Mitton tried to hide his shock when he saw how thin she was now and she hadn’t weighed much when he first met her. He also saw the black and blue and green and purple splotches on her leg as she knelt by the cooler, the shorts riding up.

She fished a sweaty Gatorade out of the cooler and brought it to him. “Drink this first. Slowly, you’ve been detoxing ever since we left Chicago. We’ve been trying to get fluids into you but you’re still probably dehydrated.”

“What the fuck happened in Chicago,” Mitton burst out but after that obediently sipped the sports drink. Once the liquid touched his parched lips, he became acutely aware how dry his mouth was and how raw his throat felt. The normally repulsive syrupy cherry scent of the sports drink actually smelt good. He had to force himself to drink slowly so he wouldn’t be sick.

In his cool, crisp, logical manner, Sherlock summarized what happened at the Onion Field.

“You blew the place up, are you mad?” Mitton interrupted, wiping red Gatorade off his lips with the back of his hand. “No, sorry. Are you stupid? Now there is no evidence. You helped them get away with it.”

“It was only a small explosion,” Rat Boy sucked down a large slurp of iced coffee. When Sherlock, Violet and Lisbeth glowered at him, he amended his statement. “Small-ish, maybe medium-sized, big enough to start a fire but not enough to level the joint.”

“We had to do something to draw the attention of the police and FBI,” Violet explained. “If we tried to call 911 or Homeland Security, they’d either laugh at the sheer absurdity of it or ignore the call.”

Thinking about her desperate call to Sally Donovan, trying to explain that Jim Moriarty was setting
Sherlock up for a literal Fall, she added, “Or both.”

“Plus, the door to the supply room in the basement was more than for security,” Lisbeth explained as she slathered chive-and-onion cream cheese over a sesame seed bagel. “Literal firewalls enclosed that space. Once we closed and locked the door again,” she slapped the bagel like a sandwich. “We felt reasonably secure the evidence could stay safe until the fire department got there. There’s lots of expensive equipment and supplies down there. The bastards wouldn’t want to risk it getting stolen or destroyed.” she chomped down on her bagel and picked up the Daytona Beach News Journal she had purchased. Through a mouthful of cream cheese and bread, she explained, “That also means they also found Brother Morris Scowrers and the other bastards the Sons and the Devil’s Foot caught and trussed up. That’s where we left them.”

“Not to mention the witnesses,” Violet added. “They were kidnapping children who wouldn’t be missed. Foster-care kids, runaways, kids whose parents were undocumented immigrants.”

“Jesus,” Mitton took the paper from Lisbeth, staring at the photograph of a slightly stunned Brother Morris handcuffed to the stretcher that was being wheeled into Cook County Hospital. “I thought the kids were part of my hallucinations not…” the newspaper began to shake in his hand. “Oh fuck.”

“It’s not your fault,” Violet jumped in before Mitton could say anymore.

“Yeah, man, you were really fucked up,” Rat Boy told Mitton helpfully. “When we found you, you barely knew your own name. We had to knock you out to get you out of there.”

“With what? A tranquilizer?”

“Yeah, let’s go with that.”

“No, let’s not,” Violet’s hackles immediately rose, still angry about how Trager handled Mitton’s hysteria. “You were knocked you out with a fist.”

“Ah, that’s why my lip hurts,” Mitton nodded, putting his finger to his lip, wincing. “So, do we know what they were putting into us?”

Violet and Sherlock locked eyes.

Then Sherlock looked down at his mobile again, “Working on it.”

Violet kept her face neutral as she thought Liar…

Lisbeth said Baskerville before we left Chicago…

Baskerville… Valley of Fear… Baskerville… Valley of Fear…

Violet set her coffee cup on the nightstand and mumbled an excuse about needing to use the bathroom, which wasn’t a complete lie. The coffee had gone straight to her bladder plus her teeth felt filmy and her face was sticky with old sweat. She closed the door, wrinkling her nose at the swampy odor of the motel bathroom, wafting up from the shower and sink drains. She performed all the necessary morning ablutions quickly.

After she finished washing her face, she studied herself in the mirror. Out of habit now, she touched the odd crescent shaped scar on her cheekbone then ran her finger down her throat, her fingers resting on the old knife-wound.

“Baskerville… Valley of Fear…” she whispered out loud, furrowing her brow.
To herself, she added, *But that doesn’t make any sense... there is no way*...

She splashed more cold water on her burning face...

*‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth...’*

***

9 May 2008
America Square Conference & Events Centre
City of London
Friday
10:04 AM London Time

“Apologies, Lady Smallwood,” Special Agent Violet Hunter reached into her FBI-approved black blazer and retrieved her Blackberry. “I really do need to take this call.”

“But of course,” the chilly senior agent of MI-6 gave her a courteous little smile. “I need to have a word with Mr. Holmes anyway. Perhaps I could introduce you to him later.”

“That would be…”

*Incredibly convenient since I’m supposed to be investigating him...*

“Very kind,” Violet lied. “He made some very astute observations earlier and I would appreciate the opportunity to hear him elaborate on the points he made without the time constraints we have during the formal meeting. I am extremely interested in his insight to such matters as well as some other challenges the United States face in international affairs.”

“You’re terribly formal,” Lady Smallwood arched an ash-blonde eyebrow.

“Military child, Lady Smallwood,” Violet smiled, trying to add some warmth to her voice. “Manners and politeness were drilled into us.” Her Blackberry vibrated again. “I’m sorry, I really must…”

“By all means, don’t let me keep you. Pleasure speaking to you, Agent Hunter,” Lady Smallwood nodded, again giving her a polite little smile.

But as Violet walked away, she could feel Lady Smallwood looking down at her feet and judging her nice and sensible black loafers.

*Well, fuck you too, you snobby bitch. I’d rather not have my toes pinched in expensive stilettos.*

She could also feel The Iceman’s gaze on her as she wove her way around a variety of agents, a motley mix of FBI, Interpol and MI-5, possibly some MI-6 but of course an Mi-6 agent wouldn’t really admit they were MI-6.

She passed Jack “The Silver Fox” Woodley, who was making small talk with a man who looked like a Batman villain and who was wearing a suit that Violet estimated was probably worth at least four months of her measly FBI salary.

Half of the man’s face was ruggedly handsome, the crow’s feet only accentuating his lovely eye and smile lines the fullness of his lip. But the other half of his face was covered with pink ropy scar
tissue. He was also missing an eyebrow. Apparently, he was lucky to still have use of both eyes. *He looks like the love child between Freddy Kruger and the Batman villain Two-Face,* Violet felt her gut clench hard and tight as she passed by Lord Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper, the Earl of Winchester.

She had dealt with some real low-lives in her career, absolute scumbags. She had learned a very long time ago to divorce herself from emotion, from sentiment while doing her job. She had to; otherwise she’d go insane with every case that fell apart. Or when her quarry could afford a powerful attorney and therefore actually get away with murder.

She had to work very hard to squash the repulsion she felt for the disfigured man her mentor chatted with.

After all, she wouldn’t want him to think it was his face that disgusted her.

*Baby-raper,* she thought viciously as she schooled her face to appear placid, slightly bored even as she walked by them, giving Jack a neutral nod.

Jack, impish as ever, gave her a ghost of a wink before breaking into a hearty fake laugh Violet had heard at other work functions. She highly doubted that whatever that pig said was really that funny.

Spying an empty loveseat, Violet tried to give her pink blouse and boring FBI-standard black blazer a discreet tug. Nothing fit anymore. Ever since she had transferred from doing field work in New Mexico to a more research based position in DC, the pounds were starting to pile up. She winced as the waist band of the last pair of nice black dress pants she owned pinched her waist when she sat down. She made another mental note to start hitting the gym on a more regular basis.

She really hadn’t needed to take this text message, of course. She wasn’t getting any useful information from Lady Smallwood, except for the offer to be introduced to Mycroft Holmes…

*Low-level government bureaucrat, my ass…*

Over the screen of the Blackberry, her eyes flicked up at the back of Mycroft’s head, noting how it was black, wavy and thinning. Biting her lip, she recalled her conversation with her supervisor regarding the disfigured lord and The Ice Man…

*Mycroft and Heathcliff were friends when they were kids or at least knew each other. They went to the same schools,* she had said to her boss, Section Chief Robert Carson, nicknamed “Bear” for his appearance resembling a grizzly bear as well as his gruff disposition.

He had responded, *And wouldn’t it be convenient to have your own junior government official in your pocket?*

*Incredibly convenient…*

Violet did not look at the Earl; she didn’t have to, she knew Jack was keeping him occupied, low-level profiling him. Jack didn’t know the real reason why they were all here, that two people on their team had used the VICAP computer system to hack into the Pentagon to steal military secrets to extremist insurgents. Jack wasn’t a suspect, of course, how could he be? He wasn’t just Violet’s mentor, wasn’t just one of the top profilers. He was *The Profiler,* one of the architects of building criminal profiling into a legitimate crime-fighting tool.

But even he didn’t know about Violet and Robert’s purpose. Their directive was Eyes Only from The Director himself: root out the traitor and connect the dots from the traitor to the Earl of Winchester. The lord was suspected of funding a shadowy criminal enterprise who acted as “consultants” to other criminal and terrorist groups. However, no one had been able to prove it… yet.
Violet’s stomach fluttered a little bit when she thought of Mycroft Holmes and the Earl of Winchester. Something had occurred between them. They definitely weren’t friendly towards each other, barely polite even. An undercurrent of genuine dislike vibrated between them. Only someone who had spent much of her adulthood fine-tuning her observational skills like Violet had would have noticed.

But it wasn’t the micro facial expressions or the sarcastic comments disguised as jokes but really were true insults or the subtle body language. Something hummed between the two men.

Violet could never completely explain away her emotional reactions to people. She didn’t believe in telepathy or any sort of stupid psychic phenomena. Often though, after observing someone, she could almost feel exactly the same emotions her mark was experiencing. Sometimes after a grueling interrogation she’d have to sneak off to one of the locker rooms at J. Edgar Hoover and shower, to literally scrub away the murderous feelings of disgust, humiliation and rage she had absorbed from her suspect.

Not wanting to draw attention to herself by staring at Holmes or Lord Cullen-Culpepper, Violet rolled her thumb over the home button of her Blackberry, scrolling to her missed messages.

SGT WIL appeared on her Caller ID and Violet ground her teeth while struggling not to roll her eyes. She humored him because Sergeant Wilson had been a friend of their father and it was good to have a connection at the Department of Defense. Plus, her brother Michael would murder her if she burned one of his sources.

Still, he could be a pain in the ass. He didn’t understand the concept of Time Zones, for example, even after Violet had told him she was going to be in England this week.

Rolling her eyes, she opened the first text message:

Hey girl, got possible lead on your dad’s case, could be nothing, is probably nothing. Thought you and Mikey want to take a look.

Violet hesitated, her thumb hovering over the Blackberry’s roll bar.

She had poked around her dad’s death here and there, more as a hobby than anything else.

There was no logical reason for the military to lie about the nature of her father’s death. It had been an accident, a horrible, terrible accident but the kind of accident that happened in battle.

When the chaplain’s car had pulled up in front of her grandmother’s house that horrible gray day, her grandma had switched the vacuum off and started untying the unflattering daisy-patterned apron she wore to protect her dress while doing chores.

Oh, her lip had wobbled. I thought I felt a ghost walking over my grave today...

Violet never forgotten how destroyed her grandmother had looked. She remembered switching off the old television set, a relic from the Sixties, and going to her. Violet never forgot how her grandmother had put her soft, varicose-veined hand on Violet’s thin shoulder then squeezed hard. Violet’s knees had nearly buckled.

Whatever you are thinking or feeling, you bury it girl, her grandmother’s eyes had sparkled with tears but her mouth was hard. You can cry and scream later, but right now, you bury it. Your brother needs you and I need you, do you understand? You don’t fall apart, hear me?
Her grandmother’s warning, as harsh as it was, served her well. When the chaplain delivered the news that Major Hunter had died by friendly fire, Violet felt like she had been sucker-punched when those words fell from his thin lips. She wanted to scream and throw things and hit the chaplain in the face with his black leather Bible. She wanted to fling herself at the chaplain, wrap her fingers around his skinny neck until she choked the truth out of him, until he confirmed what she felt…

*It was not an accident, you liar! My father was murdered!*

She knew that to be true just as she knew that the sun is hot and water is wet. But she had been only fourteen, definitely not a little girl but not quite an adult. No one would have believed her. Not even her grandma, even though the old woman seemed to have the same eerie “spidey-sense” when it came to people.

Time marched on. Violet had learned to move on, learned to accept the fact that wallowing in the past only served to severely limit her future… but eventually she also learned that while she drove forward, it was important to check the rearview mirror once in a while.

*And I’m not a snotty teenager anymore,* Violet reminded herself as she opened the second text message. *All I want is confirmation of a suspicion. If Dad did die in friendly fire, nothing changes. If he didn’t… we’ll figure out the next appropriate step after confirmation.*

She opened the next message. It was only three cryptic words:

*Valley of Fear*

Violet tilted her head to the side, pushing a light brownish-blonde curl off her forehead.

*What the hell does that mean?*

Just then, someone called out that the meeting would be resuming in five minutes and would everyone be kind enough to return to the main hall and find their seats?

Violet stood up and thumbed a quick reply, saying she’d look into it when she was back in the US. She tucked the Blackberry back into her blazer pocket and looked up just in time to see Jack shaking the Earl’s hand.

“Heath, it’s been a pleasure working with you.”

Violet felt her mouth go completely dry as her heart began to pound wildly. *No…*

The Earl nodded, murmured his thanks and politely extricated his hand from Jack’s. Jack patted the Earl on the upper arm, turned and saw Violet looking straight into his eyes.

Violet plastered a benign smile on her face even as her skin erupted into gooseflesh.

*You don’t address English nobility in a familiar fashion in a formal setting. He should have called him ‘Lord Cullen-Culpepper’ and he should have NOT touched him. Jack would know that, he would have done his homework before coming to this conference…*

*Jack is the traitor and he just tipped the Earl off that the FBI is on to him…*

In that instant, in that split second when Special Agent Violet Hunter’s life changed irrevocably forever, she completely forgot about *Valley of Fear.*
Someday I will have free time again... now is not that time, unfortunately. Not putting this on hiatus or anything, just trying to get back into a routine, but Real Life has been incredibly busy. I actually should have been in bed an hour ago.. *le sigh.* Adulting is hard and stupid sometimes... but as an adult, I also get to buy alcohol so at least I've got that going for me lol.

Posting might be a bit sporadic until work settles down or I win the lottery, which ever comes first. :^)

And thank you thank you thank you for sticking with this fic, even though I'm doing drive-by postings and haven't had a chance to properly reply to comments (I do love all your comments and kudos though!)

*The most famous of all of Sherlock's quotes (and one of my personal fav's) is from "The Sign of Four."

Sergeant Wilson is a character from "Valley of Fear."

I'm going to have a glass of wine and go to bed. Hope everyone has a lovely week :^)


Illegal Move

Chapter Summary

Illegal move

A move that is not permitted by the rules of chess. An illegal move discovered during the course of a game must be corrected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Thirty-seven: Illegal Move

29 April 2016
Daytona Beach, Florida
Friday morning
7:29 AM Eastern Standard Time

She had completely forgotten about Valley of Fear, until now.

Gripping the side of the chipped enamel sink, she hung her head, felt the stretch in her stiff neck and shoulder muscles as she moved her head slowly from side to side.

What the hell is Valley of Fear and what does it have to do with my father?

She startled a little when someone rapped their knuckles on the thin wooden door.

“Violet,” Sherlock’s voice was muffled on the other side. “Chibs and Tig wish to speak to us.”

“Be there in a minute,” Violet struggled to keep her voice sounding normal. “I need to get dressed first.”

“Don’t delay too long,” Sherlock said on the other side. He had already pulled on a T-shirt and jeans and was already regretting his wardrobe choice as the heavy denim threatened to stick to his thighs in the already sweltering Florida heat. However, he didn’t fancy getting sunburned either. The last time his bare legs saw daylight was 2006.

“I’ll be outside,” he called out to no one in particular as he snatched up his mobile, his coffee, a pair of cheap sandals Americans called “flip-flops” (hideous things) and keys, actual metal keys, not a plastic key card. This motel hadn’t been kidding when it advertised how “retro” it was, which of course, was code for “too cheap to remodel.”

Sherlock let the door swing shut behind him as he stepped outside. The roar of the sea comforted him, a pleasant sibilant sound as the waves crashed down and slapped the sandy shore. The wind ruffling his hair was a pleasant sensation, as if it served to cool his overheated brain after a long day of deducing and outwitting.

He hated admitting that he was tired, tired down to the very marrow of his bones.
However dreadful this chintzy, rent by the hour, “no-tell motel” was, the location couldn’t be better. The ocean was within walking distance.

The sand crunching between his toes, Sherlock made his way towards the sea, his narrow eyes squinting in the bright sunlight. He carried his coffee in one hand, his hideous new shoes in the other. He wished he would have brought sunglasses instead of the stupid shoes.

To be honest, they weren’t quite in Daytona Beach, at least not in the city and definitely not near any tourist traps. They would not run into any NASCAR enthusiasts here. There were south of the city, past the yacht clubs and expensive condominium communities. This was a place off the beaten path, where questionable transactions occurred, usually at night.

Once he reached the shoreline, he observed, enrapt by the waves rolling in then slowly sliding back out. He had deleted natural science, (except for decomposition, of course) but that didn’t mean he couldn’t enjoy its beauty.

Also didn’t mean he couldn’t finish his coffee while watching the sun kiss the ocean, sending gold sparks across the sea as the sky turned lemon-yellow and flamingo pink. He rolled the turn-ups of his jeans to his knees and waded into the cool salt-water up to his ankles. He smiled in delight, almost childlike as the water rushed around his pale legs. He tilted his face towards the sun, already feeling an intense heat he rarely experienced in England. He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with fresh air tempered with salt and seaweed and marine life.

Then he slowly opened his eyes and dug into his pocket, taking out his mobile.

He opened the last two text messages he had received while trying to outrun the Bellucci brothers in Chicago:

**Miss me?**

Then there was a picture of Jim Moriarty laughing, the same picture that had terrorized London on New Year’s Day 2015. The graphic that had saved Sherlock’s life, saved him from exile in Serbia, saved him from…

**Owing my life to Irene Adler,** Sherlock shivered. As fond as he was of The Woman, the idea of being in her debt was not very enjoyable. However, it had been Irene he called when he had found the hidden prepaid mobile while incarcerated in Mycroft’s office before being hauled off to solitary confinement in a secret MI-6 facility. And it had been The Woman who hired a different private jet than the one MI-6 had waiting for him on the tarmac. Her jet was already en route to Serbia when Sherlock was saying what he had thought was his last farewell to John…

Such a stupid good-bye. Idiots, the pair of them.

*I can’t think of a single thing to say…*

**Me either…**

*Sherlock is a girl’s name…*

*Marissa, you named her after Mary… how… why…?*

Sherlock shut that line of thinking down at once then threw the mobile into the sea. He watched the mobile skip across the waves, then float for a bit before finally sinking away. He felt a tiny pinch in his miniscule heart at the idea of being temporarily cut off from John, but the mobile was compromised. He wouldn’t even risk having Lisbeth research the origin of the text and gif. By that
time, the messages had malware or viruses or Trojan Horses embedded in them.

Besides, he memorized all of John’s phone numbers, his mobile, the burner he gave him, his work number, and Mary’s cell phone along with many other important telephone numbers and email addresses long ago. It wouldn’t be difficult to input all that information into a new mobile, just terribly tedious and time-consuming and boring.

Still… as pathetic and disgustingly sentimental as it was… he liked re-reading John’s emails to “Mike Stamford” late at night when he couldn’t sleep.

He had tried and tried to think of someone, anyone else who could have led both Mycroft and Professor Moriarty on a wild goose hunt though Europe. Time and time again, he came up with no one. It wasn’t a matter of competency. It was a matter of logic. Logic dictated that if Sherlock Holmes was incapacitated for any reason, he would send John Watson in his stead. John was the only logical choice to chase after “Violet Hunter” aka “Rose Spender” through Switzerland and Germany, maybe even Spain if necessary.

Still, he didn’t like it. Didn’t like being separated from his best friend, didn’t like John being on his own in a strange country, chased by two of the most dangerous men in Europe…

Stop it, he is not alone. He is in Lausanne, with Dupin, who is nearly as resourceful and intelligent as I am. John is keeping Mycroft’s attention on him, not me. More importantly he is also finally getting a chance to heal, his mind and spirit as well as his body. He is probably taking Gladstone for long walks while quoting TS Elliot:

*By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept…*

Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long…

No longer having fun, Sherlock waded out of the sea. He grimaced as the sand clung to his wet feet. He wished he had some water, but he made do quenching his thirst with his lukewarm coffee. As he turned around again to watch the rising sun, he thought about the lands on the other side of the Atlantic.

*Truth or poetry…*

*Is there truth in poetry?*

Sherlock furrowed his unkempt black brows as he watched two seagulls squabble over a crab desperately scuttling away from them.

The wind shifted. Other scents wafted past Sherlock’s hypersensitive nose: Motor oil, sweat, coffee and fresh doughnuts, Old Spice, Men’s Speedstick, shaving cream, fresh blood (*someone nicked himself shaving this morning…*)

“‘Morning boys,” Sherlock didn’t turn around, just held his coffee cup to his lips.

Chibs flanked one side of Sherlock and Trager the other. Turns out it was Trager who had nicked himself; there was the tiniest bit of toilet paper on his throat, near his Adam’s apple. Both men had wisely worn their sunglasses, but Chibs had tied a black bandanna around his head to keep his long grey hair out of his eyes.

Neither one of them wore their leather *kuttes* either. Sherlock knew that there were times bikers were expected to wear their *kuttes* and times when they could not. However, Sherlock strongly suspected that both men deferred their *kuttes* due to the humidity, already oppressive before the sun had even
risen. Both men wore their jeans and biker boots, but they only wore the vests that the Americans derogatively called “wife-beaters.”

They also both had enormous iced coffees from Dunkin’ Donuts, which, for some reason, amused Sherlock.

“Hungry?” Trager held out the white and bright orange bag to Sherlock. The bottom of the bag was already slick with oil and sugar.

Sherlock shook his head. “I never did properly offer my condolences regarding the passing of your previous president.” He studied the white plastic lid of his coffee cup, thinking. Finally he said, “I liked Jax.”

He could think of no higher compliment.

“Aye, he…” Chibs stared out at the sea while Trager studied the sand. “He… erm…”

“We owe him our lives,” Trager said reverently. “I owe him… everything.”

*I wonder what it would feel like*, Sherlock wondered, *to be the center holding the universe together as Jax Teller was to these men.*

He hoped he’d never have to bear that responsibility.

“I trust now the incorporation of the Devil’s Foot into the Sons of Anarchy will now go smoothly,” Sherlock hoped he sounded sensitive, or at the very least, not rude. It was more than obvious that these men still grieved for their brother…

Abruptly, Mary’s voice echoed in his ears:

*You died. You jumped off a roof. You’re dead!*

*Go away Mary…*

*Oh my God, oh my God. Do you have any idea what you’ve done to him?*

*Get out of my head, liar…*

“Aye, we’ll be patching them over,” Chibs nodded before taking a long sip of his iced coffee, with was more watered down coffee than ice. “Some of the weaker members will be cut, but that’s nothing new in a patch-over. Herd’s got to be thinned. Some men aren’t cut out to wear the Reaper.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock said solemnly, eying Chibs’ many tattoos up and down his arms. “Miss Salander said you wished to speak to me?”

“We need to talk to you about your little FBI friend,” Trager spoke up for the first time this morning.

“Shouldn’t the little FBI friend be included in this conversation?” a dry-as-dust feminine voice piped up behind him.

The three men turned around. Violet had deferred to the heat and put on a pair of cheap khakis shorts she had bought at the same Wal-Mart where Sherlock bought his terrible flip-flops. She also wore her own pair of terrible flip-flops, red to match her tank-top. The tank-top revealed she now sported a magnificent oval bruise on her right shoulder, where the butt of the shotgun had recoiled against her.

“And I’m not in the FBI, not anymore,” Violet crossed her freckled arms over her stomach as she
made her way towards the men.

“But you’d like to be,” Chibs arched a silvery eyebrow.

“True, but it’s kind of difficult to rejoin the FBI when you’re accused of murder.”

“Oh, that’s been taken care of,” Sherlock waved that concern away.

Violet opened her mouth to ask how then rolled her eyes as she said, “We’re going to put a pin in that to discuss later.”

“So, that particular obstacle has been cleared,” Chibs elongated and trilled his Scottish burr more than necessary, “Where does that leave us?”

“Are you worried about me selling you all out to the feds in order to get myself back into their good graces?”

“We haven’t had the best of luck with law enforcement, if you catch my drift,” Trager said far too causally to really be causal.

“Yes, I’ve read what happens to cops and agents when they cross the Sons, they tend to die or disappear,” Violet, however, sounded deadly serious. “I didn’t know her personally, my path didn’t cross with ATF very often in my career, plus she was before my time in the Bureau but I have heard of June Stahl and she had a... reputation.” She wetted the top of her lip, not biting it for once, probably because she had bitten her lower lip to shreds during her last day in Chicago. “Let’s just say the agents who worked on her case didn’t exactly make it their top priority, if you catch my drift.” She lifted her chin, “Proper procedure in a situation like mine would be for me to recuse myself from any case involving the Sons of Anarchy due to my personal relationship to Philip Green.” She batted her eyes then smiled angelically as crow’s feet created perfect ellipticals around her hazel eyes. “Assuming he makes the cut, of course.”

“Why would you have to recuse yourself from anything?” Chibs gave Violet a tight little smile. “We’re completely legitimate. We’re clean.”

“Yeah, so am I,” Violet stopped smiling, “Being implicated in a RICO case because one of your brothers got greedy is not on my bucket list. Look,” she added hastily, holding up a hand, stopping Chibs’ angry protest. “None of us here are innocent. I’m not going to throw your club under the bus to further my career. That’s not my style. It never has been, even if I wasn’t up to my eyebrows in shit right along with you guys. But,” now she held up a finger, “If one of your brothers is dumb enough to commit a felony, especially if it involves murder, kidnapping or narcotics, I’m not lifting a finger,” she shook her pointer finger now, as if she was a schoolteacher scolding an erstwhile student. “To help them if they get caught, especially if they’re that damn stupid.”

“Now, wait a minute,” Trager jumped in but Sherlock, recognizing that Violet was on a roll, shook his head at him.

“Also and more importantly, if I catch wind that the feds or ATF or whoever plan to frame one of your brothers or your entire club for something you didn’t do, or coerce you to do something you don’t want to do in order to catch a bigger fish, like what the CIA did with that cartel bullshit, I will give you all a head’s up. That I promise.”

Chibs and Trager looked over Violet’s head and had a silent conversation only bikers could have.

Trager then looked over his sunglasses at Violet. His eyes were bluer than the bright ocean behind him. “And the money?” he arched a black eyebrow.
“I’m doubling what I said I’d pay you,” Violet dug into her bra and pulled out a small jump drive. “Here,” she placed it in Trager’s hand. “Lisbeth helped me format it last night. Excel spreadsheets, showing how the money is divvied up and which banks the funds are kept. None of the accounts go over a hundred thousand and are all under dummy corporation names for small businesses. Once you’re back in Cali, call the first bank on the list, make up a cock-and-bull story about how your debit card was lost, not stolen. Stolen gets cops involved. The bank will send you a new card and you can start moving funds around. Then make sure you get rid of the evidence,” she nodded at the jump drive. “Once you’ve got the cash flowing.”

Trager stared at the jump drive as if she had handed him the Philosopher’s Stone. “You sure you really want to be a cop? ‘Cause you’re really fucking good at being a criminal.”

A slow smile, a genuine smile spread across Chibs’ face, “Aye, we’re good.” He pulled out his old flip-phone (Chibs stoutly refused to upgrade to a Smartphone.) “Well, it’s already going to be a scorcher. We best shove off soon.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock, who had been on tenterhooks during the conversation between Violet and the Sons, his agile mind already calculating various escape scenarios should that conversation go south. “And this is where we must part ways, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, are you going back to Charming then?” Violet asked the Sons as they started walking towards the crummy little motel.

“Nah,” Trager grinned. “Orlando. We’re going to Disney World.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock, who had been on tenterhooks during the conversation between Violet and the Sons, his agile mind already calculating various escape scenarios should that conversation go south. “And this is where we must part ways, I’m afraid.”

“I promised the lads that if they were good boys, Daddy would take them to Disney,” Chibs gave her a wide toothy grin.

Violet immediately pictured all the tough and grizzly bikers in their leathers, riding the Dumbo ride while wearing Mickey Mouse ears. She covered her face and started to giggle helplessly.

Sherlock crinkled his brow, puzzled. Then he held his hand out to her. “Come along Violet.”

Violet lowered her hand, her heart skipping a beat.

How many times had she heard that small little phrase, so simple and yet so… Sherlock.

How it had nearly broken her when she thought she’d never hear that again.

Violet took two long legged steps to catch up, her feet and ankles covered with sand. She almost skipped, just for the sheer joy of motion, something that could be denied to her in the very near future.

I should make my own Mind Palace, so I can remember what freedom was like…

She didn’t take Sherlock’s hand. Instead, she wrapped her arm around his thin waist as she never could in public in London because Miss Smith wouldn’t do that.

She smiled as Sherlock wrapped his long arm around her shoulders, mindful of her bruised right shoulder. Together they followed the Sons back to the hotel to pack and arrange transportation for themselves as the Sons and the Devil’s Foot were taking the van and the motorcycles.
The bikers took Sherlock, Violet, Lisbeth and a very dazed but mostly lucid Mitton to the nearest Enterprise. Mitton had delayed their departure by standing with his face upturned to the sun, toes buried in the sand, his thin, ashy face stretched out by a huge smile. He closed his eyes and held his hands out in benediction as the sea breeze ruffled the T-shirt and shorts he had changed into after a very long, very hot, very soapy shower.

“Five more minutes,” he had whispered when Violet had tugged on his thin wrist, telling him it was time to go.

Using one of her many false identities, Lisbeth rented a reasonable sedan that could comfortably seat four.

While Lisbeth sorted out the vehicle situation at the counter, Green pulled Violet aside. “Just want you to know… that… your dad would be so proud of you, honey.”

Violet’s eyes welled up as she threw her arms around the great big bald biker, “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Sure,” he ran a trembling hand down her curls. “Next time though, don’t throw a knife at me to get my attention. A phone call will do.” Violet broke the embrace with a laugh. Green chuckled too and added, “You also owe me a Glock.”

“Add it to the bill,” Violet rolled her eyes as the rest of the Sons and Vibart came to say their goodbyes.

“Never thought I’d meet a cop I’d actually like,” Rat Boy told Violet as he shook her hand.

“Oh,” Chibs stroked his goatee, thinking of Lieutenant Althea Jarry back home. “You’d be surprised, Georgie-Boy.”

“Oh God, don’t call me that,” Rat Boy groaned. Then to Lisbeth, he handed her a slip of paper, “This is Happy’s cell phone number. Seriously, you two should hook up if you’re ever in California.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea,” Sherlock muttered, remembering Happy’s proclivity towards homicide. Lisbeth however, just smiled her mysterious little crooked smile and tucked the paper away in her jeans pocket.

“I think,” Violet turned to Trager after he had said his good-byes to Sherlock, “You should buy Venus a Cinderella ball gown when you go to Disney.”

“Yeah?” Trager lit up.

“She would love it,” Violet assured him.

“Hey, that would make me her Prince Charming. Get it? Charming?”

“Yeah, we get it. Hysterical,” Chibs deadpanned. “Let’s go.”

“Sure you don’t want to drive along with us?” Vibart asked.

Violet shook her head. “Miami is out of your way from Orlando.”

“Well, if you guys make it back to Chicago in time, the patch-over party is going to be epic man, just epic,” Trager beamed.
Chibs rolled his eyes then held his hand out to Sherlock. “If you’re ever in Charming…”

“I’ll know where to find you,” Sherlock gave Chibs’ hand a hearty shake. “Thank you,” he added in a softer voice.

“Anything for a friend of the club,” Chibs vowed before giving Sherlock a manly hug, complete with the two slaps on the back. Sherlock reciprocated, barely able to restrain himself from rolling his eyes. He had found it fascinating how affectionate the bikers could be, even though he was not a fan of being on the receiving end of that affection.

Better to be a target for their affection than their destruction, Sherlock reminded himself.

Still, he would love to go back to Charming for a long holiday, just to sit in the corner of the SOA clubhouse and observe.

But the temperature was continuing to climb and the bikers wanted to find a place to eat and drink while the heat was at its most oppressive.

Lisbeth and Mitton had an early flight to catch in Miami the next morning so they couldn’t delay anymore. Sherlock volunteered to drive, changed the radio station to NPR and unrolled the windows. He grudgingly rolled them back up when everyone complained and Violet cranked the A/C to full blast.

As the sedan trundled down the highway, Vibart fished out a prepaid cell phone he had been carrying with him since Violet had arrived in his life.

He fired off one text:

They are going to Miami.

Then he switched off the phone and mounted his bike.

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to everyone who has stuck with me and this story especially with the erratic posting. I think I can finally get back on a schedule now, until Labor Day Weekend at least...

BUT... I finished writing the final chapter of this fic today. :^o

Thank you so much for your kudos, rec's and comments. They make my day :^)
Chapter Summary

Resign

To concede loss of the game.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-eight: Resign

18 May 2016
Havana, Cuba
Wednesday morning
11:29 AM Eastern Standard Time

“Lo siento, señora.”

Sherlock studied Violet with his usual scrutiny as an ancient ceiling fan whirred slowly above them, doing nothing to chase the heat away.

She sat very still and very quiet, clutching her cheap handbag. Her eyes were unreadable, staring off, looking at something other than the kindly Cuban doctor in the tiny office of the state-run hospital.

Everything had gone without a hitch ever since they had left Daytona Beach. Once they had arrived in Miami, they checked into a Best Western near the airport under yet another one of Lisbeth’s aliases. Then they went to a TGI Friday’s, where Mitton gorged himself on Loaded Potato Skins, Buffalo Wings, Chicken Tostada Nachos and a sundry of other greasy appetizers, washing it all down with Guinness.

“You’re going to make yourself sick,” Violet had mildly scolded him as she sipped a Coors Light and picked at her cheeseburger and fries.

“Worth it,” Mitton had said as he filched a shrimp from Lisbeth’s Ribeye Steak and Shrimp platter. As Lisbeth had glared murderously at Mitton, he had cheekily added, “I’m going to have pudding too. And I’m not sharing.”

“Dessert,” Sherlock had corrected him, ignoring his own shrimp platter, disappointed that the fries were nothing like English chips. He had glared at his cup of black tea as if it had personally insulted him. It had tasted like the shit Violet used to brew whenever she attempted to make tea.

Despite Violet’s dire predictions, Mitton had not gotten sick. But when it came time for Sherlock and Violet to take him and Lisbeth to the airport, Mitton had looked a little green around the gills.
They had said their goodbyes in the parking lot, inside the rental car, not wanting to create a scene or get caught on the security cameras.

“It is imperative you stay in Sweden, below the radar until I tell you to return to London,” Sherlock ordered him as Violet handed out the airplane tickets she had printed in the hotel’s business center. “If Mycroft catches wind that you’re free…”

“I have no desire to speak to Mycroft or anyone at MI-6 until I consult with an attorney and am made fully aware of my rights,” Mitton assured Sherlock. “Plus, I want to see that bastard’s face when I stroll into his office.”

“I will keep an eye on him,” Lisbeth told Sherlock then turned to Mitton. “My flat has plenty of room and it’s very private. Other than Sherlock, my friend Mikhail Blomkvist is the only other person who knows where I really live. Everyone else thinks I live in my mother’s old flat in Lundagartan.” She brightened. “My real home has many bedrooms and a Jacuzzi bath and an espresso machine. You’ll be very comfortable, I think.” She had sounded absurdly pleased by her material possessions, perhaps tickled by the idea of actually sharing them with someone.

Mitton had not been paying attention to her flat’s amenities. “Mikhail Blomkvist? He’s the guy who broke the Wennerstrom Affair story and the corruption within Säpo…” he had trailed off and then really looked at small tattooed woman. “You’re that Lisbeth then. Lisbeth Salander.”

“No ma’am, I have no problem with anyone saving my arse,” he grinned at her. Then he sobered up as he said, “Really, you lot… I have no way of paying you back. In saving my life, you all conferred a value on it,” Mitton had hesitated, swallowing down a lump in his throat. “It is a currency I do not know how to spend.”

“Start by staying safe for a few more weeks, Mitton,” Violet had turned around in the front seat, kneeling now so she could face him.

“Or better yet, start by not missing your flight,” Sherlock had drawled.

“He’s right,” Lisbeth had nodded. “We have to go now.”

Mitton had then given Violet the world’s most awkward hug, since the car seat was in the way. He did manage a kiss on her cheek then turned to Sherlock to shake his hand. “You are the better of the two Holmes brothers, you know.”

Sherlock had only grunted, but he had been pleased by the praise.

But I don’t want to be better… just… equal…

“Lisbeth, text my prepaid once you are both safely ensconced back in your flat on Mosebacke Torg,” he had said instead of acknowledging Mitton’s praise.

“Use a secure chat room in Hackers’ Republic and we can discuss our findings. We’ll figure out what Valley of Fear means and what that old bastard Moriarty is up to,” Lisbeth had said somberly. “He won’t win, the old creep.”

During the drive to Miami, Lisbeth had downloaded the contents of the laptop computers they had stolen from the Onion Fields to memory sticks then wiped the laptops clean. She had done the same to Violet’s, advising her it was wise she had never messed with the encrypted files she had stolen from the deceased Senator’s computer. “There’s malware on it, a tracing program,” she had told
Violet. When Violet’s face had crinkled in confusion, Lisbeth had explained, “If you would have opened it and tried to decipher it, it would have activated a digital breadcrumb trail for the CIA. They would have pinpointed your location and would have had local law enforcement at your door before you could say boo.”

Violet’s face had turned ashen but she managed to choke out, “Can you open it without activating the tracing program?”

“Not overnight, but it’s doable,” Lisbeth had said with a shrug, as if she were a chess grandmaster facing certain checkmate. Could she get out of it? Sure, but not in one move.

It wasn’t only Lisbeth who had a lot on her plate though. Sherlock and Violet also had their own homework assignments.

Sherlock had The Work. Violet had her health.

Once Mitton and Lisbeth were safely on their flights, flying towards the sunrise, Sherlock and Violet had slipped out of the busy, boisterous city undetected. Fueled by coffee and adrenaline, they drove non-stop to the Key Biscayne, to meet Mrs. Hudson’s son, Rupert.

As Mrs. Hudson had once told Violet and Molly, her son looked exactly like the Muppet character “Scooter,” including the odd tuft of hair on top of his head and the round glasses. His voice even had nearly the same nasally pitch as the orange Muppet.

Unlike his mother, he hadn’t been bothered by his unflattering sobriquet.

He also owned and ran a successful fishing charter business: *Scooter’s Deep-Sea Fishing*.

It was not lucrative because of the number of swordfish caught during outings on the sea. It was profitable because of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy regarding where the luxury fishing boats actually went while sailing on the high seas and who had rented those particular boats.

So off to Cancun they went. Once dropped off in Mexico, Violet and Sherlock rented another boat, a modest little houseboat rather than a luxury fishing boat from a friend and colleague of Scooter’s. They also paid Scooter’s friend to navigate them to a different destination.

Twenty-four hours later, Violet and Sherlock set foot in Cuba.

“My dad would be rolling in his grave if he knew where I was,” Violet had deadpanned as they pulled up to the harbor.

Sherlock had ignored her, listening intently to Scooter’s friend on how to back the boat out and where and how to anchor it securely when they didn’t want to be by the harbors, around people.

Besides, they were not there for a holiday, Sherlock and Violet. He had pulled many strings and called in many favors to get her an appointment with a neurodegenerative disease specialist, more importantly one who would not ask questions.

The specialist, a soft-spoken man with a chipped front tooth and liquid gold eyes had brightened when he discovered that both “Mr. and Mrs. Smith” were fluent in Spanish. Then he had somberly listened to Violet’s list of symptoms. He had pushed his empty coffee mug towards her, asked her to pick it up with her right hand, then to do the same with the left. Frowning as she struggled to get a good grip on the mug, he had ordered tests right away.

*Tests*, Sherlock sourly thought as he continued to stare at Violet, waiting for her to make some sort of
reaction, *Trial by fire is what they should have called it.*

Blood and urine samples. A nerve conduction study. An MRI. An electromyogram performed by a young intern, poking her here and there with a needle electrode through her already bruised and battered skin to test the electrical activity of her muscles during contraction and at rest.

Each test more invasive and less dignified than the last.

Sherlock had been hopeful when the kindly old specialist ordered a muscle biopsy. Often that particular test was ordered when it was believed that the patient did not have ALS but some sort of muscle disease. Violet had borne that test, along with all the other tests, with her trademark stoicism and bravery.

But her courage had failed during the lumbar puncture. Her nails had dug into Sherlock’s skin deep enough to draw blood as the kind old specialist, murmuring *lo siento* and *calmado, calmado por favor,* drove the thick needle between the two vertebrae of her lower back.

Staying as still as possible, Violet had sobbed silently through the procedure, more out of terror than pain since a local anesthetic had been applied to her back. Sherlock had wanted to weep as well. He knew that while there was no actual pain, there was a deep, uncomfortable pressure throbbing in her lower back. Not to mention a great ruddy needle stuck in her spine.

Instead of weeping, he refused to leave her side. He let Violet draw his blood with her nails as she clung to his wrist.

Later, when the longest forty-five minutes of their lives was finally over, he helped her pull the flowing sundress back over herself then knelt down to buckle her sandals since her back ached too much to bend over to do up her shoes herself. Then he carried her back to the specialist’s tiny office. She actually hadn’t resisted him, didn’t even make one of her wry comments about being capable of walking on her own or how chivalry actually wasn’t dead.

Like at the Onion Field, she knew she was worn out, done in.

Still, Sherlock felt something die within him when she didn’t argue as he scooped her up.

The specialist, truly a tender-hearted man, had allowed them to use his space with no time restraint in order to give them a much-needed moment of privacy. He had even left an already melting ice-pack, two acetaminophen tablets and a glass of tepid water. Sherlock had sunk down in the doctor’s chair, Violet still in his arms. Then he had just let her cry against his shoulder until the tears dried to a salty crust on her face while he awkwardly held the ice pack to the sore spot on her lower back.

Still he had clung to hope, illogically so. All the signs were there, had been, from the beginning, from the very first time they first confronted each other in the Carruthers Brokerage Firm’s boardroom… how her hands had trembled… how angry she had been when he had snatched her right wrist and pulled her hand towards him, his nose nearly touching her knuckles, almost as if he was going to kiss her hand…

*I will scratch your bloody eyes out if you don’t release me…*

But after the lumbar puncture, she had clung to him as if she had never wanted to let go.

Other than that one emotional display, Violet still remained Violet for the most part. She dove into The Work just as eagerly as Sherlock, if the day’s barrage of medical tests hadn’t completely spent her. While her body continued to betray her, her mind was quick and clever as it always had been. Soon, with her help, she had converted the little houseboat into their private crime lab, Scooter’s
friend having departed to visit friends and comrades in Havana, or so he claimed. Neither Violet nor Sherlock knew who Scooter’s friend was or what his true business was. Neither of them cared very much. They had their own work to do and the privacy was not only appreciated but very necessary.

Violet always hovered over his broad shoulder whenever he Skyped with Bill Wiggins and Trinity back in 221B Baker Street or when he chatted with “Wasp” as “Bambi” in one of the secure chat rooms in the Hackers Republic as they exchanged information.

When he wrote emails to John as “mikestamford” she mercifully left him alone.

They had not resumed the romantic side of their relationship. Sherlock hadn’t felt like having sex and Violet made no attempts of initiating intercourse from her end. Also, nothing in her body language or facial expressions indicated she felt like being intimate either.

For Sherlock, that was a relief. Nowadays, when he fantasized about kissing, it was John he thought about, not her…

More important than kissing was that she had started to look better, not as malnourished or exhausted. Their fare was plain, but good, mostly rice, beans, plantains, citrus fruits and whatever meat was available, which was always an adventure to the two capitalists in a communist country. Violet had gotten addicted to Cuban coffee, Sherlock to Cuban ice cream.

She was also allowing her hair to grow back out. Soon, there was a half-inch of soft brown roots threaded with silver showing above the darkly dyed curls.

Sherlock decided the chestnut shade she had sported in London suited her temperament and her complexion better… if one cared about the shallow constructions of beauty, of course.

But he admitted to himself that it delighted him to see her hair in its natural curly state. He had also given up on shaving, but after Violet dryly told him that he looked like a homeless billy goat, he did at least keep his beard neatly trimmed.

They sometimes indulged in a tumbler of the infamous Cuba Libre, if they had both hit a wall with the Cardboard Box case (because of course Sherlock was still working on it, despite his absence from London) or got tired of trying to unsnarl the new Valley of Fear tangle or if Violet had had a particularly bad day at the hospital.

Sherlock had quipped that if he could procure this good of rum back in England, he would be in real danger of becoming an alcoholic. Violet had merely glowered over the tip of the Cuban cigar she puffed on, the only tobacco Sherlock allowed on deck.

“I haven’t smoked since I had bronchitis last summer,” he had bragged.

“Good for you,” she had puffed out a perfect smoke ring. The sweetish scent of good tobacco had mingled pleasantly with the salty tang of the sea.

When she needed a break during the day, she often indulged in sunbathing, her freckles seeming to multiply under the sun. Sherlock meanwhile, wore a ridiculous floppy hat and slathered on the SPF 50 sunscreen he had bought in Miami. He also tried to stay in the shade as much as possible.

He couldn’t go back to England tan. Mycroft would immediately deduce where he had been.

When the sun started to fade into the west, sometimes, again if she wasn’t too tired from the barrage of tests and he wasn’t too wiped out from thinking, he would come out from the galley of the boat dressed in swim trunks. They would float near the boat, letting the waves rock the concerns and care
from their minds while caressing their bodies in watery graceful embrace.

Yes, everything had been going according to plan… until two days ago.

Sweetering under the sun, having been free from medical testing for three days now, Violet had gotten it into her head that she wanted to go for a swim.

Alone.

She had climbed down the ladder easily enough. She had paddled around near the boat, not really exerting herself. Just enjoying the warm sun and the cool water, not really thinking about anything in particular, she was finally allowing herself to relax.

The crisis had happened when she tried to climb back up the ladder into the boat… and couldn’t.

Her left hand refused to coil around the ladder rung. She couldn’t pull herself up high enough for her feet to reach the first rung of the ladder, which hung above the water by inches. She had flopped her useless left arm over the rung and tried to use that to steady herself as she pulled herself up with her right, but she lost her grip and fell back into the water. Spitting out a mouthful of sea water and starting to panic, Violet had clung to the ladder, trying to figure out if she should swim to shore (it wasn’t that far off, they were anchored in fairly shallow waters) or if she could continue trying to climb aboard. Then she had heard Sherlock calling for her and she started to shout back that she needed his help, she couldn’t get back into the boat.

He hadn’t been happy with her. He had sprinted to the boat ladder, leaned over and all but dragged her back onto the deck. Then he had yelled, actually yelled at her about how stupid she had been, what idiotic impulse had compelled her to go swimming alone and had she completely taken leave of her senses?

“You can’t do things by yourself anymore, Violet!” he had snapped before realizing he was shouting because he had been scared and not really angry. He swiftly removed himself from the situation before his mouth made it worse.

He had received the silent treatment from Violet before, but this time it was positively Arctic.

Later that night, while counting the stars in an effort to shut his brain off, he utilized his incredible imagination to pull Mind-Palace John to the center of his consciousness…

… because he needed someone to talk to, very badly.

What did I do wrong? I had every right to be upset.

Yes you do, Mind-Palace John said, but you told her off as if she was a little girl, Sherlock. It’s not just her freedom at stake, but her very life, her way of life. She’s not a child caught playing with matches. She’s a woman staring indignity, pain and death in the face.

She’s scared shitless mate. How you shouted at her didn’t help. Bit not good…

The next morning, Sherlock made coffee the way she liked it and tried to apologize. “I was unspeakably rude yesterday aftern-”

“It’s fine,” she cut him off, but not harshly. She gave him a wan smile and took the coffee.

She stayed silent, but it wasn’t a frigid silence anymore.
Sherlock gave her space, or as much space one can give on a houseboat.

But he still felt helpless.

Useless.

And now… and now…

The other shoe finally fell.

The diagnosis. The official diagnosis…

_I am afraid the results are not the ones we wanted to find. All the tests point to the fact that you are showing all the symptoms and indicators of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis_…

He had known, he had always known from the first time he saw her hand shake.

And she had known too, deep down inside, buried in her subconscious that her body was her traitor and her jailer.

Yet, they had still clung to hope.

_Sentiment will get you every time_, Sherlock thought, his insides twisting with a pain he had never known before as he waited for Violet to break her silence.

Her head had dipped down and her eyes had squeezed tightly shut when the kindly old specialist made his diagnosis, in English for her benefit. Then she had slowly lifted her head up, her eyes veiled, her face soft and thoughtful.

Finally, finally she took a deep breath. Nodded her head and then thanked the doctor in Spanish for everything he has done for her. She rose out of her seat, still clutching her ugly handbag she had bought in Key Biscayne.

“Could you,” she asked Sherlock in English, “get the details from the doctor about what we will need to do going forward, treatment, medication, so on and so forth? I need some air.”

“Where will you be?” Sherlock made himself stay in his seat.

“At that _paladar_ we like, around the corner down the street, the bright pink house,” her mouth crooked up in a half-smile. “The house you said looked like a wedding cake.”

His memory betraying him as a vicious memory assailed him.

Mary, of course, always Mary attacking him…

_You’re going to break her heart Sherlock_…

_No_, he thought once again. _She’s going to break mine._

_What’s left of it_…

Chapter End Notes
Mitton's remark about his saved life is now "a currency I do not know how to spend*"
is from "The Lying Detective."
Cramped

Chapter Summary

Cramped

A position with limited mobility.

Chapter Notes

More feels and a trigger warning about suicide....

“Your own death is something that happens to everybody else. Your life is not your own. Keep your hands off it...”

XOXO

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-nine

19 May 2016
Havana, Cuba
Thursday night
1:29 AM Eastern Standard Time

He hated dreams. Hated *dreaming*, hated the absolute disorder of his unruly subconscious.

Hated losing control, being a helpless bystander as the demons crawled out of the dungeons to wreak utter havoc on his well-ordered Mind Palace.

He clawed his way back to consciousness, willing himself to forget the surrealistic images his subconscious had created, warping his memories of swirling electric blue ball gowns, the sound of the leaves rustling and the bubbling of the small creek in the grove and the view of London from the top of St. Bart’s.

He inhaled sharply, barely biting back a shout in time. He swallowed it down, sucked in another deep breath, his fingers curled up in the damp sheets. Then he forced himself to exhale slowly. When he could exhale without his breath shaking, he dragged his large hand over his thin face to wipe away the perspiration beading his face.

Even in its warmest months, England never tormented its citizens with a clammy, sticky heat like this, a dreadful mugginess unique only to the tropical climes. Sherlock could feel himself becoming sluggish and torpid in the afternoons as the air grew more and more saturated with moisture, as if his magnificent brain had turned into a sponge, sucking up water not knowledge.

God… how he utterly *loathed* humidity…. He ached, no he *longed* for rain. A nice brisk cloudburst washing away the heat and the oppression would be lovely right about now.
Irritably, Sherlock kicked the tangled sweaty top sheet off his sticky body. Had it been this hot back home, he wouldn’t have bothered with sheets or blankets.

Or pants.

But he highly doubted that Violet would appreciate him wandering around in the buff right now.

Speaking of Violet…

His eyes adjusting to the dark, Sherlock scanned the room, peering through the door, not seeing her in the other room. The boat only had three proper rooms, a kitchen, a loo and a bedroom. While the boat boasted a decent-sized galley kitchen with a breakfast nook, it had been turned into a work space for their computers, devices, photos and notes. Unfortunately, due to sketchy service as well as a healthy paranoia about being caught online, the computers and devices often ended up being paperweights for everything not taped to the walls.

There was just enough space on the tiny countertop for a coffeepot, a bowl full of whatever fruit was available at the shops, and a toaster. They never used the cooker after they learned the hard way that firing it up changed the cabin from being uncomfortably warm to unbearably hot. The tiny refrigerator however was full to bursting, mostly with cold drinks.

The houseboat’s loo and shower were so small even a hobbit would have felt claustrophobic. Sherlock had to slouch to shower and practically kneel to wash his hair. He found it was easier to wash his hair in the kitchen sink. Not that bending over the tiny sink while pouring a cup of lukewarm water over his head to wash the shampoo away was much more comfortable. But it was easier than twisting into an impossible pose in the cramped, narrow shower.

The bedroom was more like a large closet with a double bed crammed into it. Suffice to say there was no closet or chest of drawers, just pegs on the wall to hang their clothes. Not to mention that the bed was ridiculous. Sherlock couldn’t fit in it unless he curled up in a ball like a cat. Otherwise, if he tried to sprawl out, his feet hung over the foot of the bed, as they did right now. There was barely room for Violet, if she had ever felt like sharing.

But they didn’t share the bed, not even platonically like they did in the beginning of Violet’s stay at Baker Street, when she refused to sleep in John’s old room, on John’s old bed. At Baker Street, she had often ended up crashing in Sherlock’s bed due to exhaustion or injuries, not because of any romantic inclinations.

Sometimes she wound up there after a bad dream.

Now, if Sherlock went to bed before her, he woke up alone.

She often stayed up late, working on slowly and painstakingly translating the mysterious “Valley of Fear” file. Since her knowledge of the Farsi language was woefully inadequate, the work was tedious and time-consuming. Violet preferred to work alone late at night in utter silence, with only a pot of coffee and a Farsi-to-English translation book for company. The tattered book she had purchased, at, of all places, a Mexican librería before she and Sherlock had left for their voyage.

If she would have used the Internet instead of the book, it would have been faster. But there were only certain times she and Sherlock felt secure using their devices, when Sherlock was certain Big Brother (literally and figuratively) was not watching. Unfortunately, sometimes they were unable to get service during those times. So Violet slogged away, character by character, page by page, with an uncooperative left hand to boot.
When her eyes hurt too much to read anymore and her head throbbed with too little sleep and too much caffeine, only then would she give up. But instead of joining Sherlock in the bedroom, she’d curl up on the padded bench that was supposed to serve as a sofa.

Not that either one of them slept down there much anyway. Too blasted hot.

They had discovered it was more comfortable to sleep on the padded lounge chairs on the deck, with the breeze blowing in from the sea, cooling their heat-prickled skin. They brought out pillows and the lightest blankets possible, in case the weather did decide to cool down. Dressed in the bare minimum they could get away with without being completely naked, allowing themselves to uncoil from the stress of the day, becoming limp and languid, both admitting there was something downright pleasant about sleeping outside.

But Sherlock had retreated to the back bedroom tonight because he needed to think, to plan.

To do what he had to do next… although, truth to be told, he wasn’t looking forward to it. At all.

He reached for the mobile next to the bed, not his mobile, not Sherlock Holmes’ mobile, but a contract-less Smartphone he had picked up in a Target while he and Violet still had been in Florida. Hoping for a signal, he thumbed over the mailbox icon. When it opened after what felt like an agonizing eternity, he scrolled until he found the message he wanted, the one sent on the seventh of May:

Hey! Haven’t heard from you in donkey’s years.
Wondering how things have been.
Drop a line and let me know how you are.

He ran his thumb over the pithy email the same way he touched John’s face.

He had kept his word, he had emailed John back, a jaunty email, letting him know that he’s sorry he hasn’t emailed but he’s been really busy. Maybe sometime would open up in a week or so and they could go have drinks?

Hardly the message he had wanted to compose…

I miss you… I hate this place, it’s hot and lonely and hardly the pleasure island romanticized by Ernest Hemingway, the suicidal, overrated, bloated old fool, warped by his own self-importance and delusions of grandeur. He is one of the many examples I provide when people ask why I delete most literature from my Mind Palace.

Violet shares many of my opinions regarding Cuba. While she finds the old-fashioned vehicles trundling down the streets picturesque and the cubano culture charming, she understands better than I the circumstances that created the need to continually “make-do.” At times I do wish economics and politics didn’t bore me so, as they are both powerful motivators to many crimes, especially global crimes against humanity. Alas, there’s always something, isn’t there.

Today I deduced that a man I witnessed crossing the street was a political prisoner who had just been released from prison. He had been a political dissident and a journalist. I could tell by his hands, his fingers had been broken while in prison so he couldn’t write anymore. People see the antique trucks and hear the sultry salsa music and think how quaint. I observe the wide, frightened eyes and the tightly held mouths, the bowed backs… Violet questioned me many times why I brought her here. I obfuscated, naturally, and she realizes that. Thankfully she hasn’t pushed the issue. But
the truth was it was the only place I could take Violet off the grid that had decent medical care…

She is sick, dying… John, I don’t know what to do…

I know how to get her safely back to 221B and to force Mycroft into clearing her name once and for all but after that…

He rolled out of the stupid bed, bowing down so he didn’t hit his head… again. This boat was not built for anyone over five feet tall.

He looked down at his pants, a pair of white Y-fronts he’d be embarrassed to wear back home, but the idea of boxers sticking to his thighs was unbearable. Spying the khakis cargo trousers he had been practically living in since he refused to wear shorts (how undignified), he snatched them up and pulled them on. But he didn’t bother putting a shirt on before taking the two steps that took him out of the shoebox of a bedroom and into the kitchen. He did stop and pull out two bottles of water, condensation immediately beading up on the plastic. Then he took the three steps that took him out of the cabin and onto the deck.

He remembered as a child how he had been enraptured by the lives of pirates, how he drank in stories about Blackbeard, Sir Francis Drake, Captain Kidd and Madame Cheng. How he had been so obsessed, his father used to build him tiny replicas of famous pirate ships inside of giant glass bottles…

… how the Pirates of the Caribbean film franchise was his embarrassingly guilty secret pleasure and he would take that secret to the grave… he’d almost rather jump off of St. Bart’s again than admit that to anyone.

However as the boat gently rocked back and forth, he had a feeling if his parents had bothered to take him on board an actual ship, let him spend a night in a tiny, stuffy cabin, he probably would have gotten over his pirate kick rather quickly.

Instead they had bought him a copy of Peter Pan, hoping he’d see that pirates were actually villains. Instead, Sherlock had rooted for Captain Hook, hoping he’d give that spoiled, misbehaved brat Peter his comeuppance.

But he had long ago resigned himself to the fact that his parents were idiots.

However, once he stumbled out of the deck and was able to properly stretch his back and stand tall, the old childish daydream returned. To set sail on uncharted seas and woe to any vessel that got in his way… it wasn’t even the idea of obtaining other people’s riches that fueled his piracy fantasies but rather the ability to acquire their possessions because they were too stupid and careless to protect their own. Or, even better, to be the victor in a battle for said riches with a worthy opponent. The gold, silver and jewels could sink to the bottom of the sea for all he cared, just as long as he could say I won.

Except now the new enemy was not a pirate or a consulting criminal or even his brother.

The new enemy was a gene mutation… possibly. Medical researchers still weren’t sure what caused the disease running rampant within her.

In the limited moonlight, he surveyed her silently. Normally, whenever they returned to the harbor after a visit to the city, they would take the boat out and drop anchor and spend the night bobbing in the sea, away from people. The houseboat’s owner had showed Sherlock the bare basics of operating a boat. He could motor it out to the bay and drop anchor and he could dock it properly. Sherlock
didn’t feel confident enough to take the boat out to open sea. Tonight, he didn’t even take it out to the cove as usual. The normally oppressive humidity was worse than ever, as if a warm, wet blanket covered everything, making it hard to breathe. Thunderheads had been growing steadily; swelling and ballooning out all day but still hadn’t broken. However, Sherlock could hear a faint, very faint, rumbling in the distance as sweat trickled down his body.

So it was no surprise she wore only a bikini top and a pair of denim cut-off shorts. She lay sprawled out on one of the deck chairs, her unruly curls kept off her neck with kirby pins (or so Sherlock assumed since her hair was too short to be held back by a pony-tail tie.) Oblivious to his presence, she watched the billowing thunderheads, now starting to flash ominously purple and silver and green. In her right hand, she played with a lighter.

Sherlock didn’t smell cigarettes. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He smelt the salt of the sea, the hot, burning sizzle of a promised electrical storm as well as petrichor.

He also smelt a sickish-sweet scent, an odor unfamiliar to her but painfully familiar to him.

Opening his eyes, he tucked both bottles of water under his arm and went to pull the other lounge chair next to hers.

He placed the water between them then sat down. Swinging his legs over on the chair, he intoned, “Show me.”

Violet indolently rolled her head over to face him. Reached down to touch the sweaty water bottles and said, “You shouldn’t waste those. We’re running out of First World amenities,” she said sarcastically, meaning things that people who don’t live in a communist country take for granted as necessities. As she spoke though, she dug into her shorts pocket. Then she pulled out a nicely rolled joint for Sherlock’s inspection.

“How many did Doña Nalda give you?” Sherlock’s voice was nonjudgmental but it was also a bit on the cool side as well.

“Three,” Violet, on the other side, sounded a bit blasé.

“And how many are left?”

Sherlock felt rather than saw her glare. “Three. Do you want to see them?”

“She gave them to you because she assumed you had cancer.”

Violet nodded. Doña Nalda, a widow with three grown daughters, ran the paladar she and Sherlock liked, the one that was close to the hospital, the one Sherlock thought looked like John and Mary’s tacky wedding cake. Paladars were a cubano phenomenon. Commerce normally wasn’t allowed since that smacked of capitalism. However some sections and districts were permitted to open dining establishments within their own private homes. The menus of these paladars varied, depending on what produce and protein was available that week. Quality varied from paladar to paladar but Sherlock and Violet found that the quality of food at Doña Nalda was always excellent, even when all she had to work with that week was beans and plantains.

Also, the doña always managed to have some contraband available, anywhere from cans of Coca-Cola that were actually cold to grade-A, top-notch cocaine, so pure it could be mistaken for powdered sugar.

Sherlock and Violet usually took the American soft-drinks and feigned ignorance when she asked if they were interested in any narcóticos.
“The doña said there are only two types of Americans who come to Havana, the obscenely wealthy who can do whatever they want or the desperately sick who can’t get help anywhere else. She told me not many rich American tourists come to her neighbors but more sick Americans than one would believe.” Violet held the joint underneath her nose and inhaled. “She said she wasn’t sure which one of us was the sick one, since we’re both so pale and skinny, until today of course. When I came alone, she said she knew it was me. She then gave me,” she held up the joint, “A present.”

“How kind of her,” Sherlock deadpanned. “Well, don’t let me stop you.”

“What?”

“I’m the last person to judge you for wanting to partake in a bit of escapism.” He shrugged. “Spark it up.”

“Won’t it bother you though?”

“Are you asking if my opinion of you will be lowered? The answer is no. If you are asking if I’ll be tempted, the answer is also no. Funnily enough, I never cared for marijuana. I don’t like the smell, plus I never felt properly high when I did partake in cannabis.”

“How did it make you feel?”

“Hungry,” Sherlock admitted. “And my feet always fell asleep.” When Violet snorted with laughter, he grumbled, “Well, it’s true. Plus it didn’t have the desired effect on my mind. It didn’t completely quiet it like morphine did and it didn’t speed it up like cocaine did. I was still me, only with a ravenous appetite and tingly feet.”

Violet snickered again but in a nervous voice asked, “Should I go down into the cabin then?”

“God no, it’s a sauna unless you planned on hot-boxing that. There’s no one about, especially a night like tonight. We’re the only ones out here actually living on a boat.”

“Will we be safe in this tin can on the water when the storm breaks?”

“Perfectly,” Sherlock assured her. “It’s just a garden-variety thunderstorm. I’ve been monitoring it. Rest assured Violet, I’m perfectly content to be your spotter.”

Violet shook her head then smelled the joint again. “I haven’t smoked pot since high school,” she admitted. “And it was always shitty ditch-weed. This stuff’s prime,” she concluded before putting the joint in her mouth and pulling out her lighter. “After all,” she managed to mumble while her lips were firmly clamped on the joint, “It’s not like I have to worry about being drug-tested for work ever again, do I?”

Sherlock’s brows beetled together as he frowned at her fatalistic comment. I thought we were over this… he worried as Violet fumbled with the lighter. Before Sherlock could intercede, she switched hands, using her right hand instead of her left to “spark it up.”

She did, however, drop the lighter. It clattered to the deck floor.

Violet ignored it, inhaling a cloud, holding it in her lungs. Then she removed the joint from her lips and exhaled, long and deep. The only sounds were the slap of the sea against the boat and the distance grumbling from the thunderclouds for several minutes.

Then finally when the THC started coursing through her system, Violet drawled out, “Holy shit.”
“Feeling better then?”

Violet let her head loll onto her shoulder, facing Sherlock. “I think this is the first time I’ve felt this good in probably months, maybe even years.” She giggled, “Maybe we should hook Doña Nalda up with Mrs. Hudson.”

“Probably not a good idea since I sent Mrs. Hudson to rehab.”

“Oh you fun-hater,” Violet took another puff, her legs untangling and dangling over the sides of her lounge chair.

Sherlock had to suppress his mirth. He had never seen Violet so loose and relaxed, even when they started sleeping together. There was always a part of her locked up, inhibited and hidden away, even in their most intimate moments. *Uptight* would not be an inaccurate adjective to use in describing her.

He wondered what it would have been like if he had met her when she was a young girl grieving her for her father and he was a deeply sad and confused boy.

Maybe they wouldn’t have become a couple, but they probably would have become friends. They could have reminded each other that they were young and beautiful and their entire future was still ahead of them and not yet etched in stone like names and dates on a gravestone.

Suddenly, he remembered Dupin sending him away to the Sacré-Cœur Basilica, to clear his mind. Remembering how angry he had been at Dupin for sending him away when The Game was On. But he also remembered once he was at Sacré-Cœur, he had paused to run his long fingers down the side of the cold stone wall when he saw years and years of graffiti scrawled on the ancient walls.

He stopped because he suddenly had wondered if a young Violet Hunter defaced these walls. She had spent a semester here in Paris when she was in university, after all. Had she come here to *Sacré-Cœur*, on a tour with a gaggle of her American schoolmates? Or perhaps with a young man she had fancied? Did she write “Violet was here” somewhere on these tower walls? Was that the only trace of *Violet Hunter* still in existence, just a faded name and date? An insufficient inscription indicating a young American girl had stood here once. An intelligent girl, a willful girl, brought up to be a patriot, who dreamed to make her country a better, safer place. A young lady, her entire future sparkling like the City of Lights below her, waiting for her to take her place in the world.

He could picture her girlish handwriting, before it deteriorated into her adult scrawl:

*Violet Jane Hunter*… perhaps she signed it with a kiss, her lipstick forever on the wall.

*Why do people feel the need to deface property not belonging to them?* He had once asked Raz, once a *graffiti artist* extraordinaire, now six feet underground in a cheap pine box.

Shortly after Sherlock began his Consulting Detective career, DI Lestrade had tossed him a bone. He had asked him to investigate a series of strange vandalisms throughout London, little stick figures of dancing men. The little stick figures had been sprayed-painted all over the walls of popular British tourist traps. Dancing Men decorated The Tower, Big Ben, Parliament and most worrisome to everyone (worrisome to everyone but Sherlock, of course) Buckingham Palace. After doing a bit of research, Sherlock had been advised that Raz was the best of the best, so Sherlock followed him around one night, learning all he could about the art of graffiti.

*Why do you do it?* Sherlock had politely queried the young artist.

Raz had looked at Sherlock like he was an idiot. *To leave a mark, to let people know, Oi! We were here once too, you know.* When Sherlock had flatly told Raz that was the stupidest thing he had ever
heard, the graffiti artist merely laughed as he shook up a can of black spray paint. *We all got our stories and we all tell 'em in our own way.*

*We all have our stories…*

“Violet, why is it so difficult for you to consider your father may have been part of the H.O.U.N.D. project in Liberty, Indiana?” Sherlock blurted out.

“Because for the millionth time,” Violet groaned. “He was a soldier, not a scientist. He was all about tactics and strategy, not science.”

“Scientists need protection, especially scientists working for the military,” Sherlock dug his heels in. They had gone the rounds about this particular theory ever since stepping foot in Havana.

“You said,” Violet limply shook her finger at him, “That it’s irresponsible to form a theory without concrete evidence. Hard data, or as you put it once: ‘I can’t make bricks without clay.’”

“Fact: your father was a high-ranking commissioned officer on the fast track to military greatness. Fact: while your father was stationed in several locations in Germany and Italy, whenever he was stationed in America, it was *always* in Edinburgh, Indiana, at Camp Atterbury, which is only ninety minutes away from Liberty, Indiana. Fact: you received a cryptic text from your source within the Department of Defense regarding your father’s death. You have never heard the words “Valley of Fear” again, until a few weeks ago, when we found documentation titled “Valley of Fear” discussing the development of hallucinogenic drugs to be used in chemical warfare, said drugs being found in an unsanctioned black-site undoubtedly funded by what is left of Moriarty’s syndicate. Ergo, there is a probability that your father was involved in Project H.O.U.N.D.”

“Project H.O.U.N.D was shut down in 1986,” Violet reminded him. “He was killed in 1989.”

“Except it wasn’t shut down,” Sherlock frostily reminded her, “As it was proven in the “Hound of the Baskervilles” case. The death of Dr. Frankland doesn’t exactly mean that the research and development of this particular drug ever stopped. It just meant that Dr. Frankland… stopped.”

“Ugh, you’re harshing my buzz.”

“Violet, just because you don’t want your father to be involved, doesn’t mean he wasn’t.”

“Of course I don’t want my father to be involved!” Violet muttered, turning to face the sea and the pending storm again. “If my dad was involved in something as terrible as chemical warfare, that means he wasn’t a good man and I need him to be a good man.”

“That’s sentiment talking,” Sherlock stonily informed her.

“And a little bit of this too,” Violet held up the smoldering joint.

“Think about it logically,” Sherlock counseled her, taking advantage of her drug-induced pliability. “Your father was a soldier, he followed orders. More than likely, he was ordered to protect Project H.O.U.N.D or draw up plans on how to utilize the drug once it was weaponized. You said that he had been killed because he said the “wrong thing to the wrong person,” that he disagreed with the decision to invade Iraq in 1989. Logic dictates there is more to that story…” Sherlock trailed off, letting her come to the conclusion on her own.

“They didn’t kill him because he complained about the Persian Gulf War,” Violet said, slower than usual. Staring up at the sky as the clouds started to cover up the stars, she said faintly, “They killed him because he was going to blow the whistle on them.”
“Your family has an irritating habit of rocking the boat,” Sherlock pointed out. “The roads we walk have demons beneath and yours have been waiting for a very long time.”

“None of this is a coincidence,” Violet pushed a damp curl off her forehead with the back of her left hand. Her fingers refused to bend enough so she could comb her hair off her sweating face. “My dad, my brother, me… they’re trying to wipe us all off the face of the earth. Hell, now I’m wondering if I start digging into my mother’s death, if I’m going to prove it really was an accident or if someone tampered with the brakes.” The errant curl slid back down her forehead. Violet tried to push it back up again with the back of her left hand. “OK… tomorrow. When I’m sober and when we can safely get online, let’s email Lisbeth and give her a challenge, see if she can hack into the DOD and find Sergeant Wilson. Hopefully he’s still alive or at the very least, has some chatty next-of-kin. Dammit,” she cursed as the errant curl refused to stay off her forehead.

Sherlock reached over and plucked the curl off her face, tucking it behind her ear. “We’ll need to discuss several things tomorrow once you’re recovered. I’m going to have to return to England very soon, maybe sooner than we thought. We need to discuss where you’ll live until I can bring you back to Baker Street.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that,” Violet took one more puff before flicking the butt of the joint overboard. The addict in Sherlock protested the waste of a good drug, but the more practical part of his nature concluded it was probably for the best.

Also, she had two more joints in her pocket.

“Oh,” he merely said as she tried to reach for one of the bottles of water, as graceful as a drunken elephant. He elegantly snatched up a bottle and twisted the lid off, handing it to her before she even noticed. “Are you going to share those thoughts?”

“Might as well. I was going to wait until tomorrow. I was thinking and planning… creating a very logical…” she waved her hand around theatrically, baptizing herself with the water Sherlock had given her. “Whatever, speech-thing, I guess. I was going to be very,” She squared her narrow shoulders, “Diplomatic and firm about it all.” Then she slouched back into her chair. “But maybe this is a conversation better had when I am stoned.” She sat up again, drawing her knees towards her. Wrapping her arms around her legs, she lifted her face towards the heavens, splashing water more on herself as she did so. A mercifully cool breeze had started to blow, the prelude to the storm. The boat started to rock back and forth with a little more intensity, scraping against the dock.

Sherlock mirrored her motions, except he looked at her instead of the skies. He wasn’t worried about the boat. He had secured it to the dock with extra ropes and added a chain for good measure plus he dropped anchor as overkill. The harbor itself was adequately sheltered from storms with manmade as well as natural deterrents. As long as they went inside once the storm hit, they would be fine.

He worried about her, what she had been thinking about.

As if she heard his unasked question, she answered, “I thought about how great it’s been, having you back in my life. Even though you coming for me completely undermined my plan to protect you from Professor Moriarty as well as getting Mycroft off your back once and for all,” she sighed heavily. “Talk about someone who is in dire need of medicinal marijuana…” She hummed to herself then said, “You know, I actually don’t feel stoned, not euphoric or mellow. I just feel good, for the first time in ages. Like, I’m not in pain for the first time since my hands started going numb. Although… I could eat a pizza. An entire pizza, by myself.”

“Next time, we’ll hide out in Italy,” Sherlock quipped. “Sicily to be precise.”
“Sherlock,” Violet slurred his name as opened her eyes and looked at him. “There isn’t going to be a next time. We both know that. That’s what I’ve been thinking about. How great it’s been, being your partner again, working a case… I felt normal for the first time since January, before everything went to hell.” She finally took a long drink of water. “When I was getting the spinal tap, all I could think about was how you didn’t sign up for this but you stayed and took care of me plus everything you’re doing to clear my name, that I didn’t sell state secrets to the enemy and I didn’t kill Senator Woodhouse… and how easy it would be for me to look at you and ask if we could pick up where we left off after I left London.”

Sherlock folded his lips tightly together and looked away. He was glad it was dark. He was glad her face was in silhouette. He was glad his face was in the shadows.

“It would be so easy to ask, and yet so wrong,” she said calmly. “And unfair. To me, to you.”

“Violet…”

“I could, you know. Easily manipulate you into back into a relationship. I could play the illness card. You’re not immune to sentiment either, even though you pretend to be. I could do to you what Mary had done to John. The irony is, it wouldn’t even be terrible, you and me together again. Living in Baker Street, seeing my dog,” she smiled wistfully. “Mrs. Hudson fussing over me as if I’m her long-lost granddaughter, we’d all be together again, our weird little family,” she chuckled. “Everyone would pitch in to help me once my legs stopped working. Molly and John would team up when it came time to battle the hospitals once I can’t eat or breathe on my own. Greg would bring Henry over to keep me company and to entertain me. Mary would find a way to help me communicate, even if it’s self-serving as usual. She still needs me and my profiler’s brain to help her find Maisie, of course,” she added dryly.

She sounded so practical, so logical, even after smoking weed, Sherlock felt his throat tighten. He knew everything she was saying was true and right. It’s what should happen when she comes home… and she’s fighting against it.

Of course she’s fighting against it.

Because she knows…She has always known, before he and John were willing to admit it.

*You’re his best friend, he’d die for you and he thinks his feelings for you are wrong so he hides them, even from himself. And… you broke his heart when you jumped. Why is it so hard for you to see what he is going through?*

“I see it. I see everything…"

Not everything, apparently.

“And whether I have five years left or fifty, I don’t want to spend that time wondering when you’ll cheat on me with John.”

Sherlock felt his lungs deflate, actually collapse. Half of his heart sang with relief, the other half shriveled up and died.

“I never intended to hurt you,” he swung his legs over, so he faced her completely now.

She turned her head, “I know… but I never had a chance, did I? Not really.”

“I tried,” he insisted, a smidge of petulance colouring his words.
She ignored him, “Not in this world anyway. You know, ever since that day back at the Devil’s Foot clubhouse, I’ve been thinking about what you said about alternative universes and multi-verses? Can you imagine,” she threw her hand out wide, this time the water bottle slipping from her left hand. She didn’t pay attention. “That maybe out there, beyond what we can see, there’s another world? Maybe there’s a world where a Violet-and-Sherlock works? And John and Mary aren’t completely fucking miserable with each other? Maybe their daughter wasn’t stolen from them? She might not even be called Maisie. Her name might be Rosamund or Eleanor, and maybe they call her Rosie or Nora. Or even Bee, for shits and giggles.” She looked around for the water bottle she had dropped, frowning when she couldn’t see it. Then she slouched down in her lounge chair again. “Maybe there’s a world where I came to you as just a client with an interesting problem. In that universe, I’m a governess who taught music and languages instead of a federal agent and my employer is giving me the creeps. Maybe in that world, you’d forget all about me once the case was solved.”

Stung, Sherlock whispered, “I could never forget you, Violet.”

She didn’t acknowledge his statement, “Or maybe there’s a world where we never met at all. We live our separate lives, me in DC and you in London. Maybe Jordan survived Nine-Eleven and we have the lives we worked and planned so hard for. Maybe it’s not John you end up with, but Molly Hooper. A tense situation forces you to tell her you love her and you two end up happily ever after, with baby making three. If there is a Henry in that world, of course,” She huffed a little sigh, as if she was still smoking the joint and had released smoke from her lungs. “Of course, no matter what universe there is a Sherlock Holmes, there is a John Watson. As long as Holmes and Watson are together, the universe makes sense.”

“If you say John and I am soul mates, I will hurl you overboard,” Sherlock scowled while thinking, She is stoned. Pretty soon she is going to start conversing with the fishes.

“I’m saying, we live in this world,” she smiled tenderly as her voice became as soft as cotton wool. “Maybe this is the universe where Sherlock and John end up together and not just as best friends sharing a scruffy little flat.”

“You weren’t just a diversion until John was free of Mary,” Sherlock felt an uncomfortable, unfamiliar ache in his throat and his chest and his gut. Regret? Sorrow? Bad shellfish? All the above? Suddenly angry, he snapped, “I tried to make us work. I read books about relationships, I went online looking for advice, sometimes I just winged it, going off of societal norms and human instinct. It’s not fair for you to pin what all went wrong on me. You never gave me a chance, you expected me to fall short, to fai-”

“Sherlock, I thought we had an agreement that since I can profile you and you can deduce me, there’s no point in either one of us lying to the other.”

“I did try,” he repeated himself, this time without the peevishness. “I wanted it… us… to work. Truly, I’m not saying that simply to spare your feelings.” He linked his long fingers together and held his hands loosely between his spread legs. “If John and Mary were still as blissfully happy together as they were when they first had gotten engaged, if their marriage endured because of mutual love and respect and not because of lies and emotional blackmail… then yes, my dear Violet, you would have had a chance, more than just a chance.”

“Even with the…” She lifted up her limp, dead left hand.

“It’s just Transport,” he said quietly as the cool breeze ruffled his hair. Feeling the breeze turning into a proper wind, he knew they would need to go inside soon.

“That’s not true and you know it,” Violet now mirrored him, albeit, a bit clumsier. “Everything
changes with terminal illness, you know that. And I’m still not sure if I want to wait until everything goes to shit, when I can’t swallow… or breathe…” her voice suddenly shook. She jerked herself up to standing, weaving on her feet. The boat was starting to rock a little more vigorously now, as the waves started to get choppier. “Oh… look at that,” she breathed, stumbling towards the rails of the boat.

Sherlock lifted his eyes up, seeing the clouds flashing hot, silvery white and dark menacing purple. He silently counted up to ten before the thunder rumbled, like a trapped animal. “We should go inside now, Violet.”

Her hands curled around the rails, the wind ruffling her curls. “It’s finally cooling off,” she tilted her head up towards the skies, still enraptured as lightening now properly streaked the sky in silver jagged lines, cutting through the black and amethyst night. “I bet the water feels amazing right now. Not going to lie, I wasn’t thrilled to be on a houseboat. Haven’t been a fan of water since Jack Woodley water-boarded me… but now… it just seems so…” She let go of the rails and leaned over as she stared off at the gathering storm. “Maybe drifting away in the midst of a squall would be less painful than suffocating on my own phlegm.”

Sherlock bolted to his feet. Before the thunder sounded, he grabbed her around her waist and hauled her away from the railing, pulling her towards the safety of the cabin.

“Hey!” She tried to wriggle out of his grip but he refused to let her go. Instead he twisted her around, holding her by her forearms as she snarled, “Let me go.”

“You need to listen to me.”

“Let me go.”

“’Your own death is something that happens to everybody else.’” He pleaded as he cupped her face in his hands. She stopped struggling. As lightening heated up the skies again, he could see tears welling up in her exhausted eyes. He drew her to him until their foreheads touched. Desperately he whispered to her, “’Your life is not your own. Keep your hands off it.’”

“I knew you had a soft, squishy middle underneath that cold exterior,” she joked even as she sobbed. He could feel her tears running down his hands.

“Well, don’t let that get out. I have an international reputation to uphold after all,” he thumbed away her tears.

“I don’t know. You did just ruin my high. Thanks, jerk.”

Sherlock chuckled and advised they should really go inside. Once they had descended into the cabin, the heavens opened up and rain poured down in unrelenting torrents.

As the storm raged on, Sherlock sat on the tiny loveseat and gently pulled her to him, settling her on his lap, tucking her head underneath his chin. “Tell me this is what you really want,” he folded his arms around her. Despite eating better than she had in months, she was still too thin. “That you’re not using your illness or John to push me away, the way you have pushed all potential suitors away?”

“Potential suitors? The hell? Are we on the set of *Gone with the Wind*?”

“And that confirms you are still high as a kite,” Sherlock sighed.

“Told you that shit was good,” Violet sniffled through a giggle. “I’m not being noble, Sherlock. I’m being practical. It’s stupid to chase a man who’s in love with someone else. Even if I wasn’t going to
turn into Living Dead Girl, I still would have ended it for the same reason.”

“Then why did you start it?”

“You’re the detective. You deduce it.”

“No. You’re the profiler. Admit it.”

He felt Violet sigh against him. “I pursue unattainable and unfulfilling relationships because I’m afraid if I actually let myself fall in love again, I’ll forget Jordan.”

He ran his hand down her hair. Found a loose curl and lightly pulled it and let it go, just for the pleasure of watching it spring back into a curl. “Love is stupid.”

“So stupid.”

“I’m going to ask you again tomorrow, when you’re sober, to confirm what you are saying is true and not just the weed talking.”

“I understand, but it’s true.”

“And I’m going to ask you tomorrow to promise me you won’t hurt yourself or…” he swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes tight to compose himself.

He had though he had understood what John had gone through, watching him fall. Now, after seeing Violet literally teetering on the very precipice of life and death, now he understood.

“Your life is not your own,” he repeated himself, tightening his embrace around her rail-thin frame. “Keep your hands off it.”

She only sighed and Sherlock felt a sick, heavy dread pooling in his belly. That particular battle wasn’t over yet.

“Also, there is something else I need to ask you, now and again when you are sober,” he cleared his throat. “A bit awkward proposition, actually, now that we’ve formally agreed to end the romance.” He nearly gagged on the word "romance.”

“What’s that?” her voice was wary, as it should be.

He dipped his head down and breathed into her ear: “Marry me.”

Violet sobered up in 0.2 seconds. “What?”

***

2 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Thursday morning
5:27 PM

Mycroft literally spit out his tea, the second cup he had made since arriving at his brother’s flat.

“What?”

Sherlock gave his elder brother a languid, indolent smile.
It was the moment he had been waiting for since Mycroft arrived.

Dramatically, he finally withdrew his left hand from his pocket and held it up so Mycroft could not miss the gold wedding band on his left ring finger.

“I would like to discuss the safe return of my wife to England, brother mine.”

Chapter End Notes

AND with that twist, I'm taking a two week hiatus for work and vacation.
*muwhahaha*

Mean, I know, but sadly Real Life is kidnapping me once again! But I'm going to be polishing up the last three chapters and cadogan is kicking ass and taking names while beta'ing so more story to come soon.

I know Series 4 was not well-loved by the fans, but damn it has some amazing dialogue. Sherlock stole the line about demons from Mycroft's speech about Eurus in "The Final Problem."

The "Your life is not your own..." if from "The Lying Detective. Not going to lie, I teared up a little bit during that monologue from TLD.

"I can't make bricks without clay..." is a quote from the ACD canon "Copper Beeches."

Violet's speech about "alternative universes" is not just a nod to Series 4 but also to two of my favorite fanfics on the forum.

The names Eleanor and Nora were used for John and Mary's daughter in splix's "The Case of the Green Gown" :
http://archiveofourown.org/works/2659472/chapters/5943698.

The nickname Bee is from Odamaki's "The Men Who Talked Between the Words." http://archiveofourown.org/works/1890621/chapters/4074051

Personally, I think Nora and/or Bee would have been better names for the Watson baby that Rosemunde, but what do I know? lol

Seriously, I wish I could write as well as those two! But one of the many things I love about fanfic, writing and reading, is exploring all these alternative worlds our favorite characters exist in. :^)

And with that, as things in our world continue to get... stranger... be safe and be nice. You really can't go wrong with that combo... one would hope.

XOXO
Chapter Summary

Critical Position

The moment in a game or opening when the evaluation shows that things are about to change, either towards an advantage for one player, or towards equality; a wrong move can be disastrous.

Chapter Notes

Miss me? lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty: Critical Position

6 April 2016
London, England
Wednesday evening
7:47 PM London time

“Amazing,” John blurted out after Sherlock finished explaining his plan to bring Violet safely back to Baker Street, or rather, as much as he could. There were some parts he hadn’t shared with John, for security reasons, which John understood. “I’m gobsmacked actually. It’s brilliant.”

Sherlock popped the last bit of the cold bacon and cheese butty into his mouth then balled up the serviette. He had savored that sandwich, knowing he had nothing to look forward to but nasty, heart-burn inducing Indian food back at John and Mary’s house. After swallowing, he asked, “Do you really think so?”

“Of course, I do. It will completely force Mycroft’s hand. Serves him right too, seeing he had the ability to clear Violet’s name all along, forcing her to work for him, in order to keep tabs on you, making her your handler…”

An old memory echoed in John’s head just then:

He’s trapped me here just as neatly and permanently as he’s trapped Sherlock. Don’t you get it? I’m Sherlock’s new handler. I’m not The Other Woman, I’m John 2.0...

“Plus that nonsense of forcing Violet to marry you, I mean, seriously? Who even does that anymore? But if you go through with it, you’re merely doing what your loving Big Brother wanted you to do in the first place. Of course it’s brilliant.”

“And you’re OK with this?”
“I’m OK with anything that makes Mycroft look like an idiot.”


“Oh. That bit. Well… I’m not thrilled with it, of course.”

“It’s just a legal formality. My surname shields her life, it doesn’t mean anything.”

“To you it means nothing, but what about her?”

“She’ll see the practicality of it, the necessity of the thing.”

“What if she’s still in love with you?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, “We still don’t even know if she was in love with me in the first place.”

John didn’t realize how his eyes had popped out and his mouth had dropped open until Sherlock pointed out, “You’re making that face.”

“What face?”

“The ‘Sherlock, have you lost your bloody mind’ face and no, I haven’t.”

“You… her… both…” he blustered.

“Yes, good, use your words, Dr. Watson,” Sherlock rolled his eyes. “It is little wonder how you manage to be such a prolific blog writer.”

“Oh shut up,” John snapped sourly. “You two cared about each other. You two had a relationship. What you two had was not causal.”

“True, but… I don’t know if it was love,” Sherlock put his hands behind his back, as he was wont to do to hide discomfort. “I know I care deeply for her and she for me. I tried my very best to make it a successful relationship. But… I don’t know if it was love. Not like how I… um…” he stared at John a second too long then ducked his head.

Oh…

John wanted to take him in his arms right then and there. Whisper to him, I love you too…

But they were still in Suburbia and there were lights on in all the houses surrounding them. Nosy people with boring lives looked out of those open windows. Nosy people friendly with the Watsons, specifically with Mrs. Watson, John realized with a sinking chest.

“Come on, let’s go,” John tilted his head indicating he wanted to continue their walk just as Ted and Stella’s Citroën DS4 tooted past them, Ted honking the horn as they drove by. “Late to the party, as always,” John sighed as they backed up then pulled up to the kerb next to them.

“John,” Stella leaned over the driver side window after rolling it down. “Is the party that boring you’re trying to run away?” Coolly, she added, “Evening, Mr. Holmes.”

After Sherlock had loudly deduced at a different dinner party about how Stella had lied to Ted about how much she really spent at the shops, not to mention that she sent Ted’s shirts to be pressed and laundered instead of washing and ironing herself, she was rather not fond of him.
Sherlock was unaffected. “Good evening,” he rumbled while looking at her up and down. “I hope you didn’t tell your husband you coloured your hair yourself, that obviously was done by a beautician and it’s not a very flattering cut and colour either, makes your head look small.”

“There’s plenty of food left,” John quickly inserted himself into the conversation as Stella’s jaw dropped to the street while Ted demanded what in the hell did that beanpole say now?

“Mary’s dying to see you, said it’s been yonks since you’ve popped in.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Stella glowered at Sherlock. “See you at the house,” she snarled as she threw the car back into drive.

“Your hair looks lovely!” John called after her forlornly. Turning to Sherlock, he demanded, “Was that really necessary?”

“No, but it was fun.”

John rolled his eyes now. “We need to get back, soon. But… before we go…”

“Yes?”

“Just… erm…hmm,” he put the knuckle of his right hand to his lips as his casted left hand dangled uselessly from its sling.

“Are you alright, John?”

Swallowing down burning bile, John squared his shoulders, “If Violet tells you she’s still in love with you… I want you to take her back.”

“What? But I…” Suddenly Sherlock looked mulish, almost angry. Two spots of red actually flared up on his bone-white cheeks. “What if I’m not in love with her? What if I decided, what if I actually made up my mind what… no, who I wanted?”

Closing his eyes, John now wanted nothing more than to take him into his arms (or his one good arm at least…) and kiss him as if the world was coming to end. “Sherlock, she’s dying and I’m married. Let her last years be happy ones.”

“What about you? Don’t you deserve…” Sherlock spread his hands out then let them fall helplessly. “Don’t you want to come home?” He swallowed hard and added, “With me?”

“Of course I do!” John burst out. “I want that more than anything. It’s taking every fibre of my being not to grab you by the hand, flag the first cab and get the hell out of here. But you know who and what I’m married to and what she’s capable of; she used to kill people for money.”

“I’m aware,” Sherlock said dryly, rubbing his chest.

“You should have died that night. We’re both somebody had the decency to call for an ambulance because my murderous wife sure didn’t, despite your best efforts to make me believe otherwise.”

Sherlock held his tongue. There was no point in re-hashing the past. He was supposed to die that night. He covered up for Mary, saying she called 999 so John wouldn’t completely hate her. She was the mother of his child after all.

Plus a part of Sherlock had still believed back then that there was no way John would ever… could ever reciprocate the feelings Sherlock had for him.
And (if one was being perfectly honest), he was just a bit afraid of Mary. Best to keep on her good side. So, as he bled out for a second time from the gunshot wound, he had lied. He told John that the gunshot was “surgical” and that Mary had called 999 to paint her in a better light.

But… someone had called 999 that night before John did.

*But who did? Who made the call? Who saved him?*

It wasn’t Janine. Or Magnussen. It sure as hell wasn’t Mary.

The mystery plagued him.

Meanwhile John kept raving, “And I don’t know how much longer I can keep her placated with threats and empty promises. We need to get Violet home. We need to get her proper medical care and we need her help ridding us of Professor Moriarty and his bloody Red-headed League once and for all, especially since that bastard is now targeting our kids.”

“I know.”

“I can’t risk Mary taking off to search for Maisie on her own, especially now. Not only do I risk never seeing my daughter again,” John felt the old, smoldering resentment towards Mary kindling again. “But Mary could lead the Professor right to Maisie and then…”

He ran his hand over his face, actually dry-heaving now.

“John,” Sherlock sounded like a stern schoolmaster. “I told you not to research what *La Ligue des Roux* does to train the *Petit Roux* in the art and lifestyle of a consulting criminal.”

“Then you know that the girls are trained ten times more brutally than the boys and what the boys go through is no walk in the park. And that the girls are given additional training… that they’re groomed on…” John’s face twisted as his throat worked. His damaged left curled uselessly and painfully over the edge of his cast as he pressed his right knuckles against his forehead, trying not to cry. “Groomed on… how to perform in the bedroom…”

“John, do not torture yourself like this.”

“Assuming that they’re not just sold to some monster who likes fiddling around with little kids, if they’re not… *attractive* enough to go through the grooming program…” John covered his face, heaving a shuddering sob. When he felt Sherlock’s hands tentatively touch his shoulders, he whispered, “Don’t. I know you’re trying to be kind. But if you hug me, I’ll be undone and I can’t go back to the party in pieces.” Lowering his voice, he added, “Especially when all I want to do is to run back to Baker Street, lock the door and hold on to you and never ever let you go again,” he finished fiercely.

“Then why are you asking me to start again with Violet if you feel that way? That makes no sense whatsoever,” demanded the most logical man in the world.

But John heard the hurt in Sherlock’s voice.

He lifted his head and lowered his right voice. “Because, I’ve already lived in a world where you don’t exist anymore and I *can’t* do that again. But I also don’t want to live in a world where you’ve been hurt or damaged in any way because of me.”

“You? You didn’t do anything.”
“Shut up. Just let me talk for once,” John held his hand up again, this time in an effort to silence
Sherlock. “See, I’m not sure if Mary would actually try to kill you again, since she risks not only me
tearing her limb from limb but also the full weight of Mycroft’s wrath.” When Sherlock snorted, John
risked putting his hand on Sherlock’s chest. “Maybe he cares about you, maybe he doesn’t, but
Mycroft does care about what Mummy thinks of him. I saw how incensed your mother was after you
had been shot. I hate to think what she would do if Mary had a second go at it and succeed.”

“I think she wouldn’t even bother with asking Mycroft to deal with her,” Sherlock said wryly.
“She’d want to see to Mary’s end personally.”

“So, you see, I don’t think Mary would kill you, but I think she would hurt you, very badly
somehow. Maybe she wouldn’t kill you, but she is a crack shot, a former sniper. She could easily
hide out on a roof top, wait for you to cross the street and shoot you in the lower back, paralyzing
you.”

Sherlock swallowed hard and let John go. He hadn’t thought of that. “Does the woman’s
deviousness know no bounds?” he asked faintly.

“You’re safer with Violet, and it will comfort her, especially when things really start going bad,”
John felt his resolve firm up. “She’ll feel less alone and that will help, it won’t fix anything of
course,” John mumbled hastily, wiping his damp eyes with the sleeve of his black coat.

“But… what if she doesn’t… love me… that way?”

“Obviously, Violet isn’t going to do anything she doesn’t want to do,” John stuck his right hand in
his coat pocket. His broken fingers and wrists were really starting to ache now too plus he felt a chill.
He needed to make sure he didn’t catch a cold since he was about to embark on an adventure in
Lausanne… and also because he now lacked a spleen.

“But there is something more… something more that you want to tell me but it’s causing you terrible
distress to do so and I’m not talking about your broken fingers and wrist.”

“You two will be alone together at some point, for great stretches of time.”

“Yes…?”

“You two did have an intimate relationship. You both have emotional attachment to each other.”

“Oh God,” Sherlock moaned when he realized where this conversation was going. “Call Ted and
Stella back. I wish for them to run me over with their overpriced automobile.”

“Plus, well, it must be said, she is pretty, has a lovely smile actually not to mention you’ve waxed
poetic about her eyes in the past.”

“Waxed poetic?” Sherlock spluttered. “I most certainly did not. I would not. ‘As you are perfectly
aware, emotion is abhorrent to me. It is the grit in a sensitive instrument, the crack in the lens.’”**

“Oh bollocks, you fibber,” John fired back. “’She has pretty eyes, Violet…’”, quote, unquote.”

“Well… they’re not unseemly. And I was just making an observation.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” John exploded. “I know how the damn coffee table got broken!”

“I am quite sure I don’t know what you are talking about,” Sherlock lied while plotting an intricate
scheme to murder gossipy old Mrs. Hudson.
“Damn it, Sherlock, you are flesh and blood. You have feelings. You have ... you must have ... impulses.”**

“As I think I’ve made you quite aware of my impulses a time or two, specifically towards you,” Sherlock suddenly had an urge to throttle John instead of Mrs. Hudson. “Why do you think I would have... impulses... towards her?”

“Because (to quote you again) the fairer sex is more my department than it is yours.”

“Actually, that’s paraphrasing.”

“Stop nitpicking me and listen!”

“FINE! WHAT?”

John sucked in a deep breath. “I am really trying not to embarrass you, but I have more experience with sex and relationships than you do. I know how things go between a man and woman who’ve been together in the past and are left alone again.”

“And some of us have masterful control over our impulses,” Sherlock snapped, balling his hands into fists, even as he wondered why this conversation was making him so angry. “It’s one of the perks of mastering mind over matter, brain power over transport.”

“All I’m saying is this,” John raised his voice over Sherlock’s diatribe. “If you and Violet do go to bed together, you two have some sort of fling but aren’t in a proper relationship, that you’re just married in name only…”

“Yes?” Sherlock seethed through his teeth.

“Don’t tell me.”

Sherlock blinked, all the anger seeping away, like rain hitting quicksand. “What?”

“Please, don’t tell me. You two are both brilliant liars. If you’re not in love but something... you know... happens in the heat of the moment or I dunno, your honeymoon since you’re getting married and all... I don’t want to know. I can’t ask you, erm... to abstain. If I did, I’d be the biggest hypocrite on the planet, wouldn’t I, me being married and all.” John lifted his eyes, looking older and puffier than usual. “You two are both marvelous liars. Make something up. Don’t let me know, don’t let me find out.”

“John…”

“I won’t ask either. It’s none of my business. You and I... you’re my best friend. You’re single-handedly the most important person in the world to me. You’re the best and wisest man I’ve ever known and I love you with all my heart... but, we’re not a couple. Not yet. Not until I can slough Mary off of me for good. It’s not fair for me to expect you to be faithful to someone who was an idiot and married someone else.”

“John…” Sherlock tried again, but his brain was dangerously close to overloading…

*Did he just say what I think he just... what just happened?*

“John?”

“Please.”
Silence stretched out for an eternity on the dark, deserted streets as the streetlamps flickered. Boring, ordinary families lived their boring, ordinary lives inside the boring, ordinary, identical terrace houses neatly lined up along the road.

Even the air smelt ordinary. No smoke from fireplaces, no strange odors from overflowing skips. No unfortunate small animals squashed by lorries’ tyres rotting in the road. No flowers growing yet in anyone’s garden.

Everything was safe and bland, like forgotten white bread going dry or popcorn becoming stale.

“Very well,” Sherlock finally complied, his voice cracking.

**

21 May 2016
Havana, Cuba
Saturday morning
12:05 AM Eastern Standard Time

He had shaved off his beard Friday morning and put on one of a crisp dress shirt and neatly pressed suit for the first time in nearly two months. The luxurious clothes had felt foreign to him.

But the necktie choked the life out of him.

When he suggested to Doña Nalda that he wouldn’t wear a tie to his wedding, she had berated him, informing him that yes he would and trundled off to find one of her deceased husband’s old ties for him to borrow. “Not wear tie to wedding, bahhhhhhh,” she had howled in broken English.

Doña Nalda had also rustled up a dress for Violet, a white eyelet sundress that maybe was fashionable back in the late Nineties. It had been slightly too large for Violet, not to mention it was a dress meant for a teenage girl, not a forty year old woman. Still, Violet made it work, with the help of safety pins, a push-up bra and a silk sash cinched around her waist.

Sherlock made no comment about the color of the sash, a bright electric blue.

Shame that Jepthro Rucastle had been a clinically insane abuser of women; he really did have an eye for what colours complemented one’s complexion.

Creamy white and dark pink las flores de la mariposa decorated her hair. She also carried a bouquet of Cuba’s national flowers as well as they stood in the magistrate’s office.

Sherlock had asked if she had wanted to get married in a Catholic church, since she had been baptized into the religion as an infant. She shook her head.

“If this is in name-only, it wouldn’t feel right, getting married in a church.

Sherlock hadn’t understood her sentiments but then, he was an atheist. His parents were sporadic church-goers at best, his mother joking they were C of E CEOs… Church of England on Christmas and Easter Only, ha ha ha… but then, Sherlock had always thought his mother had a terrible sense of humour.

They opted out of the traditional Cuban procession to the government building where wedding ceremonies were performed.

They did make one quick stop at the post office.
“What is that?” Violet arched an eyebrow and crossed her arms as Sherlock took a heavily padded envelope from inside his jacket.

“Never you mind,” Sherlock waved her off, preparing to do battle with the surly looking postal worker, leaning on the counter, eying them in their wedding finery.

After his chore was completed and the appropriate bribe paid so the envelope would actually be sent where it needed to go, Sherlock crooked his arm, “Shall we, my bride?”

“Oh zip it,” Violet rolled her eyes but took his arm.

Having greased a few more palms a few weeks ago and making sure those palms stayed greased, Sherlock ensured that he and Violet jumped the queue and were escorted to a private room once they arrived at the appropriate government building.

Once inside and the door closed, the fastest marriage ceremony ever began. After a rapid-fire exchange of vows in Spanish, the judge pronounced them man and wife after Violet slid a gold wedding band onto Sherlock’s finger and Sherlock not only put Janine’s old engagement ring back on her finger but also added a new gold wedding band as well. The judge didn’t even issue the usual command to kiss the bride, just pulled out the wedding license, smoothed it out over his desk and handed a pen to Sherlock and a pen to Violet.

Sherlock had signed it with his usual elegant cursive, borderline calligraphic handwriting. Violet had hesitated, the point of the pen soaking ink into the document. When the judge tactfully cleared his throat, Violet shook herself and scrawled out in her dreadful handwriting:

_Violet Hunter Holmes_, as if adding _Holmes_ was an after-thought, like she had forgotten the whole point why she was there that day.

Sherlock had arched an eyebrow but held his tongue as he slipped the judge another American hundred dollar bill. He had already deduced the judge was sending all the American money Sherlock had given him to his children who had defected to Miami, but was bored by the family drama and chose not to dig into it further.

The judge had surprised them with snapping their picture with an old fashioned Polaroid. Neither Violet nor Sherlock had smiled.

Walking arm-in-arm to Doña Nalda’s _paladar_, Violet had waved the picture in the vain effort to make the picture appear faster. “That’s not how it works,” he had pointed out.

“Shut up,” Violet had leaned on Sherlock more than usual on their walk to Doña Nalda’s. Her feet had felt weird that morning, like they had fallen asleep. She still couldn’t wiggle her left toes but she could still walk, thank God. She hadn’t mentioned it to Sherlock, but fear had iced her veins and frozen her heart.

One of the many, many things about ALS that made it such a God-awful disease was the remission, then relapse, remission, then relapse, until there were no more remissions and the disease steadily progressed, destroying everything in its path.

Doña Nalda had agreed to rent out her spare bedroom to the happy couple and then to the lonely bride after her husband left to attend some business before she could go home. She had also surprised them with a traditional wedding cake, complete with the brightly coloured ribbons embedded within the bottom layer of the cake. The small crowd had cheered and whistled and clapped their hands when Sherlock and Violet walked in. Beaming, Doña Nalda encouraged any and all single girls to
come up and pull on the ribbons to see who would pull out the ribbon with a ring tied to the end, making her the next girl to get married.

The modest unexpected wedding reception turned into quite a party. Suddenly plates of *lechón asado* and *enchilado de mariscos* appeared along with pots of *ajiaco* and *caldo gallego*. Several bottles appeared as well, some of them labeled with recognizable names of wines and spirits. Other bottles not so much.

The radio was turned on and loud raucous salsa music filled the *paladar*, with all the men insisting a turn with the bride, even though the bride insisted she couldn’t dance.

“She’s not lying,” Sherlock had said, although his toe was unconsciously tapping. He would have loved to gone out and cut a rug.

His wish was soon granted. Doña Nalda grabbed him by the wrists and dragged him out to the dance floor. Despite her girth, Doña Nalda moved just as smoothly and sensually as any professional dancer. Sherlock discovered he had to struggle to keep up with her.

Then everyone at the party insisted on doing the traditional Cuban “money dance” for the newlyweds.

“We don’t need it,” Violet had hissed into Sherlock’s ear as Doña Nalda’s laughing daughters pushed them to the middle of the *paladar*. “I don’t want to take money from these people, they can’t afford it.”

“It’s rude not to,” Sherlock had muttered back as people lined up with bank notes and safety pins. “We’ll give it to Doña Nalda to split amongst her daughters.”

So Sherlock and Violet took turns dancing with everyone who lined up, waving a bank note. After the dance, a bank note was pinned to the skirt of Violet’s dress or Sherlock’s borrowed tie.

Violet even got into the spirit of the thing, showing off all the bills pinned to her dress. Twirling around, she informed Sherlock impishly, “*Me gustan mas que a ti, mi esposo.*”

It had been the first genuine smile she had produced all day.

After that, the party wound down, with only the hard-core drinkers staying on.

Near midnight, the smells of drying out pork and warm fish enchiladas had started to make Violet nauseous and Sherlock had a headache from all the talking and the loud music. They tried to slip out unnoticed but the last of the revelers cheered as they crept out of the main room to go upstairs, shouting bawdy wedding night advice in Spanish.

Doña Nalda let rooms out as well as running her *paladar*. After her husband died and her daughters moved out after getting married, Doña Nalda said loneliness prompted her to rent out the empty bedrooms. She liked having lots of people around her, which Sherlock could not understand for the life of him. How could anyone enjoy hordes of people about their person all day, every day?

Personally he had been relieved when Violet told him she needed to go upstairs, away from the noise, the smoke and the aromas of left-over food.

Their new lodgings were tiny, even compared to the houseboat. But there was a private washroom attached to it. No shower or bath, but at least a private loo and sink to wash up.

Sherlock stared at his cleanly shaven face, running his hand over it, feeling bristles already starting to
grow. With his dark hair and ivory complexion, shaving was a necessary chore or else he’d sport a five o’clock shadow by three.

He washed his face and hands with the little soaps Doña Nalda provided (he didn’t ask where she got them from) then dried his hands and face. He tugged off the ridiculous necktie, took off his suit jacket, his socks and shoes, breathing a sigh of relief that this day was over.

Turning off the light, he stepped back into the bedroom.

He could still hear the party going on without them downstairs. Violet sat on the bed, her dress belled out around her. All the flowers had fallen out of her hair and she had unpinned all the money from her skirts. A thick envelope full of cash sat in her lap.

In front of her was an old map of North America. Next to her hip was a notepad.

Violet studied the map, a red pen in her mouth.

Sherlock observed that the West Coast, East Coast and Central America had great big red X’s slashed through them. There was a question mark drawn on Canada.

“Mrs. Violet Holmes,” he leaned against the doorjamb, unable to resist teasing her.

Her head jerked up. “Oh God, I am Mrs. Violet Holmes,” she groaned. “First thing I’m doing when Mycroft fixes all this shit is that I’m writing an essay regarding the Oedipus Complex and crime-fighting and how it’s all related.”

“Mother prefers to go by Lettie. It’s Father’s pet name for her.” He padded across the old scratched up hardwood floor to the bed and sat next to her. She smelt like herself, coconut oil and witch-hazel, but there was a little bit something extra, something floral and sweet. Violets… she was either wearing a perfume or essential oils that had notes of violets.

It suited her.

“What are you working on?”

“Ruling out where Mycroft sent John’s daughter based on the profile I’ve created for him so far,” Violet fixed her eyes back on the map.

“Oh?”

“I want to hit the road running with this when I go back to England. I haven’t been able to dedicate much time to finding Maisie.”

“I think you can be forgiven for being a bit distracted,” he peered over her shoulder at the map.

“I’ve ruled out Ireland and Scotland, too close to home. New Zealand has too sparse of a population. Australia and Canada are wild cards, but my money is he’s hiding her in the States. Probably the Midwest,” she circled the center of map.

Utah was not within her circle.

“Why the Midwest?”

“Demographics,” she proclaimed. “The Midwest was mostly settled by Europeans, primarily Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch and German immigrants.”
“And Marissa is blue-eyed, blonde and Caucasian, easy to hide her in plain sight.”

“Ding, ding, ding,” Violet chimed as she lifted her eyebrows in approval. “Although…

“Although?”

“I haven’t ruled out…”

She circled Utah.

“What’s special about Utah?”

“Other than Donny and Marie Osmond?”

“Who are they?”

“You have no idea how lucky you are not to know who those people are.”

“But what is special about Utah? Why do you think that state is a possibility?”

“Because it’s not obvious,” Violet promptly replied. “It’s something your brother would do,” she started to say but yawned widely. “I need coffee.”

“You need sleep, as do I.”

They sat on the bed, a double bed with a snowy white duvet and an old-fashioned wrought-iron bed-frame. A small lamp glowed on top of an oft repainted night stand.

Through the open window, they could hear the laughter and the music from the wedding reception they had just abandoned.

“Erm…” Sherlock twisted the unfamiliar gold ring around his finger. “Your face is healing nicely. The scrapes and bruises are almost gone.”

“Just in time for my wedding photos,” Violet quipped, “I can’t wait to frame the Polaroid.”

“Ahh… yes, speaking of the wedding. Umm… I know there are certain… expectations that go along with the wedding night. Also, I am aware that we have… in the past… engaged in… intimate activities which are proper for two consenting adults to participate in when in a committed relationship… but said activities need not necessarily be confined to relationships, of course,”

Sherlock felt his cheeks burning as he stared at his new wedding band. “As long as both individuals involved in said activities are willing and able, which is to say… Erm… well, I just…” he waited a moment for Violet to put him out of his misery. When she continued to stare at him wordlessly, with one eyebrow arched, he miserably plowed on: “It’s not as if it wasn’t enjoyable, what we had… It was good, what we had, shared, whatever. The point is…”

“There’s a point to this?”

“Yes,” he kept his eyes fixed on his hands. He threaded his fingers together now, the nerves getting the better of him. “The point is… tonight…” he let his shoulders fall and he lifted his eyes up at her. “I don’t want to.”

“Don’t want to… sleep with me.”

“I’m sorry.”
She finally smiled then, a mischievous spark in her eyes. “I’ll be damned. He finally told you he loved you, didn’t he?”

A small, sheepish smile quirked his lips up as he nodded.

“It’s about frickin’ time.”

“You’re OK with this?”

Violet fidgets with the hem of her silly dress. “I mean… I’d rather you be happy than miserable. But it’d be lie to say I wasn’t just a little bit jealous.”

“A little jealous?”

“Sure, I mean…” she continued to twist the hem of her dress. “You and John will get to experience something I never will.”

Mitton leaning around the car seat so he could kiss Violet’s cheek immediately popped into Sherlock’s head. “You don’t know that for sure. Stephen Hawkins was married thrice.”

“Yeah, he’s not exactly a poster child for healthy, committed relationships,” Violet dryly pointed out. “Besides, that’s not the only reason why I’m a little jealous.” Impishly she added, “It’s not even the biggest reason, to be completely honest.”

“Oh?”

“The sex was fucking amazing,” she pouted, “That I will definitely miss.”

“You will?”

“Um, sweetheart?” Violet held out her hands. “We made love in the freaking Eiffel Tower. We broke your coffee table and one night we scared the dog. Yeah, the sex was that toe-curling, mind-blowing good. Are you done fishing for compliments now?”

“Well, far be it for me to stop you praising my prowess.”

Violet reached behind her, pulled out a pillow and smacked Sherlock over the head with it, “I’m happy for you two idiots, OK?”

“OK,” Sherlock felt something warm and comforting glowing within his chest. For the first time since he found her, he started to loosen his grip on the cold, hard logic he prided himself on. Started to reach out for an emotion he rarely dared to succumb to… hope.

Everything is coming together… John, Violet and Marissa will come home to Baker Street. We will not only take care of Violet, but we will help maintain her dignity whether she has only five years left or fifty. We will watch Marissa grow up. John and I will grow old together...

It’s not a dream anymore. It’s closer to reality than a fantasy...

Violet must have picked up on Sherlock’s emotions because she put her chin on Sherlock’s shoulder. “We’re so close now. We’re almost home-free.”

“Almost,” Sherlock swallowed a massive yawn. “But first, sleep. I’ll take the floor.”

“No, you won’t,” Violet slid off the bed. “We’re married now. Married people don’t have sex.”
“Ha,” Sherlock snorted, but secretly he was grateful. He truly was exhausted and he really didn’t fancy having to sleep on a hard floor. Not that he’s slept in worse places in the past; but that didn’t mean he enjoyed it.

His head hit the thin pillow, his eyes already fluttering. The bed was no king-size, but it was a far sight larger than the one on the houseboat. He at least fit on this bed.

“Take your suit off before your fall asleep in it,” he thought he heard Violet say but she had been yawning as she spoke so he wasn’t sure.

“M’fine,” he wearily informed her. “M’shoes off, I’m fine.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Was that pun intentional?”

“No…God no,” she groaned. “If you’re not going to change, shut up so I can get some sleep.”

He heard the rustling of a dress gliding off of hips, then the soft *whump* of a bra hitting the floor.

His Transport didn’t respond one jot.

He felt the cotton sheet and linen duvet lift then fall as she slid into bed next to him.

“Did you steal one of my T-shirts?”

“Yes.”

“Stop stealing my clothes.”

“Make me.”

For a moment, there was only the *whump-whump-whump* of the ceiling fan.

Then he asked her, “How’s your foot?”

“I can move it again, but my toes are still tingling.”

He pulled her to him and held her until they both fell asleep.

’Till death do us part…

**

2 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Thursday evening
5:35 PM

The Polaroid of Sherlock and Violet Holmes starting stoically at the photographer shook in Mycroft’s hand.

“You have a lot of explaining to do, Little Brother.”

“No,” Sherlock dug deep into the sofa cushions and produced a mobile, but not just any mobile.

Anthea’s mobile.
“You do, Brother Mine.”

He waggled the mobile at him.

“What’s in Salt Lake City, Mycroft?”

Chapter End Notes

...hmm, I wonder if Mycroft is about to get what is coming to him....? 0:^)

***Snippets of Sherlock and John's argument about the "crack in the lens" and "impulse" are from "The Abominable Bride."

XOXO Have a great week! :^)
Deflect

Chapter Summary

Deflect

The inverse of a decoy. Whereas a decoy involves luring an enemy piece to a bad square, a deflection involves luring an enemy piece away from a good square; typically, away from a square on which it defends another piece or threat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-One: Deflect

“I’m quite sure I don’t know what you are talking about,” Mycroft sneered in his most supercilious voice.

“Perhaps you should quiz your little protégé regarding her plans for Salt Lake City since she is scheduled to fly out there next week,” Sherlock tossed the mobile at Mycroft, paying no mind as Mycroft dropped the Snoopy and Woodstock mug as he reached to catch the mobile. The mug clunked loudly to the floor, the handle snapping clean off as the dregs of the tea splattered all over Sherlock’s dusty rug.

“Anthea is not my protégé, she is my PA.”

Sherlock started leaving through the piles of folders, magazines, unopened mail and books on his coffee table as he continued to lecture his elder brother: “She’s currently your PA, but also an MI-6 trainee m you are desperately grooming to take over your post when either you turn up your toes due to natural causes or an assassin’s bullet finally finds you for I do not see you retiring. Although,” Sherlock pulled out a large manila envelope from underneath a tea-spattered pharmaceutical textbook. “Are you sure she’s really the right person for the job after you’re gone? She’s already committed two rather large blunders, first being murdering Miss Jennifer Kay Boyle, the nurse who suspected that John and Mary’s daughter really hadn’t died. The second blunder being that she let Violet Hunter slip through her fingers whilst in Baden-Baden.”

“Anthea followed a false order planted by the mole to terminate Miss Boyle.”

“And whose orders was she following to apprehend Agent Hunter in Germany?”

“Where is Violet Hunter?”

“Mmm, deflection, interesting, but I shall let it pass for now. Violet is in a country that has granted her asylum from extradition,” Sherlock stood up and thrust the envelope out at Mycroft. “Here is a certified copy of our official marriage license.”

“Ah,” Mycroft recognized the state seal on the envelope. “She’s in Cuba.”

“Was in Cuba,” Sherlock baldly lied to his brother, but the lie didn’t really matter. Cuba was actually one of the few countries the British Government has no power or influence over. “Now, I expect you
to expedite Violet’s safe passage back to England and fast-track her permanent residency status. At this time, she is not interested in citizenship but may be in the future…”

Whatever future she has remaining…

“And why would I be interested in allowing a potential criminal to return to England? Surely you do realize that she’s still a person of interest in Senator Woodhouse’s murder?”

“Suicide,” Sherlock started rooting around his coffee table again. He pulled out a medical file from New York City Mortuary “Plain as the nose on, well, your face, actually,” he held the file out to Mycroft. “To be honest, when you do put on weight, your chubby cheeks make your nose seem smaller. Maybe a few extra pounds suit you.”

Mycroft snatched the file away from Sherlock. “What’s this?”

“Senator Woodhouse’s autopsy report, the original autopsy report that was leaked to the press, not the falsified one that had been sent to the CIA in order to make them believe that the Senator had been murdered,” Sherlock airily informed him. “Oh, and once I proved that Violet was in Washington DC metro area, Fairfax to be exact and nowhere near New York, where the Senator slit his own wrists in order to avoid the shame Moriarty had in store for him, the CIA lost interest in questioning her. Imagine that.”

“How did you prove that, Little Brother?”

“Had a conversation with the night manager who checked Violet into the Best Western she hid out in while federal agents lost their minds, thinking she was actually stupid enough to flee to New York City.”

Tracking down the said night manager had been the other reason for Sherlock and Lisbeth’s arrival to Chicago. Once Sherlock had deduced Violet’s escape from Dulles, it had been easy for him to narrow down where she went to ground. Finding someone who not only recognized her but also would agree to testify to that fact had been a whole other tedious matter.

No thrilling chases down darkening alleys, no terse confrontations, no cracking of computer codes as the clock ticked down, no duel of wits. Just hours and hours of watching surveillance videos, reading hotel registers and making phone call after phone call, chores Sherlock usually let the peons at the Met handle.

Thank God events in Chicago had been more interesting.

Mycroft, meanwhile, started putting the dates together. “When she called me,” he glowered at his younger brother, “She told me she was in New York. She wanted me to arrange safe passage for her to Canada.”

“She lied. Shocking, I know. Does the name Scowrers mean anything to you,” Sherlock looked up just in time to see the colour drain from his pinched, angry face, “Interesting.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft clutched the file and Anthea’s mobile. “I do not know what you are up to. I also know I was not… forthcoming as to why I did not want you to take Lady Smallwood’s case against Charles Augustus Magnussen and that is my fault.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “I ordered you not to meddle with Charles Augustus Magnussen. I am pleading with you not to interfere with the Scowrers Family.”

“Too late,” Sherlock shrugged.
“Oh Sherlock, what have you done?”

“Put a man called Brother Morris Scowrers behind bars because he oversaw an unauthorized black site used for conducting illegal medical tests on human test subjects, primarily children but one confirmed adult, that adult being Agent John Mitton, whom you abandoned in the field, which he’s still a bit bitter about, by the way. Did you burn him because he was the one who leaked the information that Marissa Watson was alive?”

The only sound in the flat was the dripping of the leaking tap.

“Mycroft,” Sherlock dropped his playful guise. “You did not have the authority to remove that child from Mary and John Watson. No matter how… repellant you find Mary, you overstepped your bounds.”

“He had orders.”

“He has a conscience.”

“It wasn’t just my call to make, Sherlock. Honestly, I do not operate alone within MI-6 nor am I in charge of the entire organization.”

Sherlock made a snorting, dismissive noise through his nose. “Enjoy explaining that to Mitton’s lawyer. I’m sure you all will have loads to discuss. Now, about Violet…”

“Does she have the Moriarty Code?”

“It doesn’t exist,” Sherlock snapped. “Richard Brook informed me of that fact on the roof. It was all a trick, a ruse in order to coerce me into my suicide. You’ve been chasing shadows, brother.”

“Violet told me-”

“Violet is a masterful liar, brother. She told you exactly what you wanted to hear so you would release her from your indentured servitude. She tired of being your puppet, as I have.”

“I saved you from prison, Sherlock.”

“You were going to send me on suicide mission, Mycroft.” Sherlock bit back, “You were sending me to my death even though I did a job that MI-6 planned on doing anyway!”

“So you didn’t find the prepaid mobile in my office while we held you there before escorting you to solitary confinement?” Mycroft asked silkily, putting the mobile and file back on the cluttered coffee table. “Did you really think I would allow you to die in the field, Little Brother?”

“Exile from London would have been the same as death.”

“Ah,” Realization dawned on Mycroft. He rolled his eyes, “Of course, the army doctor. Tell me, how does Dr. Watson feel about your nuptials?”

“Seeing that he is married himself, I don’t see how it would really affect him,” Sherlock said airily as he side-stepped around the coffee table to pick up the broken mug. “Shame, I liked this one. The dog is cute. Never really sure what that yellow… thingy is supposed to be,” he mumbled.

“You think your marriage will have no effect on John?” Mycroft narrowed his black eyes.

“Oh, it will affect him. He’ll be delighted. He thinks I spend too much time alone and he likes Violet. He also said he had always hoped that my interest in her would… evolve.”
“Evolve?”

“Into something more romantic.”

“Ah.”

“Nothing is more romantic than wedded bliss.”

“If you say so,” Mycroft made a face as if the dog had fouled the carpet. “What are you up to?”

“I told you what I wanted.”

“If Violet’s name has been cleared from Senator Woodhouse’s suicide, why would she want to come back here? Surely she would want to stay in America now?”

“Her name was cleared for Woodhouse’s death, not the original crimes she was framed for eight years ago,” Sherlock’s face widened into his unpretty smile. “That’s where you come in.”

“Ahhhhh…. Of course,” Mycroft saw the whole picture now. “Since she had been unable to give state’s evidence against Woodhouse—”

“Which was why Moriarty’s men tried to apprehend her and Mitton in the first place, so she couldn’t testify against the Senator,” Sherlock interjected.

“She needs my influence to influence the FBI and CIA to formally drop the charges against her, rescind her death certificate and put her back in good standing with the FBI.”

“Yes, that. Precisely.”

Except she won’t be able to work for the FBI, but you don’t need to know that, Mickey…

“If she wants my help, then she needs to understand that I simply cannot murder the Earl of Winchester as she had requested.”

“You are in no position to bargain, Mycroft,” Sherlock hovered over his brother. “Stories tend to get out. Mitton could give an interview on Crimewatch. John could blog about it. I could update The Science of Deduction for the first time in three years or invite myself to my little fan club and see if The Empty Hearse would be interested in hearing a thrilling tale of heroics and betrayal.”

“You always were a drama queen.”

“You owe me,” Sherlock rumbled. “You not only owe me, but to John and Violet for all the misery your subterfuge and manipulations put them through.” He crouched down to whisper into Mycroft’s ear, “You also owe Ford.”

“What does he have to do with any of this?”

“Everything!”

Both Holmes jumped at the rap on the doorframe. “Sorry, didn’t mean to eavesdrop. This door was unlocked and the downstairs, well, I…” Lestrade held up a silver key. “You did say to use this in an emergency and it’s an emergency.”

“I was just leaving,” Mycroft started to stand up. “I trust you’ll forget anything you may have heard, Detective-Inspector.”
As Sherlock backed away from his brother, Lestrade said, “I think you better stay, Mr. Holmes. I have a feeling MI-6 might take jurisdiction over this anyway, due to the location.”

“Location?” Sherlock lifted his heavy brows, putting his hands behind his back, still holding the two broken pieces of his Snoopy and Woodstock mug.

“Start from the beginning, if you please,” Mycroft lifted his chin and placed his long, slender hand on the crook of his umbrella handle.

“DI Walter Mason and Sally Donovan are missing, have been for over 48 hours now.”

“Who?” Mycroft politely queried while Sherlock demanded, “Why would I care if those two morons are missing?”

“Because,” Lestrade gave Sherlock his patented would-you-shut-up-and-listen glare. “They started an off-the-books investigation into you.”

“Why?” both Holmes brothers demanded.

Under other circumstances, it would have been funny.

“I don’t really know for sure, but they’re digging deep, Whitey and Sally. When I checked out Sally’s bedsit, I found all these files from last year about you and John and Violet and the clinic fire on March 11th, the explosion on Hartwill Street on March 13th and Moriarty’s reappearance.”

“Files?” Mycroft arched an eyebrow.

“Metropolitan police files,” Lestrade let himself into the flat.

“Would you like a coffee?” Mycroft still remained the epitome of good manners. “Clearly you have not been home since this ordeal began?”

“How did you… oh right…” Lestrade waved his hand wearily at him. “Brother… deduction… thing,” He shook himself. “And no, we don’t have time. I need to finish briefing you then we need to fetch John and hit the road running.” He ran his fingers through his silvery hair. “The Met files in Sally’s flat were removed without proper authorization.”

“Stolen,” Sherlock said flatly.

“Yeah, and from what I can tell, they’re trying to connect the dots, but to what I don’t know. But one of the stolen files was from when you were shot in Magnussen’s penthouse.”

Mycroft and Sherlock exchanged a horrified look.

“Appledore,” Mycroft breathed.

Both men sprang into action, “Mycroft, go fetch John. He won’t fight you, I’ll text them en route so he knows to expect you. Lestrade, did you come in a panda car or your own vehicle?”

“I drove myself.”

“Good, don’t want to draw attention to anyone by arriving at the property. Your bland little car will do nicely.”

“It’s a mini-van now, we had to upgrade, the kid and all,” Lestrade blushed. Trading in his nice Jetta for a Ford mini-van had been a bit of a blow to his ego but it definitely made life easier.
“Even better, then there’s room for Gladstone,” Sherlock strode over to the peg where the leash dangled. As soon as Sherlock called for Gladstone to *komm*, the Alsatian loped out of Sherlock’s bedroom and sat obediently next to Sherlock.

“Always forget how ruddy big that dog is,” Lestrade took a cautious step back.

“Right, meet us at Appledore, Mycroft?”

“Why Appledore? What’s Appledore?” Fatigue was starting to fog Lestrade’s judgment.

“It’s where Magnussen used to live so obviously Mason and Donovan went to nose around there,” Sherlock said impatiently as he straightened up. “And we’re stopping at Speedy’s first, you’re clearly dead on your feet and need a coffee and some sort of sustenance you can eat on the go. I’ll drive.”

“If you order a cup of coffee along with a cheese toastie and only take,” Mycroft pulled out an old-fashioned gold pocket watch from the waistcoat of his three-piece suit. “No more than fifteen minutes to eat it at the café, we should all arrive at Appledore at approximately the same time. The time you take to order, eat and settle the check will give me enough time to pick up John and leave in order to meet you two at Appledore at the same time. We should not go to this property alone, Sherlock.”

“Point made,” Sherlock grudgingly agreed. “Greg, if you order a coffee to go when you get your food that will give you another boost of caffeine to make it through the day.”

“I could do with some coffee and food, actually,” Lestrade wearily admitted.

Mycroft checked his watch. “Right then, let’s get to work boys.”

Sherlock tugged Gladstone’s leash and started texting John as he hurried out of the flat, “Lock up if you don’t mind, brother,” he called over his shoulder.

Mycroft dallied just a bit so Sherlock, Lestrade and Gladstone would leave before him. Just as the front door closed on Lestrade asking, “Hang on, did you actually call me Greg?”; Mycroft pulled out his mobile and dialed a number he had memorized.

He did not introduce himself, “Not only has Sherlock gotten himself tangled up into the affairs of the Moriarty Family,” he announced as he walked down the seventeen steps. “But now he is embroiled in the Scowrers Family’s business as well.”

The voice on the other end was low, deep and aggrieved.

“*Shit.*”

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, no grizzly bears in this chapter. Maybe next time!

Have a great week, everyone XOXO
Chapter Summary

Exposed King

A king lacking pawns to shield it from enemy attack.

OR

"Reunited and it feels so good..."

Also, mild trigger and spoiler warning because of a certain nefarious character showing up again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Two: Exposed King

2 June 2016
En route to Appledore
Thursday evening
7:30 PM

The ride from John and Mary’s terrace house to Appledore was dead silent.

John kept his arms crossed and his eyes fixed outside the window the entire drive.

Mycroft used the time to catch up on paperwork, using his laptop. Occasionally he’d flick his eyes over the computer screen to scrutinize John.

He looked fitter than he had when he saw him last, not as thin and pasty-faced. He wore a soft, pliable brace now, instead of a clunky cast. He still wore the same old black jacket, which was starting to look faded, but he finally gotten rid of the beat-up brown lace-ups he had worn since the beginning of time. He also finally wore a new pair of jeans as well.

Mycroft wondered if John had given up the comfortable, hideous jumpers as well. He flicked his eyes down at the bit of the shirt sleeve hem peeking out from the old black jacket. No jumper but rather a green and blue plaid print dress shirt, expensive material, quality stitch… brand, Rag and Bone, interesting, very interesting since in the beginning, it looked like John got his clothes from the rejects of a jumble sale.

Mycroft observed that John no longer had military short hair. Though he had let it grow out longer, he kept it neatly combed and pomaded back. It suited him much better than the ten-quid cut he usually sported. But there was no sandy-blond colour left in his hair. It had gone mostly silver with streaks of ivory starting to show here and there. There were also more lines around his dark, expressive eyes than ever before.

Conclusion: his wife was picking out his clothes now, but he has not surrendered to her will
completely yet, proved by his refusal to get rid of his old, faded black jacket.

Second (and more important) conclusion: the battlefield was taking its toll on the good doctor.

Yet, judging by how tightly he held his jaw and how steady his unbroken right hand was, the raging fire within John Watson had not been snuffed out, despite Professor Moriarty’s best efforts. The army doctor had fully committed to returning to the Great Game.

*Welcome back…*

“How was Switzerland?” Mycroft threw a fishing lure into the deep well that was John Watson.

“Nicer than Germany was for you, I suspect.”

Mycroft produced a thin, tight smile then went back to his emails.

When the town car made its final turn down the long driveway to Appledore, Mycroft closed his laptop, “You know what this means for all of us if those nitwits from the Met unravel the secrets we all strove mightily to bind, Dr. Watson.”

“Then it is best we find those nitwits, isn’t it Mr. Holmes?” John turned to face Mycroft for the first time since getting into the car with him. “Hopefully alive, since they are still human beings, nitwits or not,” John added tartly.

“Naturally,” Mycroft closed his laptop as he perceived the car slowing down.

The town car pulled up next to the 2013 Ford Transit Courier parked halfway down the driveway. Only when the chauffeur let John and Mycroft out of the town car, did Lestrade and Sherlock hop out of the mini-van. Gladstone followed Sherlock with an elegant leap from the van.

Only Sherlock noticed that the dog walked with a slight limp now. War-wounds, from when that bastard Jepthro Rucastle shot him.

Meanwhile, John felt his heart literally skip a beat upon seeing Sherlock for the first time since April. He had to fight to keep a smile off his face. Sherlock, thank God, appeared to be unhurt. His hair was longer, the curls almost waves. His suit looked looser around his frame and his dress shirt didn’t strain across his chest like it normally did.

John made a mental note to nag Mrs. Hudson into feeding him up… once she came home from rehab, that is.

One look at Sherlock’s stern, unsmiling face told John immediately this was not the time for a warm, loving reunion. “What’s the plan, boys?”

“We approach the house together,” Sherlock pointed at the looming estate. “Normally I’d suggest that we’d split up to save time. However, I do not think it’s wise in this situation, safety in numbers and all that.”

“Sherlock,” John checked his watch, his trusty old Timex he had owned for as long as he could remember. Long enough to have the crystal and watchband replaced several times. He had thought about treating himself to a Swiss watch while in Lausanne… then recoiled and changed his mind when he saw the prices. “Sherlock, there is only two hours left before sunset. That’s not enough time for us to canvass or Gladstone to sniff around the grounds.”

“I don’t think they are on the grounds,” Sherlock tugged on the dog’s leash and started striding
towards the modern manor. “I think we’ll find a clue where they were taken after they were discovered poking about,” he called over his shoulder as Gladstone trotted obediently beside him. “Besides, Gladstone is a bomb sniffer, not a person sniffer.”

John jogged up to Sherlock. Close enough for their shoulders (well, Sherlock’s upper arm and John’s shoulder,) to brush up against each other as they walked, John could see a muscle twitching in Sherlock’s cheek. He also looked paler than usual, chalky instead of milky. His long, elegant fingers were balled into fists.

“You OK?” John breathed so Mycroft and Lestrade couldn’t hear him. “Being here again?”

“I’m OK.”

“You don’t look OK.”

“I’m OK.”

“Sherlock…”

“I’m not OK,” Sherlock whispered, “But let me pretend I am so I can do my job.”

“Fake it until you make it?” John grinned. But when that quip earned him an annoyed side-glare, John added soberly, “Look, just say the word and we’re gone, yeah? Don’t be a hero.”

“Heroes don’t exist.”

“Yeah, they do,” John contradicted him serenely.

If Sherlock heard him, he made no sign that he did, for he had stopped dead in his tracks.

So did John, Mycroft and Lestrade. “The lights are on,” Lestrade muttered. “Someone’s here.”

“Excellent deductive skills,” Sherlock snarled. “Can hardly see why you need me anymore. Tell the Met I said good luck and I’m sure they’ll say good riddance.”

The look Lestrade gave Sherlock was definitely not friendly. “Should I call for backup?”

“No need,” Mycroft said airily. “If I do not make contact with Poe within fifteen minutes, he will contact the proper authorities.”

“Who’s Poe?” Lestrade looked predictably lost.


“Look,” Lestrade snapped. “I know none of you give a shit about Donovan and I can’t say I blame you. She’s the one who fucked everything up. If she hadn’t made assumptions when Ambassador Bruhl’s girl screamed at the sight of you, then Jim Moriarty-”

“Richard Brook,” Sherlock dully corrected him.

“Different side of the same coin,” Lestrade rolled his eyes. “Evil fucking psycho, po-TAY-to, POH-ta-toe, my point is, you blame Sally as much as you blame Jim-Richard-whatever’s-he’s-actually-called. But,” Lestrade sucked in a deep breath. “She was a good cop. She was smart and she was compassionate, towards the victims and their friends and families. She worked hard and she had an impressive case closure record. She deserves your full attention just as much as any of your other
cases. Can you two…” he glared first at Mycroft then at Sherlock. “Whatever squabble you’ve got going on right now, can you put it aside so we can find Don…” his words trailed off when he finally noticed Sherlock’s left hand when he absently scratched his nose. “Is that… is that what I think it is?”

“Hmm, this?” Sherlock held up his left hand. “Yes, it’s a wedding ring.”

“You’re… actually… for real? Or is it for a case?”

“Legitimate question, mate,” John chimed in.

“Is that why you two were fighting earlier?” Lestrade turned to Mycroft, “Because he eloped?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Mycroft growled through gritted teeth.


“Shouldn’t we be focusing on finding Donovan and Mason rather than the change in my marital status?” Sherlock intoned, sounding positively bored.

“Oh! Errr… yeah, right,” Lestrade flushed. “Carry on…” he flourished towards the house.

“Shut up,” Sherlock hissed at John as he snickered under his breath.

The good humour evaporated as they came closer to the house. John unzipped his jacket, reached into his shoulder-holster and clicked the safety off his Army Browning.

“Please tell me you have a proper permit for that thing,” Lestrade groaned.

“In a manner of speaking,” John tugged his jacket over his holstered weapon but didn’t zip it up.

“Oh yeah, thanks mate, that really reassures me.”

“I hate to interrupt your witty repartee with logic, but I’m not exactly seeing the sense of strolling up to the house as if we are the Welcome Wagon. Shouldn’t we be a bit less conspicuous?” Mycroft sneered from behind.

“Forgive Mycroft. He’s not used to operating in broad daylight as exposure to the sun normally causes him to spontaneously combust. We’re not spies, brother mine. Lestrade is acting on the behalf of the Met, following up on a lead regarding a missing person case. I have been hired to consult on said case and John is my partner as well as medical expert.”

“And what is my purpose, little brother?”

“I needed someone to pick up John. Cab fare out here is astronomical.”

“Sherlock, if you brought me out here on a wild goose chase as a distraction…”

“I always miss something,” Sherlock gruffly admitted. “Usually a small detail, but it’s always something. As you know in missing person cases, time is of the essence and we already lost two days. I need you to catch what I miss. Happy?”

“Beyond words and measure,” Mycroft drawled out, his voice slick as an oil spill.
The door was slightly cracked open when the four of them approached. A fluted, feminine voice floated from inside out the open door.

“… will do anything in my power to expedite the closing of this property for you. I can’t express enough how much you are going to enjoy living out here. It’s so pretty, so quiet, so-”

“Secluded,” Sherlock pushed the door open and forcefully strode into the room, filling it with his presence, shoulders squared, eyes narrowed, mouth turned down.

He never could resist a dramatic entrance.

Georgina Prescott jumped, nearly falling over on her ridiculous high heels. “What is the meaning of this?” she demanded while her buyer still did not turn around.

“My name is Detective-Inspector Lestrade,” Lestrade hastily produced his badge. “There’s nothing to worry about. We’re working on a tip regarding a missing person that led us out here. We’d just like to ask just a few questions and we’ll be on our way.”

“Of course, Detective-Inspector,” the buyer purred. “We’d be happy to help the Met in any way we can, wouldn’t we, Ms. Prescott?”

The man turned around.

In the short time that it took for Sherlock’s presence to fill the enormous room, it shriveled just as quickly.

Gladstone growled, his ears flat against his head, his hackles and tail bristling.

John immediately positioned himself next to Sherlock, ready to attack, his right hand already flexing, itching to reach inside his jacket. He recognized this bastard.

Meanwhile, Mycroft slipped in and stood next to Sherlock’s other side, his hand resting neatly on top of his umbrella handle, as if it were a sword he was ready to draw.

“Lord Culpepper-Cullen,” Mycroft gave the disfigured man a cool smile. “What a… surprise.”

“Yes, isn’t it? Are you a…” he sniggered an urbane chuckle, “Consulting Detective too?”

But he kept a concerned eye on the snarling dog.

“Is he safe?” Georgina trilled, trying to giggle, but looking like she was about to wet her knickers.

“He is very well trained,” Sherlock recovered enough to sound sweet.

“Lord Cullen-Culpepper, from time to time, my expertise is called upon when there is a particularly difficult case challenging the Metropolitan Police, such as missing people,” Mycroft smoothly deflected the Earl’s veiled insult.

“You two… know him?” Lestrade again looked lost.

“His Lordship and I were schoolmates, at Eton,” Mycroft explained calmly. “His parents and mine were… friendly. Our fathers were in business for a time, but alas our families drifted apart when we moved to London. What prompted you to leave the confines of Snodgrass Manor?”

“Oh, that fusty old place,” he waved his scarred hand around. John studied the hand with a morbid curiosity. He noted that the Earl could not move his pinkie. Also the pink and white pigmentation
indicated that he had definitely endured third degree burns. John let his eyes rove over the Earl’s face, half of it still ruggedly handsome, the other half the stuff of nightmares.

The pain of the burns had to be mind-shatteringly awful, from the moment the fire roasted his flesh, muscle and bone to the horrible healing and skin-grafting process.

John looked down at the damaged hand, remembered what those hands had done to his best friend and to other vulnerable children.

He wished the fire had finished the job.

The dog whistle still hung around his neck on a fine chain. It was tempting … so tempting.

He wished his German was better… rache, rache, rache!

Meanwhile, the Earl continued to ramble on about his ancestral home: “… decided to make it open to the public. Tourists, film-crews, the like, it’s simply too… much to keep up on my own. Not to mention inconvenient, as it’s nowhere near London, where I am most of the time. I wanted something a bit closer but not too close. I needed a place that I can get the city out of my lungs, a place that was peaceful … a place that had a vast garden or a lovely grove.”

John heard Sherlock’s sharp inhale. He cleared his throat, “We received a tip, that the people we’re looking for may have been sighted around here two days ago. Greg, the pictures…”

“Right,” Lestrade dug into his suit jacket and produced his mobile. He tapped on the screen and pulled up first Donovan’s picture then Mason’s. He showed first Georgina then the Earl.

“No, I was out here two days ago with his business manager,” Georgina shook her head. “We didn’t see anyone wandering around. Why would they come out here anyway?”

“We’re not sure,” Lestrade said apologetically. “We just have to follow… up… on… any… tips, Sherlock? Where are you going?”

Sherlock had broken away from the group, Gladstone yipping as Sherlock tugged on his leash.

John noticed he looked green about the gills. “Sherlock?” John called out but Sherlock garbled out, “Washroom?”

“Around the corner, first door on the right,” Georgina called out miserably, probably thinking that the nice clean loo was probably going to smell like sick now.

“Still has a sensitive stomach,” the Earl smiled thinly. “I suppose he still eats like a bird too.” Jovially, he told Georgina, “He was an awful pest when he was a little boy, William. Always following me and Mickey around, wanting us to play with him,” he chortled.

John wanted to kill him. His face must have telegraphed his rage because he jumped when Mycroft rested his bony fingers on his shoulder. “Why don’t you go see how my brother is doing?” he breathed into his ear. “I’ll assist the D.I. with his questions.”

“Yeah, OK,” John shot the Earl one last homicidal look before stomping off.

Before he left the room, he heard the Earl say unctuously, “Dear me, that little fellow doesn’t care for me at all, does he?”

Fuck you, John thought viciously as he turned the corner.
But the first door on the right was wide open, revealing the loo to be empty.

“Oh, you massive, massive dickhead,” John spat, rolling his eyes to high-heaven, immediately realizing Sherlock had performed one of his infamous disappearing acts.

Mentally repeating shit shit shit bugger fuck on an endless loop inside his head, John crept around the manor. Only the overhead lights in the lounge had been turned on. The rest of Appledore was only illuminated by the dying sunlight, creating pockets of dim light and waves of undulating shadows.

He crept through the hallway on the balls of his feet, trying to make as little sound as possible while straining his ears. His heart was in his throat as he saw fluorescent light beaming from underneath the door at the end of the hall.

His right hand stayed nice and steady as he smoothly drew his gun. He had been advised by Sholto to learn how to shoot with both his right and left hands and he had been eternally grateful for his counsel. Licking his lips, he sidled up next to the door. Nudging the door open, he poked the barrel of the gun through the crack. When he saw Sherlock rummaging through drawers through the cracked door, he sighed in relief and pushed the door open.

“You alright?” John holstered his weapon. He petted Gladstone who was watching Sherlock with his big head cocked to one side. If he was human, he probably would have asked Sherlock the same question John did: “What are you doing?”

“I’m faking fine-ness and I’m looking for clay to make bricks.”

“Um…’K,” John frowned, hoping he looked like he thought what Sherlock said made sense. “So what are we looking for exactly?”

“Think, John. If Donovan and Mason were investigating me, there was only one reason why they would come to Appledore.”

“Well… you were shot in Magnussen’s office, this was Magnussen’s home. That’s not a great big leap, Sherlock.”

“Wrong. If it was about me getting shot in Magnussen’s office, they would have investigated his office. They came out here to poke around…”

“Christ,” John ran his hand down his face, “Magnussen’s death. OK, so how does Lord Fuckface out there fit into this?”

“Pressure points, obviously.”

“Nope, not to me.”

“We’re getting too close to it all,” Sherlock explained, slamming shut one drawer and opening another, slamming it again upon discovering it was empty. “They are trying to unbalance me.”

Noticing Sherlock’s still-greenish pallor as well as the shine of sweat on his face, John dryly replied, “I think they are succeeding.” He strode over to Sherlock and grabbed his arms, pulling him closer. “We don’t have to do this right now. We can leave. We can come back.”

“No, the evidence will be gone by then.” Sherlock jerked himself out of John’s grip. Twirling around, fingertips pressed to temples, he ordered himself, “Think! This is an empty house. If Donovan and Mason came to Appledore and found nothing, they would have been allowed to leave unmolested.”
“But there is nothing here, Sherlock! We know that first hand! There’s absolutely nothing here. There’s not even furniture here. Besides, when we were here the first time, we would have…. You would have seen it, observed it. But you deduced there was nothing here, no clues, no files, no secret vault. There’s nothing here then and there’s nothing here now.”

Sherlock stopped his mad whirling. He let his hands drop. His mouth dropped open in a perfect O as he blinked rapidly, as if watching a film being fast-forward.

John recognized this look before, “Sherlock?”

“‘There is no key, DOOFUS.’”

“What?”

“That’s what Jim said to me on the rooftop.”

“Richard.”

“Whatever,” Sherlock waved John’s correction away. “That’s what he said to me on the rooftop. He told me the Moriarty Key didn’t exist, but it did. He lied.”

“So?”

“Is Moriarty the only one capable of lying?” Sherlock grabbed John by the shoulders and impulsively kissed him on the forehead, “My conductor of light, how I have missed you.”

Then he ran out without a backwards glance, the kitchen door swinging behind him.

“Yeah,” John touched his forehead, a wry smile on his face, “Missed you too.” He looked down at the Alsatian. “Well, we better catch up, hadn’t we, boy?” When Gladstone whined, he added, “Yes, but you’re a bomb sniffer, so I’m rather glad you didn’t find anything.”

Lestrade had just finished his routine questions when Sherlock burst into the room.

“Ah, William, feeling better?” the Earl politely asked as John and Gladstone returned.

“Better than I have in years,” Sherlock practically sang as he threw open the doors to the closet where Magnussen sat and lied about how there were no vaults.

Sherlock knelt, practically in the yoga pose called child’s pose. Pulling his little collapsible magnifying glass out of his dress jacket pocket, he informed everyone in his most resonant voice, “Magnussen was a master manipulator. Not only did he know how to push people’s pressure points—”

“Nice use of alliteration,” John crossed his arms, mentally noting to himself to remind Sherlock of that the next time he accused him of vomiting out purple prose on the blog.

Sherlock awkwardly looked over his shoulder to glare at John, “AS I WAS SAYING BEFORE I WAS RUDELY INTERRUPTED,” he cleared his throat. “Magnussen knew other psychological tricks, mind games. The games he played could be as complicated as gas-lighting Janine Hawkins, making her believe that the torment he put her through was normal routine for an office job or as simple as…” he ran his hand over one of the marble tiles in the closet, “Misdirection.”

“I don’t understand,” John said then immediately wished he hadn’t.

You should have that on a T-shirt…”
Now he was the one who felt sick. He could actually feel that reptile flicking his face.

Sherlock rose to a kneeling position then twirled on his knees like a professional dancer. “We were too busy looking at Magnussen sitting in his posh leather chair, reading his invisible files. We were both so horrified with what he was telling us that we didn’t look at—”

“The floor,” Mycroft finished, “Third tile from the right, I think?”

“Mm, right you are,” Sherlock nodded and tapped the second tile with his knuckles.

Lestrade crept up next to John and hissed, “What the fuck is going on, John?”

“At this point in the game, I usually just stand back and watch,” John admitted.

Sherlock knocked on the third tile. A distinctly hollow sound rang out.

John finally understood, “Oh my God.”

“Only a very small percentage of people can remember everything,” Sherlock smirked. “My wife,” he gave a very pointed look at Mycroft, “Created a very extensive profile of Charles Augustus Magnussen. There was nothing in his records that indicated an eidetic memory.”

He pressed down on the third tile on the right. It sprang open, revealing a keypad and a handle, much like a bank vault. “Mycroft,” Sherlock hummed.

Mycroft wove around the stupefied John and Lestrade and crouched beside Sherlock. He ran his hand over this mouth. “Clever, Magnussen, but not as clever as we are,” he reached down and typed in 6278.

Nothing happened.

The Earl laughed, “Oh some things never really do change, do they Mickey.”


“Try 2472,” Sherlock burst out, ignoring all chatter in the lounge.

Mycroft cocked his head in thought then said, “Yes, of course. Stupid of me,” he shook his head as he punched in the code. There was a loud beep then an even louder click. A great grinding of gears rumbled as the wall behind Mycroft and Sherlock slid neatly open, revealing a spiral staircase going downstairs.

“Holy God,” John blinked as Lestrade’s mouth dropped open.

“Would that be considered a bonus room, Miss Prescott?” the Earl quipped to the stupefied estate agent.

As Mycroft stood up and brushed invisible dust off his knees. Sherlock stepped into the narrow corridor. Leaning over the railing, he called out. “Sally? Walter? Are you down there?”

“I’m here,” wheezed a sick, old man’s voice. “But I don’t know where Sally is. They took her. Please, help me, I’m tied up, it’s dark and…” the weak voice trailed off.

“Mycroft, Lestrade,” Sherlock rushed back into the lounge.

“Already on it,” Lestrade had started 999 the minute the false door to the Appledore vaults was
found. Mycroft meanwhile had called MI-6 HQ.

“Detective-Inspective, it appears that you are correct and MI-6 will have jurisdiction over this matter,” Mycroft informed him.

“All yours, gov’,” Lestrade muttered, thinking about the paperwork he was being spared.

Meanwhile John was shouting, “Somebody, get me a torch. I’m going down there and assess Mr. Mason, see what kind of shape he’s in before the ambulance gets here.”

“I’ll go with you. I'll use my mobile as a torch,” Sherlock offered, looking for a place to tether Gladstone’s leash so the dog wouldn’t follow them.

There was a thump behind them all. Everyone froze then stared down at poor Georgina, who had passed clean out.

“My, what an exciting day,” the Earl looked faintly bored. “Shall I put the kettle on?”

“I’d advise you to stay close by, old friend,” Mycroft cooed as Lestrade knelt down to check on Georgina. “There will be questions, for you as well as your business manager.”

“All questions that we will be able to answer,” the Earl tut-tutted Mycroft. “And you can’t understand why I am pushing for more transparency with MI-6.”

“Well, if you want your good name sullied by the ghost of Charles Augustus Magnussen, I can arrange that,” Mycroft informed him as the complicated wheels of the great machine that was his mind started churning.

The sun had just started to settle into the west when the ambulance finally departed with a dehydrated and starved Walter Mason. He complained of dizziness, but that was no surprise since there was a great big lump on the back of his head. Other than the rope burns on his wrists and ankles, he seemed unharmed. But the vertigo was concerning.

MI-6 agents started prowling the estate. Uniformed men and women descended into the vault and ascended with banker’s box after banker’s box containing paper files. “We haven’t even gotten to the digital files yet, sir,” a young agent reported to Mycroft. “He’s got a private server down there as well as laptops and file cabinets dedicated to memory sticks.”

“Well, we have our work cut out for us, don’t we?” Mycroft shooed the agent away as Sherlock just returned inside. Gladstone had a bit of business to take care of on some bushes.

The Earl agreed to questioning, of course but insisted on having his solicitor present. “As a member of the House of Lords in good standing, I know my rights,” he icily informed Mycroft.

“Shame you are unable to comprehend the rights of others,” John viciously struck back.

“Dr. Watson, you forget yourself,” Mycroft grabbed John by the arm to pull him away from the Earl but John shook him off easily.

“John, don’t,” Sherlock quietly pleaded as Lestrade jogged up to him after giving his statement to a senior MI-6 agent.

“Fellas, a word?” Lestrade’s face was creased with worry as he gestured they should go outside. As they walked towards the front door, Lestrade hissed, “So we found Mason, but we have no idea where Sally is. Mason’s not going to be ready for questioning until he gets that big ruddy lump on
his head checked out and who knows if he remembers anything, especially if he’s concussed. *Tell me,* you’ve managed to deduce where Sally could be?*

Sherlock actually looked regretful. “I need more data, Greg.”

As Lestrade dragged his hand over his face, Mycroft attempted to reassure him, “I’ve got my best men and women searching high and low for any trace of Miss Donovan. You need sleep.”

Lestrade rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hands. “Yeah, and Molly’s going to murder me if I don’t check in. OK, I’m calling it a night here. You need a ride back to the city?”

“In a minute, I want to have a word with my brother first.”

Lestrade nodded and plodded out the front door.

“I trust this discovery of the Appledore vaults terminates any debt I owe you once and for all?” Sherlock arched an eyebrow as he stood in the doorway with his brother and John.

When Mycroft made a long, drawn out sigh, John snarled, “Oh for Christ’s Mycroft!”

“Fine, yes. You’re free of any obligation to me, to MI-6, England. Happy?”

“Only if that is put in writing; you’ll forgive me if I don’t trust your word.”

“Oh, are you two taking the piss out of each other still, after all these years?” the Earl made them all jump. As I said earlier, some things never change.” He smiled down at John condescendingly, “Oh if only you could have seen these two when we were children together. Plump little know-all Mickey, desperate to be part of the cool kids clique but never quite fitting in,” his lips twisted into a sneering smile, made all the worse by his deformed face. “And then there was wee little William, the prettiest little boy you’ve ever seen. He had this high-pitched little voice, he sounded like a twittering bird when he spoke, it was … so precious.”

“And you were so handsome,” Sherlock drawled, purposely using his lowest register possible, reminding the Earl he was no longer a little boy. “Truly you were the golden boy of your class, with your looks and your wealth. Shame the,” he coughed delicately, “*car accident* took that all away from you. I was reading, that sometimes with deep burn injuries, that victims become more sensitive to the changes of the temperature.” He strolled up to the Earl. “Tell me, how sensitive are you to change?”

Then he forcibly blew on the Earl’s face as if he was a child blowing out his birthday candles.

The Earl’s eyes immediately watered with pain and he recoiled from Sherlock, reaching up with his clawed, pink-and-white hand as if to rip the hypersensitive flesh from his face.

“Fascinating,” Sherlock sounded like his dispassionate old self. “A windy day must be a special hell for you. Brother, if John and I are no longer needed?” When Mycroft nodded in agreement, Sherlock gave the Earl a sardonic bow. “Good evening, *your Lordship.* You might want to bundle up tonight, there’s an East Wind blowing.”

“Still the ill-mannered little beast,” the Earl’s lip curled now in contained rage, making him look more monstrous than before. “Again, some things never change. Do you know what else hasn’t changed, William?”

“His name is Sherlock,” John’s voice shook with fury. “Don’t answer that, Sherlock, let’s go.”
Gladstone growled.

But curiosity killed the cat as usual. Sherlock had to ask: “What?”

The Earl leaned forward and whispered, “You still make a pretty picture, down on your knees.”

“You son-of-a-bitch,” John lunged forward but both Sherlock and Mycroft caught him by his arms, pulling him away from the Earl. Sherlock only had a one-handed hold on John for he grasped the leash with all his might with his other hand. Gladstone leaned against his leash, the leather creaking as Gladstone snarled, working himself up into a fury. All he needed was the proper command and he’d explode in a fury of fur, fangs and claws.

The Earl wisely stepped away from the frenzied dog.

“Outside, now,” Mycroft ordered them while Sherlock hissed in John’s ear, “He’s wealthy, connected and powerful, John. It’s not worth it. We have a case on which we need to focus.”

He felt the muscles in his arm ache as he tried to hold Gladstone back. The loop of the leash dug into his wrist as he desperately clung to the lead. “Grab his collar, John,” Sherlock added with a gasp. “I can’t hold onto him myself.”

“My goodness,” the Earl, smug and secure in his position and power, “Such an angry little man. I certainly hope he’s not allowed around children. I’m not sure if he can be trusted around them…” he examined the manicured nails of his good hand, “Especially babies.” He lowered his voice again, “Especially baby girls.”

John surged against Mycroft and Sherlock’s hold again, actually swinging out this time. Gladstone switched from growling to barking, actually getting up on his hind legs, pawing at the air with the front. Sherlock shouted the German command to heel. Gladstone dropped to all fours but continued growling.

“That dog is a menace!” Mycroft cried out as poor Georgina fainted again.

“Lestrade!” Sherlock called over his shoulder as John started to slip out of his grip while Mycroft raised his voice to assure the staring agents that everything was under control.

“Yes, get your little pets under control, especially the want-to-be writer,” the Earl finally sounded angry now, perhaps shocked that someone would have the temerity to actually attack him. “I’d hate for him to have his ears boxed.”

Sherlock froze.

Feeling Sherlock stop moving, so did John and Mycroft. Even Gladstone paused.

“What did you say,” Sherlock demanded breathlessly.

The Earl’s face crumpled up, now looking cartoonish instead of frightening. “I’d... hate for him to have his ears boxed?”

“Ears... boxed...” for the second time that night, Sherlock’s mouth dropped open in a perfect O and his eyes lit up.

Then his face closed up, became cold and unreadable again. “Thank you, your Lordship. You have shown me that even monsters have their uses.”
Then, for the second time that night, Sherlock turned and bolted, leaving John and Mycroft struggling to catch up.

But Gladstone loped right after his master.

Chapter End Notes

The "DOOFUS" line is from TRF.

Poe was named for a character in the ACD canon story "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box."

I'm sleepy and going to find my bed now.

Have a fantastic week everyone! XOXO
Gambit

Chapter Summary

Chapter Forty-Three: Gambit

A sacrifice (usually of a pawn) used to gain an early advantage in space or time in the opening.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-three: Gambit

2 June 2016
Outside of Appledore
Thursday evening
9:21 PM

Lestrade, upon hearing his name called up, had run back towards the house.

“What’s going on?” he demanded while wondering what fresh hell had descended upon them all. “I heard shouting.”

“Ears, boxed!” Sherlock gesticulated with his hands wildly. “OH, I do love it when the pieces all start falling together. I can nearly see the full picture now, only there are one or two pieces left.”

“What in the hell did I miss now!” Lestrade nearly wailed as the red-and-blue police lights flashed, clashing with the huge spotlights illuminating the house and grounds as agents prowled through the neatly manicured gardens.

“We’re hoping my brother will elucidate,” Mycroft sounded calm but he kept a wary eye on John. The police lights flashed red and blue on the doctor’s furious face as he continued to breathe heavily. “Don’t we, Dr. Watson?”

John didn’t answer, just balled his fists and gave a stiff nod.

“Lestrade, where was Sally staying while she was in London?”

“Uh, some digs in Hammersmith, I’ve got the landlady’s mobile number.”

“I need complete access to that bedsit. Also, I need to speak to Mason the minute he is capable. Can you arrange that?”

“Errr… sure,” Lestrade said gloomily, seeing all hopes of sleep sailing away.

Mycroft made a discreet cough, “Perhaps you can delegate those tasks to the excellent and capable Sergeant Alexis MacDonald?”

“Oh, yeah, good idea,” Lestrade fumbled with his mobile, tapping out a message to Alex.
“She’s not going to join MI-6, do stop trying to poach the few competent people working for the Met,” Sherlock pulled out his own mobile, and pulled up a photograph. “But speaking of agents,” he held the mobile up to Mycroft, “This man, the MI-6 agent who broke into my flat last April, is he in MI-6 custody or Met custody?”

“Ours,” Lestrade rubbed his tired eyes again. “He’s not MI-6. Name’s Gordon Fowler, been pinched for petty theft and burglary before. Was in hospital for a bit before he could be tried, since that one,” nervously he glanced at Gladstone, “used the poor sod as a chew toy. Not that anyone had any sympathy for the dumb bugger. Was convicted of Burglary With Intent, sentenced to a six-month stretch, parole in three if he’s a good little gaol bird.”

“I need to interview him, as soon as possible. But first, I need his mug shot and his police records. Email them to me.”

“I’ll call Monty, he owes me one,” Lestrade started swaying on his feet from exhaustion. “Anything else, Your Highness?”

“I will have one of my agents drive you home, Detective-Inspector,” Mycroft magnanimously offered. “Sherlock, John, my driver, Poe,” he shot Sherlock a scathing glare, “will drive you back to London, as I am needed here.” He waited until Lestrade wearily trundled off, “I have to mop up the mess you two made with the Earl.”

“To mop up…” John spluttered then exploded, advancing on Mycroft with the intent of knocking his block off. “You mean you are actually going to make nice with that fucking bast-”

“He wields a great deal of political power,” Mycroft held up his umbrella as if that could defend him from John’s temper. “He wants to declassify all MI-6 activities.” When Sherlock had clamped a hand on John’s shoulder, only then did Mycroft dare get closer to the two men. “He doesn’t know about your role in Magnussen’s death. If what actually happened here on Christmas Day two years ago is released to the public, it is the undoing of us all.” Now Mycroft bent down and got into John’s face, “And not just your best friend, but your precious little wife, for whom you have sacrificed so much, including your own personal happiness.”

John swallowed hard but said nothing.

“Well then,” Sherlock butted in, as usual. “Complete the mission Violet gave you and problem solved. Tick tock, tick tock.”

“Wait, what mission?” John slid out from under Sherlock’s hand, temper diffused.

“I am not like the two you,” Mycroft hooked his umbrella over his forearm and smoothed down his jacket. “I do not kill in cold blood.”

“No, you just kill with a signature or a push of a button. Thank you for your assistance, brother dearest. I may even remember your birthday this year. Maybe I’ll even send you a card.” As he walked off, he added over his shoulder, “Let me know how quickly you can arrange Violet’s return to England. Mother is looking forward to seeing her new daughter-in-law.” He tugged gently on Gladstone’s leash. “Komm.”

“Brilliant,” John breathed once they were away from Mycroft as well as the general hubbub of the controlled chaos at Appledore. “Absolutely fucking brilli…” John trailed off when he noticed Sherlock curling into himself, one hand on his stomach, one on his forehead. “Sherlock, what is it, what’s wrong?”
“I…” he started just as his legs gave way. John caught him and hauled him back up to his feet. Fortunately, they were far enough away from the house now that no one noticed. The sounds of men and women talking to each other and on their mobiles wasn’t even audible anymore; the only noises were lazy summer sounds. Indolent insects buzzed, the wind ruffled the grass and there was a solitary hoot of an owl searching the plains for a vulnerable rabbit.

John half-carried, half-dragged Sherlock back to the town car parked all alone in the middle of the winding driveway. Lestrade had left ages ago, and had probably fallen asleep the minute the driver put the mini-van in gear.

“Sherlock, Sherlock,” John fussed as Sherlock’s legs crumpled again, right in front of Mycroft’s town car. “Talk to me, mate.”

Kneeling in front of town car, hand on bonnet to steady himself, Sherlock shook his head. But he kept his other hand over his mouth. Meanwhile, Gladstone whined and nosed the side of Sherlock’s head, asking to be petted.

Poe stepped out of the car, “Anything I can assist with, sirs?”

“Yeah, if you’ve got water or some sort of fizzy drink, club soda or ginger ale, that’d be great,” John felt grateful for the first time he had arrived to the scene in a posh vehicle. “He’ll drink it when we’re in the car.”

“Very good, sir,” Poe slipped back inside, not at all perturbed by the scene in front of the car.

“Sherlock,” John crooned, bending over to rub his back as Sherlock dry-heaved. “Let it out if you’re going to be sick, it’s OK.”

However Sherlock hadn’t eaten except tea and dry toast at breakfast so there was nothing to bring up. He gagged one more time, spit, then leaned his head against the car’s grill.

“I’m not fine.”

“I know, but you were amazing back there.” John ran his hand down Sherlock’s hair, wanting Sherlock to look at him, but he refused to turn his head. “Not just for finding Mason and the secret vault. You stood up to him, Sherlock. The Earl, you refused to let him intimidate you or bully you. That is huge.”

Now Sherlock turned to John, sinking back onto his heels. By the dim lights of the car’s interior lamp shining out from the windscreen, John could see the despair etched into every line of Sherlock’s face. Folding his hands in his lap, he hung his head.

“He did intimidate me, John.”

John knelt down in the gravel next to him and pulled him into his arms, not giving a damn that there were MI-6 agents everywhere, not to mention Poe probably watching from the driver’s seat. “Puffing like that on his burns was bloody brilliant. Probably felt like he had fire ants gnawing on his face.”

“It was petty,” Sherlock sat up a bit and scratched Gladstone’s ears. “Good boy.”

“Still worth it,” John grinned. “You should have let Gladstone at him.”

“They would have put him down if he had.”
“Then you should have let me throttle the prick.”

“I don’t have time for your court case, far too busy,” was the faint reply.

John chuckled as he cupped Sherlock’s face. It felt far too clammy especially in the burgeoning warmth of a summer evening. But still he asked, “Got your breath back then?”

“Ready when you are,” Sherlock started to pull himself up to his feet, but still had to steady himself against the town car. He kept his hand on the vehicle as he slowly walked around the car. He opened the car door, ordered Gladstone inside, then slipped in.

“Mr. Poe, what you think you may have witnessed out there,” Sherlock’s words lacked its usual sharpness. “I want you to reconsider reporting it to my brother.”

Poe reached over and handed him a bottle of Schweppes ginger ale. After Sherlock took the bottle, he coolly informed him, “I work for MI-6, not Mr. Holmes. Now, where am I taking you?”

“Dr. Watson’s house.” Sherlock then rattled off John’s address as Gladstone curled himself up into a large, fuzzy, brown-and-black ball at Sherlock’s feet.

Poe nodded and with that, he closed the privacy divider between them.

Sherlock flopped back into this seat, looking utterly spent. Stupidly, John realized that Sherlock had probably just returned to London last night. That meant he had to say good-bye to Violet again. Not only was he emotionally flattened, he was probably jet-lagged on top of it all.

So John wrapped his arm around Sherlock’s shoulders and pulled him to him again. It was very telling that Sherlock didn’t fight him. Sherlock’s head slumped against his shoulder. John suddenly remembered driving away from the candy factory well over a year ago, in a stolen black cab. Violet was driving, an illegal immigrant girl named Beatriu in the passenger seat. Sherlock, high as a kite, curled up next to him, his poor shorn head on John’s shoulder, like it was now.

Except now, John didn’t feel self-conscious about running his hand down Sherlock’s head. Also, the hair had grown back, which was also nice. Another cruel irony of his situation was that Sherlock’s hair was so much nicer than Mary’s. Mary’s hair was a pretty colour and the longer curls suited her better than the pixie cut she had sported when he first met her. But it was thin and dry, probably from the constant bleaching to keep its platinum shade.

Sherlock’s hair was sinfully soft and thick. It reminded him of the fluffy Angora bunny his nursery school had as a class pet. Upon closer examination, however, John noticed, with a little glee, that his hair was not completely jet black as he always thought it to be. A few strands of silver glistened through the inky curls.

“Sherlock,” John mumbled against the curls. “What if MI-6 finds the AGRA files?”

“I was thinking… that would be a shame, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah,” John said after a pause. “That would be too bad…”

... for Susan, he thought as guilt twisted his stomach. It would be wonderful for me and Sherlock for Mary to go to prison. But Susan’s bonded with her now, what will happen to her? Will I have to take responsibility for the girl? She’s nice enough, but I barely know her.

“We’ll figure out the appropriate course of action for Miss Dobney once Mary is sorted out,” Sherlock mumbled sleepily. “I’m not opposed to her return to Baker Street, provided she lives in
Mrs. Hudson’s spare bedroom and not ours.”

“OK, we’ll discuss more when we get to that bridge,” John ran his thumb up and down Sherlock’s shoulder. He could still feel how tight and tense his friend’s muscles were from his ordeal. “Sherlock, why are we going to my house?”

“You’ll see,” Sherlock nestled against John, succumbing to the need for a little sleep. “Wake me when we get there. Oh… and apologies beforehand.”

Faint alarm bells rang in his ears. “Why?”

“You’ll see…”

Oh shit, John thought dismally.

**

2 June 2016
John and Mary Watson’s residence
Thursday night
10:25 PM

Mary had her nose buried in a pharmaceutical book and was munching ginger lemon tea biscuits when Sherlock threw open the front door. Mary nearly jumped out of her skin. She did knock over the forgotten cup of coffee sitting on the arm of the sofa, splashing cold coffee and congealed milk all over the rug.

Sweetie, their battered bait dog they had rescued from that scoundrel Rucastle, made a frightened, high-pitched yip, piddled a bit on the floor, then bolted for the kitchen.

“Sherlock! What the f-”

“Where is Susan?” Sherlock had recovered nicely during the drive from Appledore. He had dozed until John nudged him and whispered they were thirty minutes away from his house. He had roused himself, clicked on his mobile and started reading Gordon Fowler’s police report. Then he gasped, “Ah-ha!” and locked his phone screen with a knowing smirk.

And just like that, he had tucked away his vulnerabilities and his fears. Emotion was locked down and logic had the helm. There was no sign of the shivering, traumatized man dry-heaving in front of a government vehicle. He was Sherlock Holmes, towering over everyone in the room, looking down at all over his hawk-like nose, his omniscient eyes missing nothing.

“Susie? Up in her room, why?” Mary did not look frightening, not in her pale blue bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. But her voice was just as cold and imperious as Sherlock’s. “John?” she snapped as Sherlock stomped upstairs and John let himself in. “What the hell is happening?”

“I don’t know,” John breathlessly admitted as he tugged on Gladstone’s leash. As the Alsatian bounded in, John added, “But I really think we shouldn’t leave Susan alone with Sherlock.”

Mary bolted up the stairs before John could move from the doorway. “Right, so this is going to be awful,” John moaned to Gladstone as he shut the door behind him.

John was half-way up the stairs when he heard Mary shriek, “SHERLOCK, YOU LET HER GO RIGHT THIS MINUTE!”
“Fuck,” John ran the rest of the way up.

The room that was supposed to be a nursery was made up into a bedroom for Susan. Mary and Susie had made a day of it, shopping for furniture, picking out paint and wallpaper.

They spent another fun day together decorating it. It didn’t look like a room meant for a girl only temporarily staying until her mother pulled herself together.

Susie had been dressed for bed, in hot pink sleep-trousers and an oversized Imagine Dragons T-shirt, her shiny blonde hair tied up in a sloppy top-knot. She had been sprawling on her bed, playing on her candy-pink mobile when Sherlock had burst into her room. When she leapt off the bed, startled, he had grabbed her by her forearms, swung her around like a demented dance partner and pinned her against the wall, his face in hers.

Susan, of course, was sobbing. Mary had launched herself at Sherlock, grabbing at his arm in an effort to make him release Susan. Sherlock roughly shoved Mary to the floor. She landed on her hip, with a grunt.

“Sherlock, Jesus Christ!” John yelped from the doorway. Instinctively he went to help Mary to her feet. “Stop this at once!”

“Who instructed you to come to Baker Street when you were thrown out of your house?” Sherlock bellowed, giving Susan a shake.

Susan sobbed helplessly, still clutching her mobile. Her hair had tumbled out of its bun and strands of gold hair stuck to her wet face, “Sh-sh-she said she was called Crusher. S-s-said she used to belong to a gang that helped kids like me but was a social worker now. Said she knew a place where I could crash that wasn’t a shelter or foster home. She gave me your address and said it would be OK… that-that that you w-w-wouldn’t mind.”

“Crusher…” John breathed, “Why does that name… oh!”

“What?” Mary turned around… but she kept her arms around John’s shoulders.

“The first Cardboard Box victim, her nickname was Crusher,” John whispered. Then in a louder voice, John asked, “Susan, did she give you her Christian name at all or her surname?”

“N-no,” Susan sniffled.

“You weren’t sent to my home by anyone else, just Crusher?”

“No, I swear, please you’re f-f-frightening me.”

“Sherlock, I will break every single bone in your hands,” Mary growled.

Sherlock dug into his trouser pockets and pulled out his mobile. He showed her Gordon Fowler’s mug shot. “You weren’t sent to my flat by this man?”

Susan stopped crying. Now that one arm was free, she wiped her face with the back of her hand. “You weren’t sent to my flat by this man?”

“Him? That tosser? No! Never!”

“Wait,” John slithered out of Mary’s grip. “You know him?”

“Yeah, Gordie Fowler, he’s one of Jimsie’s mates,” she took great big whooping breaths. Her eyes were still huge with terror, but she was slowly starting to calm down. “He’s a real loser. Keeps
getting pinched for stealing. He’s like the world’s worst burglar.”

“Jimsie, who’s Jimsie?”

Mary, of course was putting it together faster than John, “Her stepfather or rather her mother’s common law husband, to be more accurate. Susie,” she purposely made her voice gentle. “You never really saw who broke into 221B that night did you?”

“No. It’s like I told that D.I. fellow, the silver fox? I saw a man trying to open the skylight but it was dark. I didn’t see his face. I ran. I texted Sherlock and I ran and hid in his wardrobe.”

“And since he pled guilty, there was no need for Susie to identify him in a line-up,” Mary mused.

“But why would Gordie try and break into 221B?”

“For this,” Sherlock plucked Susan’s mobile out of her hand.

“Hey!”

As Sherlock started thumbing through the apps on her mobile, Mary hurried over to Susan. As she pulled the terrified girl into her arms, she said over Susan’s blonde head, “I went to see Susan’s mum, to see if I could get a few of her things and to make sure it was alright she was staying with me. Susie’s mum said she managed to hide the mobile as well as a few other things of Susie’s before Jimsie sold the lot at a car boot sale. That she shouldn’t have squandered the money on it. She also said that there was a quarrel over her mobile, that Susie should have helped out with the bills instead of buying an iPhone with her money. Afterwards, I ran into Jimsie Browner,” her mouth pulled down as she recalled that distasteful man. “He tried to make a grab for Susie’s mobile, but I uh… deterred him.”

“I’m sure you did,” Sherlock droned.

“But, I don’t get it, why all the fuss over a mobile?” John wondered aloud.

“Because of this,” Sherlock held up the mobile’s screen to John.

“Fuck!” John burst out upon seeing a young man, lying on the pavement, throat slit, ears sliced clean away.

When Sherlock turned and showed Mary and Susie, Susie turned pea-green. She wriggled out of Mary’s grasp and sprinted for the loo. Soon the sounds of retching came from down the hall.

“What else did Miss Dobney’s unfortunate mother have to say about her common law husband? Night job? Factory?”

“Yes?” Mary blinked, torn between running to comfort Susan and slapping Sherlock across his bony face for being an arse. “She said he had a good job now, works nights at a warehouse.”

“A convenient lie,” Sherlock starting scouring through all of the apps on Susan’s phone, “That shall be undone momentarily.” Sherlock started scrolling through Susan’s Recent Calls list. “Susan is a Millennial, she relies on text and Twitter and Facebook Messenger and Snapchat and Instagram to communicate with her peers. She’d never make a phone call. She wouldn’t notice if someone had been making calls on her mobile.” Sherlock tapped on one of the numbers on the All Numbers list, dated 29 March 2016.

“Yes?” a testy, unctuous voice answered.
“I told you monsters have their uses,” Sherlock purred then hung up on the Earl of Winchester. Without even looking at him, he tossed the mobile to John. “Jimsie Browner has a job at Parliament, probably something menial, janitor most likely.”

“Parliament… how did you…?” John blinked, remembering who Sherlock said those exact words to hours ago. “Oh.”

“What?” Mary looked puzzled.

“Of course… the Earl… the murders, all the murders happened in Westminster. Parliament is in Westminster and this bastard prick of a lord is a member of Parliament.”

“That doesn’t exactly narrow down which member of Parliament you’re talking about, John” Mary sighed, now wanting to give John a good smack for being obtuse.

“When we go to the Met, we will need to give the mobile to Lestrade as evidence.” Sherlock steepled his hands and held his fingertips to his lips. “Yes, it is all weaving nicely together, like a beautiful tapestry.”

“Yeah, beautiful,” John deadpanned. “A tapestry of murder.”

“Sherlock?” a tremulous little voice wobbled from the doorway. Everyone turned around as Sherlock said, “Yes?”

“I swear to God, I had nothing to do with any of that… that… stuff on my mobile. I knew Jimsie was bad, I didn’t know he was that bad, honest. Please believe me.”

Sherlock pivoted then glided towards her. Instead of tossing her around like a rag doll, he gently cupped her cheeks with his long fingers. “I do,” he assured her. “I just needed you to talk faster.”

“SHERLOCK!” John roared. “WE TALKED ABOUT THIS!”

Susan nearly fell to the floor but Sherlock caught her and gently led her to her bed. “Errr… yeah, John, remember me apologizing in advance? That was for this.” Sherlock tried to look endearing but only looked sheepish instead, like a bad dog who had just chewed up all the shoes.

Mary marched up to Sherlock and hit Sherlock across the face, hard.

“Mmmm OK,” Sherlock pressed his hand over his face. “Not good, got it. Sorry.”

When Sherlock lowered his hand, Mary popped him again, this time a proper punch to the nose. “Gahh, I said I was sorry. No!” This time Sherlock successfully blocked Mary’s next punch. “I didn’t mean to throw you to the ground, Mary. That was an accident.” He wiped a trickle of blood from his dribbling nose with the back of his hand. “I also didn’t hurt Susan, just frightened her so she would be disorientated enough to tell the truth.”

“He’s right, he didn’t hurt me, I was just shook, that’s all,” Susan whispered. Then she scowled at Sherlock, “You are a great big bloody bell-end though.”

John didn’t feel the need to scold Susan for language, not after dropping the F-bomb in front of her. “So the Earl is mixed up with the Cardboard Box case?”

“He’s been mixed up with it since the beginning, John, all the way back to A Study in Pink. He’s been bankrolling Moriarty and his Consulting Criminal enterprise ever since he was ennobled as an
“earl and in return…”

“They help him hide his crimes,” John’s face reddened in anger, fuming about the Earl’s earlier
taunts as well as his heinous crimes.

“Precisely,” Sherlock nodded. “And try not to crush the mobile while you are upset, John. We still
need it as evidence.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” John tucked the mobile in his coat pocket.

“As I confirmed with that call a few minutes ago, Jimsie used that mobile to stay in touch with his
Parliamentary benefactor. But after he threw Miss Dobney out, Jimsie mistakenly thought that she
had taken his mobile with her, so that’s when he committed his first blunder,” Sherlock held up his
pointer finger.

“He hired his idiot housebreaking friend to bust into Baker Street to steal the mobile back,” John
groaned. “Dear God, what an eejit.”

“That’s why he tried to go for the mobile when I was at Susie’s mum’s flat,” Mary rolled her head
back in realization. “Stupid me, I thought he was just being spiteful.”

“It’s not just phone numbers and photos he hid on her in sub-folders that Susan didn’t even suspect
existed. He also has all his secret bank account information and passwords, the ones that neither
Susan nor her mother knew he had.” He held up the mobile again, having opened a Barclays app
that he had hidden in a subfolder.

Mary whistled when she read the ledger balance of his current account. “Not bad for a novice.”

John gave Mary the Not Good Look he usually reserved for Sherlock.

Sherlock smirked.

But Mary’s comment had sailed right over Susan’s head. “You mean he had loads of money and
didn’t tell me or Mumsie?” Susan exploded. “Shouting at me for being a freeloader and not pulling
my weight and I should get a proper job instead of wasting time at school? When we had no heat and
we were eating ketchup sandwiches because Mum’s dole ran out and he had… he could have…I
just… I can’t even…” she ran out of steam and crossed her arms. Impotently, she cried out, “That
douche-canoe!”

“Susan, honey,” John weighed his words very carefully. “He got all that money from killing people.
It wasn’t right for him not to help with the household expenses, but you wouldn’t want to use money
he got from murdering people, would you?”

He could feel Mary’s glare burning into his skull. Knew she thought he was a filthy hypocrite.

Clearing his throat, John quickly changed the subject, “So Sherlock, how does Donovan fit into this
mess?”

He did not want Mary finding out that the Appledore vault was real. Not yet.

“Haven’t the faintest idea. That’s why we need to get to her bedsit.” Sherlock dabbed at his still
bleeding nose. “First, I will require a tissue.”

“I’ll get one,” John said hastily. “Half a tick.”
“I’m going to go down and put the kettle on,” Susan slid off her bed. “I don’t think I’ll be able to
sleep now, knowing that Mumsie had hooked up with a serial killer.” She paled. “Maybe it was a
good thing Jimsie chucked me out. It could have been me, dead on the slab, ears cut off.”

“That’s a sensible way of looking at it,” Sherlock nodded approvingly.

“Yeah, well,” she snatched up her Teen Vogue and her ratty old Pooh bear. “I’m still mad at you,
you bloody jerk.”

“I’ll buy you a new iPhone with all the bells and whistles.”

“Well… still mad, but that helps,” she muttered as she sauntered out of the room.

Mary however was not to be placated with a promise of a new mobile. “I should have killed you
when I had the chance,” she seethed between her teeth.

Sherlock leaned forward, his eyes narrowed, “You really should have, Mrs. Watson.”

John came back with a tissue. Just as Sherlock jammed it up his nostril, his mobile buzzed.

“Ah, excellent,” Sherlock said, reading a text from Lestrade’s colleague, Detective Inspector
Montgomery. “They’ve decided to wake our friend Gordie up for a late-night chat, since a woman’s
life is at stake and all. Shall we, John?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

“John,” Mary’s voice was heavy with reproach. “You’ve only gotten back this morning.”

“I know, I’m sorry, I told you, there was a delay on the trains and I couldn’t get a flight to save my
life,” John lied. “But Sherlock’s right, a woman’s life is at risk. And yeah, I know, Sally Donovan is
a right pain in the arse, but… she deserves to be found, just like anybody else who’s lost, yeah?”

Then John turned and bolted out the door, following Sherlock.

Alone, Mary rested her hand on the chest of drawers she had lovingly repainted for Susan’s room.
With a shaking hand, she covered her eyes and tried to muffle her sobs. Still, tears slid down her
cheeks, still pink with anger from how poorly Sherlock had treated Susan.

All she could think was I’m lost too, John…

*I want somebody to find me.*

*Please find me… love me… stay with me…*

“Mary?” Susan called from the bottom of the stairs. “Do you want tea?”

“Yeah,” Mary was glad her voice sounded normal as she brushed the tears away. “Be down in a
mo’, darling.”

She looked at herself in the mirror she had hung over the chest of drawers. Studied her face, making
sure it showed no trace of tears.

Softly, she sang to herself as she walked down the stairs to her foster daughter…

*No… my daughter…*
“I that am lost, oh, who will find me…”

Her singing voice was thin and reedy but she could carry a tune.

“Deep down below the old beech tree? Help me succor me now, the east wind blows…”

She mourned for the lost girls.

All the lost girls.

Chapter End Notes

"Monty's" name was derived from Inspector Montgomery from the ACD canon "Cardboard Box."


So you will all simultaneously indulge me and forgive me for going off on a tangent... but I've read and re-read "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box" and "The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax" for this fic... and weirdly, the more and more I read the canon stories, the more and more I found my opinion about s4 changing. I still think TLD is pretty damn close to perfection as far as script-writing/directing/acting/SFX goes... but TST and TFP... ehhhhhh.... I know they painted themselves in a corner with Mary-is-the-perfect-wife-surprise-she's-an-assassin plot line and had to write their way out of it (plus Mrs. Watson dies in the canon story, so her death really wasn't a big surprise...) but it feels like they keep returning to the same old, same old SH canon stories for inspiration that have already been done in other series and movies. IF there is a Series 5, I would love to see a modern twist on The Cardboard Box story or the Lady Carfax story instead of "Oh, let's focus on "The Final Problem" ... again... even though we already adapted it in TRF."

Plus, I kindasorta now feel like TFP was a regurgitation of TGG, only it was Eurus as the puppet-master instead of Jim Moriarty.

Or is it just me?

While I still consider myself a die-hard fan of the series as a whole and hope for a Series 5, I do find myself liking TST and TFP less and less the more and more I read the original stories. If if IF there is a Series 5, I really would love to see modern adaptations of either the scarier/gorier canon stories or the lesser know stories. "The Problem of Thor Bridge" or "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot" would also be awesome stories to modernize. //end rant

TLD however, I will always love, even with it's flaws... come on... Mrs. Hudson speeding down the highway in her sports car with Sherlock handcuffed in the trunk? That's just amazing and I'll re-watch the shit out of that ep. :^)

Thanks for letting me ramble. Have an awesome week, everyone!
Time Pressure

Chapter Summary

Time Pressure

Having very little time on one's clock (especially less than five minutes) to complete one's remaining moves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-four: Time Pressure

2 June 2016
Hammersmith, London
Friday morning
1:27 AM

The nice thing about interviewing cowards was that they caved so quickly.

Gordon Fowler was a thief, but he was no murderer. He wasn’t about to add a life sentence to his current punishment either. He most readily agreed to sell Jimsie Browner out for hiring him to break into Baker Street, bug it and steal the candy-pink mobile back.

“Jimsie told me he was working for the government,” Gordon feverishly told a dispassionate Sergeant Alexis MacDonald, who was less than pleased to be hauled out of bed at a late hour. But she bore it with her usual stoic silence.

All she had to do was to arch an eyebrow and Gordon immediately started babbling again: “So when Mr. Holmes accused me of his brother hiring me to bug his flat, I just went with it. When I told him that his brother called him were a pain in the arse, I figured that would be a big brotherly thing to say. But I don’t know nothing about no murders, that’s the God honest truth. I always knew Jimsie could go off the rails when he’s on a bender, but I had no idea he was…”

He had then glanced at the photographs of Raz’s crime scene and blanched. Shuddering, he had whimpered, “Between Holmes’ ruddy dog and Jimsie being a psycho, I feel safer in gaol, truth be told. There’s loads of robberies I could confess to that I was never caught doing,” he had added hopefully.

“God, is he really that thick?” John had asked Sherlock while shaking his head in astonishment as they had watched behind the two-way mirror.

“Most people are, John.”

“Rhetorical question, Sherlock.”

“K,” Alex had stifled a sigh, apparently deciding that if she had to be woken up for work, she might as well make it worth her while. “Want coffee?”
When Alex stood up to get coffees, Sherlock had then decided it was time to wake up Sally’s landlord so they could peruse her bedsit. “Come along John,” he rumbled, leaving the world’s worst thief to spill his guts to the Met’s least talkative detective.

The black cab pulled up in front of the tiny block of flats. On the steps stood Sally’s very grumpy landlady, and she was no Mrs. Hudson. She had steel-grey hair pulled into pink curlers, and wore a frumpy plum coloured dressing gown zipped up to her neck and black slippers peeping from out underneath the hideous dressing gown.

“Thought you Scotland Yarders got all you needed from Miss Donovan’s flat yesterday and the day before,” she said sourly before Sherlock or John could introduce themselves, then she frowned at Sherlock. “What happened to your conk?”

“Told one lie too many,” Sherlock hastily removed the bloody tissue from his nostril. “Mrs. Algar, do you recall who stopped by yesterday and the day before?”

“Yesterday was a real good looking bloke, older gent with lovely brown eyes and silver hair, left me his card and everything,” she sighed, brightening for a bit as she produced D.I. Lestrade’s business card from one of the giant pockets of her baggy dressing gown. Then she frowned again, “’Course he was married.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. John elbowed him then politely asked, “And the day before?”

“An Aussie chap, didn’t give me his card,” she crossed her arms. “Nice enough, but didn’t give me his card, didn’t even tell me Miss Donovan is missing. Just showed me the warrant and his badge and told me to let him in.”

Alarm bells rang in John’s head again, loud ones this time, “An Australian?”

“Describe him,” Sherlock ordered.

“Big beefy bloke, bald, said his name was Henry or was it Harry? Not sure and I can’t remember his surname. A bit scary, tell you the truth,” Mrs. Algar admitted. “When I asked if I could read the warrant and where was my copy, he got a bit… curt with me. I know the property laws but…” she faltered then rallied. “But I stopped worrying about it when that nice, handsome D.I. came by the next day. Didn’t say nothing to him about the first copper’s visit. He didn’t stay long in Miss Donovan’s flat, less than five minutes, maybe. So, like I said, didn’t worry about it.”

But both John and Sherlock were plenty worried now. “Did Henry seem to have difficulties with his shoulder?” Sherlock hid his growing panic.

“Yeah, well, not sure if it was his shoulder, but his arm was in a sling. He didn’t seem like he felt well, was all sweaty. Probably why he was short with me, looked like he shouldn’t be out of bed,” Mrs. Algar nodded, reassuring herself.

John and Sherlock turned away from her. “Holy Peters?” John whispered, feeling sick.

“Sounds like it I’m afraid.”

“What’s the deal with his shoulder?”

“Violet shot him.”

“What?”
“I’ll explain later, we need to find Sally now. It’s so much worse now, if Peters is involved,” Sherlock whirled around, snatched the key from Mrs. Algar’s hand.

“Thankyouverymuchsorrytohavewoken you we’llleavethekeythroughthe postslotinyourdoorwhenwe’r ethroughhaveanicenight,” he spat out without taking a breath. Then he grabbed John by the front of his coat and all but dragged him up the three flights of stairs.

“Call Lestrade, wake him, I don’t care,” Sherlock ordered John as he unlocked the door to Sally’s bedsit. “Tell him he needs to start monitoring funerals, starting with any services happening tomorrow. Also, we may need a team to exhume any fresh graves.”

“Funerals? Graves?”

“Peters’ signature is to put a victim inside a coffin,” Sherlock explained as he fumbled around, looking for a light switch. “Then, the actual recipient of said coffin is put on top of the victim. Then the victim is buried along with the deceased and voila, a two-for-one special.”

“Oh my God,” John cried out. “You think that Peters had Sally buried alive?”

“Sally has been a thorn in their side for a very long time now,” Sherlock intoned as he flicked on the light.

“And ours,” John said glumly, surveying the lounge. It very much reminded John of the way 221B could look when Sherlock hit a wall with a case. There were maps and photographs and red string slung everywhere, connecting the dots.

“Quite,” Sherlock muttered, scouring the room. Taking a deep breath, using his hypersensitive nose to its fullest, he announced, “It’s true, other than Lestrade and Peters, there hasn’t been anyone one in this flat for over two days. The air is stale, plus there are no residual cooking smells or perfumes or smells of cleaning supplies.”

John held up a finger, having gotten through to Lestrade. “Greg, it’s John, listen, sorry about waking you, I know you’re dead on your feet, but the thing with Sally? It got worse, so much worse. You need to get down here and question the landlady again…”

John explained the direness of the situation to Lestrade than rang off. “He asked me to text Alex to set up the task force for the funerals,” John started thumbing a message then stopped. “Jesus, Sherlock. How many people die on a daily basis in London?”

“Approximately 151 people a day, give or take a corpse,” Sherlock held a red string between his thumb and finger, following it to a blurry picture of himself and “Violet Smith” on the Millennium Bridge. Then he looked around again then exhaled, “Oh… that stupid woman!”

“What?” John picked up one of the police files Mason had stolen from the Met for her. “That she didn’t really do a very good job hiding she was investigating you?”

“Not me, her,” Sherlock jabbed his finger into the blurry photograph. “She was investigating the disappearance of ‘Violet Smith.’”

“Oh shit,” John rolled his eyes heavenwards. Then he looked down at the police file in his hands. Flipping the cover open, he skimmed the first few lines, “You’re right Sherlock, look,” he pointed the first page. “It’s the bloody March 13th bombings of the surgeries, the case that started it all.”

Something else had caught Sherlock’s eye, however. He didn’t go to John but rather to the tiny breakfast nook that was supposed to divide the large room into two separate sections, the kitchen and
the lounge. Spying a sheet of paper underneath a NSY mug, Sherlock slid it out. “Peters didn’t stay long because Sally had told him everything he needed to know just by looking around.”

He held up the GBF Holdings, UK Board of Directors list Sally had printed off.

And painstakingly crossed off every name on the list…

… except for Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper, Earl of Winchester.

“He was sent here to find out how close Sally was to the truth.”

To avoid Sherlock making a snide comment about how he needed reading glasses, John walked up to Sherlock and simply plucked the flagstaff page out of Sherlock’s hand. “Thought he was a silent partner?”

“No any longer, apparently.”

“Why?”

“Well, he can’t push a bill through Parliament demanding more transparency when he’s a silent partner in a large corporation, can he?” Sherlock plucked the paper out of John’s hands again. “The Earl is always self-serving.”

“Right. So… now what?”

Sherlock strode over to Sally’s sofa and dropped down elegantly. “Now… we think,” he folded his hands together.

“We think?”

“Spot of tea wouldn’t hurt.”

“You want to drink up Sally’s tea?”

“Hardly think she’d mind, if we find her, would she?”

“Milk’s probably gone bad,” John grumbled but he crossed over to the kitchen anyway. Opening the tiny fridge, he hummed in surprise when he discovered that Sally had bought groceries three days ago, so the milk was still fresh. Searching for a kettle, he asked, “So, what are we thinking about? How we’re going to catch Peters?”

“No, he’s a wounded animal. He can’t be caught, he needs to be put down and I’d rather have professionals handle that task. I was an assassin but once John and I didn’t care for it.”

“Right, sorry,” John mumbled as he located an old fashioned kettle that had to be boiled on the stove top. Turning the tap on, he asked, “So what are we thinking then?”

“Mathematics,” Sherlock sighed. “I’m tempted to wake my mother… but then I’d have to talk to her,” his face scrunched up as if he’d bitten into a raw onion.

“Come off it, your mum’s great.”

“Hmmpphhfff,” Sherlock slouched on the sofa now, crossing his arms. “As I said earlier, roughly 151 people die in London on a daily basis and that’s just in London, not including the suburbs. So what we need to do is narrow down the search radius, eliminate all the funerals that do not fit Peters’ criteria. The coffin must be able to fit two people.”
“OK, well, this is morbid,” John put the kettle on the stove top and switched on the gas. There was a tick-tick-tick then a *flame* as the gas ignited, creating a merry blue flame. “But we can rule out babies and kids.”

“Obviously, the boxes are too small,” Sherlock agreed insensitively as he drummed his fingertips against his chin. “We can rule out midgets too.”

“Mid… how many midgets really die in London? And I don’t think *midget* is the correct terminology anyhow.”

“It’s not?”

“No, it’s considered rude.”

“Well, what is the *not-rude* nomenclature for people less than four feet tall?”

“*Little people*, I believe.”

“*Little people*?” Sherlock dropped his hands and stared at John in irritated disbelief. “And that’s not condescending? Oh… no time to argue, put it on the list.”

“List? What list?”

“Start a list of funerals we can rule out,” Sherlock sat up, pulling out his mobile. “I’ll start scanning obits online.”

“I’ll scan the obits, you make a list,” John held up his left hand, still in its soft brace. “Trust me, it’ll go faster. My handwriting is still crap.”

“Oh, very well.”

Ninety minutes and an entire pot of *fancy pants* tea later, John slumped back into the sofa. “Great, so we’ve narrowed the search down from 151 possible funerals a day to… 70.”

Sherlock paced back and forth in front of the picture of him and Violet exiting Rucastle’s limo, Violet’s long chestnut hair covering most of her face. What her hair didn’t cover up, a huge pair of sunglasses did. “This is taking too long,” he ground his teeth.

“No shit, Sherlock,” John tossed his mobile onto the coffee table. He ran his fingers through his own silvery hair, making it stick up like a hedgehog. “Sherlock, the Met can’t disrupt 70 funerals a day. Are you sure that if Sally is about to be buried alive, it would happen today?”

“Today or tomorrow,” Sherlock turned to face the old tabloid photograph of himself and Violet together. “Look at the timeline, John. Whitey’s wife told Lestrade that Whitey called Sally on Tuesday to go to Appledore. Sally picked him up after supper and never brought him home. Mrs. Mason called in the missing persons report on Wednesday morning. When Lestrade arrived at my flat yesterday, it had been over 48 hours. Peters would want to dispose of Sally as quickly as possible. Therefore, today or tomorrow, Sally will be interred six feet under before her time, suffocating on her own carbon dioxide output when the oxygen runs out.”

“Jesus Christ,” John closed his eyes. “But why kill Sally and spare Mason?”

“Mason wasn’t going about to be spared,” Sherlock spat. “Sally was smaller, easier to contain and carry. Mason is morbidly obese. Too heavy to carry up the stairs… in one piece,” Sherlock didn’t turn around and his voice was clipped and clinical as usual. “Plus, he was a pain in the arse and
Peters likes to torture his victims.”

“I’m aware,” John looked down at his hand.

Now Sherlock turned around. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I was too wrapped up in…” he waved his hand around.

“No, I wasn’t thinking about me, well, I was a bit, but… I was thinking about my sister.”

“Oh.”

“You’re right. He is a mad dog, Peters. He would do something horrible like letting someone die in the dark with no food or water. He tried to drown Violet, remember?”

“I do.”

“Call her.”

“What?”

“Call her. Pick her brain. Look, she can get inside of people’s heads in a way that neither you nor I can and we are seriously running out of time.”

Sherlock checked his watch, “Speaking of time, it is only ten o’clock over there.”

“Over where?”

“Never you mind,” Sherlock scolded him as he took out his prepaid mobile and dialed a number from heart. “The less you know until she’s home, the better.” He held the mobile to his ear and listened to it ring. Just when he was about to give up, she answered.

“Hello, wife,” he crowed, putting the mobile on the coffee table. “You’re on speaker.”

“This better be fucking important, I just went to bed,” a tinny, grumpy, familiar voice flowed out of the speaker.

John’s eyes filled with tears, “Hey Violet.”

A beat, then sheepishly she said, “Hey John. You mad?”

“A bit put out, yeah. But unfortunately, I don’t have time to shout at you properly. Sherlock, why don’t you get Violet caught up?”

In his brusque, succinct manner, Sherlock gave Violet the pertinent details of the present situation. Violet responded in her usual dry manner, “Well, shit.”

“Yeah, that’s about the sum of it,” John chimed in.

When the silence stretched too long, Sherlock calmly ordered her, “Stop chewing on your lip.”

“I’m not,” she grumbled. “OK, so, there’s no way in hell you guys can bust 70 funerals. You don’t have the time or manpower, even if you call in a favor with MI-6. Here’s the part I don’t get.”

“What?” John and Sherlock said at the same time.

“Jesus, would you two get married already,” Violet sighed.
“Are you advocating polygamy?” Sherlock smirked.

“Oh trust me, Stick, I’m divorcing your ass the minute I’m in the clear.”

“I’m hurt. I just picked out china patterns and monogrammed tea towels with our initials.”

“John, reel him in.”

“Stick?” John lifted his brows at John.

“I was undercover,” Sherlock said hastily. “Violet, what don’t you understand?”

“Sally does allow her emotions to blind her and she does have a huge chip on her shoulder. But she’s not stupid. She wouldn’t go into a potentially dangerous situation without letting someone know where’s she is at all times. She’s been a cop for too long, plus she’s a P.I. She’s not going to go somewhere shady without someone being able to track her.”

“What, like GPS?” John said. “They would have taken her mobile away from her though.”

“What about a Smartwatch? Most of them have GPS trackers on them now.”

Sherlock had leapt out of his seat the minute Violet said Smartwatch. “And some Smartwatches have a pre-set that allows a distressed owner to send an SOS message if they are in trouble. Sally’s probably been trying to communicate with us all this time but the idiots at the Met didn’t take her messages seriously. Or they were routed to…. Cardiff,” he held his hands up. “Oh, of course, the SOS message would go to her work, at the private investigative company she worked at instead of in London because she doesn’t know anyone in London except the Masons.”

“Assuming she has a Smartwatch,” John pointed out. “Let’s not leap to conclusions.”

“Check her laptop or tablet,” Violet sat up in her bed, wishing to God she could be there, to be a part of the hunt.

She looked down at her left hand. Willed it to move.

Her forefinger, middle finger and thumb barely curled forward. The pinkie and ring finger barely moved at all.

She had gone to bed early because the tingling in her feet wouldn’t abate tonight. It felt like she was walking through snow without shoes.

“If she has a Smartwatch, she’ll have synced it to a larger device. That’s what I did with my iPhone. If I lost my phone, the info would still be on my mini iPad and vice-versa.”

She listened, heard the sounds of rummaging around. “Found it,” Sherlock puffed. “A tablet.”

“Look for an app for Apple Watch, Android or Asus…”

“Asus, there!” John crowed. “But, Violet, Sherlock, she’s been missing for nearly three days now. What if the charge in her watch is gone?”

“She’s careful,” the profile said slowly and deliberately, recalling what she had learned about Sally Donovan’s personality. “She would have fully charged her phone and her watch before leaving. She also would have taken a portable charger with her. If Peters didn’t realize she had a Smartwatch on and if she has some mobility with her hands, she might have had a chance to send a distress signal and charge her watch.”
“Go get Lestrade,” Sherlock ordered John. Picking up the prepaid, he said, “Once again, you exceeded my expectations, clever girl.”

“Good for me. Can I go back to bed now?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Holmes,” Sherlock sing-songed.

“Please stop calling me that. It makes me think of your mother.”

“Thank you, Violet,” John said sincerely. Mischievously, he added, “That doesn’t mean you’re off the hook with me. I’m still a bit cross with you running off like you did.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

John smiled at their old, shared joke. “I’ll see you soon, OK?”

“OK,” Violet felt tears welling up. “See you soon,” she whispered, hoping it didn’t sound like she was about to cry. She hit the End button before either one of them could say anything else.

She flopped back onto the pillows. She pulled her bad hand up to her chest and tried to massage some feeling back into her dead fingers, even though she knew there was no point.

Just like there was no point in feeling as bad as she did right now.

She made her decision and it was the right decision, the practical decision, letting him go…

He was never hers to keep anyway.

But still… goddamn, this fucking hurts… Violet curled up in the bed she had shared with him only two nights ago. Granted, nothing fun happened in this bed. Still, better a platonically shared bed than an empty one.

Life is really not fucking fair, she decided as she took her engagement ring and her wedding band off.

Mercifully, sleep found quickly this night.

Chapter End Notes

Mrs. Algar’s name is inspired by a character from ACD’s canon "Cardboard Box" story.

Busy week this week. Only time to post then crashing. Hope everyone’s Monday was kind to them. Thank you always for the kudos/rec's/comments :^)
Sudden Death

Chapter Summary

Sudden Death

The most straightforward time control for a chess game: each player has a fixed amount of time available to make all moves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Forty-five: Sudden Death

3 June 2016
Somewhere in London
Friday
Time Unknown

Her Smartwatch had died ages ago, at exactly four o’clock in the morning.

She thought it was maybe Friday morning, possibly mid-morning. Or maybe now it was afternoon, it was hard keeping track of time in the pitch black.

But her Smartwatch had flickered out at exactly four o’clock in the morning.

She had tried to conserve the battery. Lucky for her that the bastards who put her in this box…

(...becauseitsaboxjustaboxnotacoffinnotacoffinnotacoffinNOTACOFFIN…)

... never found her portable charger. Her hands had been zip-tied but between her and Mason, they managed to get her charger out of her pocket and power up her Smartwatch while they had been both imprisoned in the basement (...fallout shelter…vault?...) of Appledore.

Of course, it was bad luck that her hands had been bound in the first place. Otherwise she could have sent the SOS text programmed into her watch. But she couldn’t reach the watch. Mitton tried to send it, but he was too clumsy and too weak.

The real bad luck was going to Appledore in the first place.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

And now, barring a miracle, she was going to die for this stupidity.

Sally swallowed a sob and tried to control her trembling. She needed to think, dammit. Figure a way out of this box (notacoffinnotacoffinnotacoffin… the walls are NOT closing in and there is plenty of air, enough to breathe, enough to think because this is NOT a coffin…)

They hadn’t expected to find much at Appledore, she and Mitton. Really, it had been a fool’s errand. Like Mitton said, they were just going to poke about. An excuse to tour a private, luxurious
residence, if one wanted to be completely honest. Any evidence proving Sherlock Holmes had murdered Charles Augustus Magnusussen in cold blood would have been washed away years ago.

However… what other secrets could be hidden at Appledore?

Perhaps there was a body hidden out in the meadows surrounding Appledore?

Maybe they would have found Violet Smith had they not lingered inside for so long.

They had been milling around the expansive lounge when two men strolled out of a closet they had just inspected minutes ago.

That closet had been empty. Yet, here were two men, drawing large, expensive and illegal handguns. “Well, this won’t do at all,” wheezed the larger of the two men. He had an Australian accent and his arm was in a sling. He looked decidedly unwell, as if he should be in hospital and not walking around.

That was probably why his mate did all the heavy lifting. Or rather, told them to kneel so he could knock them out cold with the butt of his gun while the Australian man watched.

Sally and Mason had woken up with headaches, tasting blood in their mouths. To their shock, they were in some sort of old fall-out shelter (… vault? It seemed more like a vault.) There were rows and rows of filing cabinets and one wall was lined with very modern computer servers.

Mason deduced they were underneath Appledore… maybe.

Sally spent maybe a day with Mitton before she was dragged away. She wasn’t sure how long she spent in the boot of the Australian’s car. But when the boot was opened, she kicked out with her feet, getting the other, healthier man square in the chest. But she didn’t get far with her hands and feet bound. Reinforcements were called in, someone jabbed her buttock with a great big needle and darkness dragged her down, down, down…

… and she woke up, cotton-mouthed and woolly-brained, inside this box.

She had screamed, she had kicked and she had thrashed around. She tried to work the zip-ties free but she had so little room to work with. She started counting backwards from one hundred In an attempt to calm down.

If I can get my hands free, I can re-charge my watch then send the SOS signal…

Oh this is going to hurt… but she gritted her teeth and started slowly trying to work her hands free. Even as the plastic scraped the flesh away and blood beaded up, she continued to struggle against her bonds.

The pain was good. The pain meant she was still alive...

Shortly before her Smartwatch died, she contemplated breaking her thumb in order to slip out of her bounds. She was too weak to get a proper grip on her thumb and break it… although the jury was out if it was her body or her will that was too weak to get on with it.

So, alone in dark, the black suffocating eternal dark, she twisted about, trying to find a way to smash her thumb against the wall or ceiling (… because it was a ceiling and there was NOT a body lying above her, separated by wood and satin lining…)

But she only managed to bruise her hands badly, adding to the scrapes and torn flesh.
She was also uncomfortably aware she had been wearing the same clothes for nearly three days now. Her teeth felt filmy but running her dry tongue across them did no good. Her bra straps had slid down and her knickers had crawled up between her cheeks but she couldn’t make any necessary adjustments. The scent of her own dried sweat made her want to gag at first, but eventually, she got used to it.

But far more worrisome was her nervous awareness that she felt no need to use the toilet. Her muscles and bones ached from the lack of hydration. Her dry throat burned, driving her mad. She fantasized about drinking a large glass of cool, clean water with lemon slices while soaking in a hot, soapy bath.

Then she started to work, trying to slide her hands out of the zip-ties, cutting and scraping her skin again. Her fingers felt fat, clumsy and cold, but at least she could still move them. Desperately she tried to bring her hands up to her face so she could lick the blood away. She didn’t have enough space to bring her hands to her face. She couldn’t even brush away the hair now stuck to her face, tickling and annoying her.

Earlier, she had felt the box rise then move smoothly, then rise and lower again. She heard deep male voices, cussing each other out, one rising above the fray, admonishing someone to “be careful with the old girl.” Sally tried to kick against the box. An eye-watering jolt of pain radiating from her heel up her leg was how she realized (or remembered as her mind grew cloudier and cloudier the longer she went without food or water) she had no boots. Someone had stolen her footwear before putting her in his box, probably to punish her for kicking that other guy, as if being buried alive wasn’t enough.

(No… nonononono… can’t think like that, will go mad, this is NOT a coffin, oh God, oh God…)

She had drifted off after the hearse started drifting, but she came to again when she heard something… something like an ocean… no, a brook babbling…

Not a brook… people!

“Oh my God,” Sally’s heart started racing again as she started to kick her heels against the foot of the coffin, despite the pain. But two, nearly three days of no food and very little water had weakened her significantly.

Then she heard the swell of pipe organs and the scrape of chairs as people stood up.

“Oh, no, no, nononononono,” Sally moaned out loud as she started rolling from side to side in a vain, pathetic attempt to tip the coffin over. “SOMEBODY!” she tried screaming. “I’M IN HERE! HELP ME!”

But only a weak, pathetic rasp slipped out. She tried again and her voice cracked. She’d weep if she was hydrated enough to do so.

As the congregation started to sing tonelessly Abide with me… Abide with me: fast falls the eventide… Sally started shaking from head to toe. Her teeth even started chattering as realization forced her foggy, dehydrated brain to accept she very well may die in his box (coffin.)

“Please,” she gave the coffin one more pathetic kick.

As if she was heard, the organ came to a squalling stop, as if the instrument had been personally offended.

She couldn’t make out the words, but she could hear indignant tones of what had to be the vicar. She
lollled her head towards the right, as if that would help her hear any better. She still couldn’t make out
the actual words, but she still could more angry voices, mostly female now, protesting the
interruption. Then there was another voice, male, graveled, authoritative, ordering everyone out.

Sally’s despairing heart skipped a beat. It sounded like… Greg?

“Oh God, please,” she croaked out to herself while dizzily thinking I’ll go back to church, I’ll
volunteer, I’ll give to charity, I’ll get my life together, just please please, if there really is a God,
please let that be Greg Lestrade…

Feebly she scraped her fingernails against the plywood separating her from the guest of honor.

Soon there were more voices surrounding her. Now she could clearly distinguish the voices.

“This is an absolute outrage! I must protest…”

“Well, protest all you want, but get those mourners out of here or they’re really going to have
something to talk about over their tea and cake!” Lestrade snapped.

(... bless you, Greg... God bless you...)

“Listen, listen please, Reverend, I understand that this is a very ... well, odd situation, but a woman’s
life depends on it, so please, let us help her and clear the chapel, please.”

It was another familiar voice, a soft tenor voice with a barely noticeable East End accent but with the
consonants clipped like someone who had led a military life. Someone who expected to be obeyed
and yet at the same time, someone who was used to making apologies during social engagements
suddenly made awkward...

Oh no...

If John Watson was here, that only meant...

“Reverend,” boomed the familiar, hated, arrogant baritone. “Unless business dictates you must
provide two-for-one sales, get these people out of here and let us do our job.”

“You have no proof that…” the vicar dropped his voice, “there is another body in there. Absurd.”

“There will be another body in there, unless you move aside and let us work. Right now it is obvious
that there is another living person in there. If you relied on science instead of an imaginary friend in
the sky, you would have perceived that the dimensions of the coffin ar-”

“Sherlock, not now,” John snapped, then added in slightly less stern tones, “Reverend, really we
must insist that we open the casket.”

“Oh the hell with this,” Sherlock announced, “Let them watch if you won’t clear the hall.”

“Stop, stop, what are you doing? Those flowers cost hundreds of pounds!” a woman shouted.

“Waste of money,” Sherlock proclaimed loftily, his voice much closer now.

“Allright, alright, I’ll clear the chapel but so help me, if there is only one body in there, you will hear
from my superior.”

“Oh really,” Sherlock was positively scathing. “Tell God I said hey and that He should have really
had mankind evolve from lizards and not apes, although having opposable thumbs is rather nice, but
the ability to regenerate limbs whence severed would have been far more convenient. John, help me divest this casket of these ridiculous flowers.”

“I say,” chimed in another woman with an accent so toff it was almost a parody of British upper class. “Those are Song of Praise roses. They are most certainly not ridiculous flowers!”

“GET OUT,” Sherlock roared.

She had lifted her head as high as the narrow space allowed her, but now Sally let her head flop back. *I'm going to die in here while The Freak scares everyone else off.*

God has a funny sense of humor…

Sally struggled to focus. She could feel herself start to drift again. She swallowed in a vain attempt to have what little saliva she could produce to wet her parched throat. She longed to drift off into sweet oblivion but her fear of not waking up again forced her to concentrate, to stay awake… to listen to the bickering voices outside the coffin… *(it IS a coffin, but they will get me out of this... I only need to stay awake a bit more...)*

“… alright, John, you grab the ankles, I’ll take her under her arms, Lestrade, the middle and—”

“And, what, exactly Sherlock?”

“What, exactly? We move the corpse, John. So we can remove the false bottom and take Miss Donovan out of this ghastly coffin, *obviously.*”

“And where shall we be laying the late *Mrs. Linton-Hareton*?”

“On the floor.”

“On the flo- SHERLOCK HOLMES, that is not good, not good at all.”

“Oh for God’s sake, why can’t we put it on the floor?”

“We can’t because it’s disrespectful, you heartless cock! And don’t call it, it, I mean, don’t call Mrs. Linton-Hareton *it*. She’s someone’s granny, for fuck’s sake. How would you feel if someone called your gran a corpse or an *it*?”

“I never met my Grandmother Holmes, she passed before I was born and Grandmamma Vernet was a holy terror, so even if I were a sentimental being, I wouldn’t care. At any rate, neither does Mrs. Linton-Hareton because she is *dead*. This is a corpse, not a living breathing person. Pronouns are irrelevant.”

“Speaking of living breathing persons, shouldn’t we get on getting the *actual* living breathing person out of the bloody coffin?” Lestrade bellowed. “God almighty you two should have married each other and not the poor women shackled to you two. We’ll put the body on a pew and use the altar linen as a shroud out of respect, yeah?”

“Yeah, fine, let’s get on with it,” John grunted.

“Right, now, as I was saying,” Sherlock sang out. Sally could easily imagine him swanning around, his posh coat swirling around him. “John, the ankles, Lestrade, the middle and—”

“Oh, Christ,” Lestrade complained over the whine of the hinges as someone opened the coffin lid. “Why do I have to grab her middle? Nobody told me Granny was a big girl.”
“Are you actually fat-shaming the deceased? Seriously, do either one of you comprehend the concept of having respect for the dead?”

“What happened to your sense of urgency, boys? Sally is probably listening to you two and making plans to find a way to defy space, time, physics and logic in order to haunt us for eternity if we let her die. John her feet, Lestrade, the middle, and quit whining,” Sherlock barked. The other two must have obeyed him because Sherlock ordered, “Right, on three. One. Two. And three,” he groaned as the plywood creaked above her as the dead weight was lifted off it.

Sally felt her heart start to pound, hearing the strained voices of her rescuers fade away as they carried the body away. She thought it was about to burst from her chest as panic started to overtake her again. Maybe this isn’t real, she despaired, her throat tightening even more. Maybe I’m hallucinating, dreaming this entire thing up because reality is just too…

Then she emitted a dry sob when she realized she couldn’t think of the right words to finish her ghoulisht thought. There was a dull throbbing within her skull, as if the cranial bones were trying to crush her brain.

Suddenly the coffin shuddered, jolting Sally out of her panic. There was a tearing sound then Sally dumbly realized they were tearing away the satin lining. Soon, she heard Lestrade shouting, “Sally? Sally? Are you in there? Are you OK?”

Sally twisted her swollen, blood-encrusted hands around again, reaching up to feebly scratch at the plywood once more. She tried to call out, “Here, I’m here,” but again, her voice was nothing more than a reedy gasp.

They must have heard her because Lestrade burst out, “Oh thank God!” while John admonished Sherlock to hurry up and help him remove the false bottom.

There was more creaking along with more manly grunts and ungentlemanly cursing. Then there was an almost deafening crack!

Then… light. Beautiful, blessed, glorious light.

Sally sucked in a great big gulp of fresh air and tried to sit up. She immediately felt dizzy and nearly fell back into the coffin, but like magic, Lestrade appeared, reaching down into the coffin, catching her, calming her, “Sally, Sally, thank God, thank God. It’s alright, you’re safe now.”

If she wasn’t dry as a bone, Sally would have burst into tears. Instead, she reached up with her blood-stained hands, trying to catch hold of his shirt, need to touch, to feel the sensible poly-cotton blend of his shirt on her fingertips. She needed to touch something other than her own bruised and battered body or plywood, something soft to soothe her shattered psyche, her bleeding soul.

“Greg,” she croaked, “Get me out.”

“Wait,” John ordered, “She might have a head or spinal injury. We need to wait for the paramedics to help us. Get a cervical collar on her.”

But Sally started shaking her head wildly, shivering uncontrollably again. Clinging to him now, getting blood all over his nice white dress shirt, Sally whispered, “Get me out now.”

Casting an apologetic look at John, Lestrade asked, “Are you certain?”

Sally nodded frantically again as John sighed resignedly before turning to harangue the vicar, who had been watching the entire thing with his mouth hanging open. “Don’t just stand there. The
paramedics will be here any moment. Wait outside for them then show them where to go.”

When the vicar wheeled around to stare at Sherlock for confirmation, he shrugged and with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, purred, “WWJD?”

As the vicar fled the chapel, Lestrade whisked Sally out of the coffin, which could have been her coffin. A wave of nausea crashed down on her as Lestrade lifted her up and out. As he lowered her down onto the floor, he told her, “Alright, John’s going to have a look at you while we wait for the paramedics. Is there anyone we can call?”

Sally closed her eyes then shook her head, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

No one commented. But Lestrade ran his big hand over her forehead, smoothing away all those irritating little hairs that had been stuck to her skin.

Soon, she felt long elegant fingers gently hold her arms up. “Stay very still,” Sherlock commanded her in a hushed, gentle voice she had never heard him use before. Numbly, she obeyed him and listened to the sound of steel sawing through plastic. Soon her hands fell away free. Her fingers began to tingle painfully as proper blood circulation finally resumed.

She kept her eyes closed as John’s stubby fingers lightly squeezed her right wrist. “Sally,” he crooned, “Did they hurt you before putting you inside the coffin?”

“Hit me… my head, but…” Sally frowned as she tried to remember. She whimpered, “I don’t know…” as John carefully ran his hands down her throat. “Gave me a jab…. Something that put me to sleep but… dunno…” she rambled as he palpated her abdomen.

“OK, can you open your eyes now? Just for a bit,” As he shone a penlight into her pupils, he asked, “Can you tell me what day it is?”

“Thursday… no Friday… I think?”

It was growing harder to think.

“Can you tell me who prime minister is?”

“Ummm…”

It was right on the tip of her tongue.

“Do you have a headache?”

“Yes,” she garbled, “Badly.”

“Hard to breathe, yeah?”

Sally nodded again and immediately felt dizzy again as John took her pulse a second time.

“Feel sick?”

“Yeah… a bit.”

“Paramedics!” announced the vicar, his funeral vestments flapping around him as he ran ahead of the paramedics. Then he moved aside out of their way, still goggling at the Gothic melodrama unfolding in his humble little chapel.
John started rattling off symptoms at once after announcing he was a doctor, “Extreme dehydration and possible head injury, most likely concussion, but not sure. Tachycardia, nausea, feverish, confusion, shortness of breath and has fixed pupils. Some sort of drug was administered to her before she was confined in the coffin, but unsure what, will probably want to run a tox screen to be safe.”

“Ta, doc, we’ll take it from here,” the lead paramedic crisply informed John as the other paramedic knelt next to Sally. John nodded and moved out of the way, but continued to supervise, his arms crossed, his big blue eyes fixed on every move the paramedics made.

Soon, Sally found herself on a stretcher, with an oxygen mask over her nose and mouth and a saline drip in her arm. The wheels of the stretcher crushed the Song of Praise roses that had decorated the coffin.

“We’ll see you soon,” John jogged alongside the stretcher until they wheeled her out the door. Lestrade, on the phone with the mortuary who had worked on poor, abused Mrs. Linton-Hareton, nodded and waved at Sally as she wheeled by. She weakly smiled, even though she knew he couldn’t see it underneath the oxygen mask.

Without meaning to, she made eye contact with Sherlock as she passed him. He wasn’t wearing his swishy coat (of course not, it was June, far too hot for a wool coat…) and his curly hair was a bit longer than he usually wore it. But he wore one of his usual suits paired with an expensive dress shirt, the suit coal-black and the shirt dove-grey. His face, his stupid haughty face, was still abnormally white and odd-shaped, like an albino otter.

He lifted his heavy black brows in greeting when she wheeled past him. His eyes looked like actual chips of ice as he stared her down, his hands behind his back.

Sally closed her eyes again, desperate for sleep, desperate to wake from this nightmare.

Impassively, Sherlock watched as the paramedics rushed her towards the ambulance. The glowing rush from solving the case was already starting to fade, but he still felt pretty damned pleased with himself. A half-smile crooked his heavy Cupid’s bow lips.

*Not bad for only being back in London for less than two days,* he privately gloated.


“Well, bully for you,” Lestrade yawned hugely. “Glad Sally’s abduction entertained you. If I don’t get some sleep, I’ll be in the hospital bed next to Sally.”

“What about this Jimsie Browner fellow?” John asked, although what he really wanted to ask was What about Holy Peters?

He heard the swishing sound of an aluminum bat crashing down on his rib cage again. Unconsciously, he flexed the fingers of his left hand.

He thought about his sister trussed up like a Christmas goose, Peters holding a gun to her head and laughing at her as she pleaded with him not to hurt her little brother…

*I want him dead…*

“Got a warrant out for Jimsie, won’t take long to find him. Gordan General completely ratted him out,” Lestrade swallowed another yawn. “Look, before I collapse, I just want to say… I know neither one of you have any reason to help Sally. So… thank you.”
“Of course, Greg,” John said gruffly, now rubbing his left wrist. “We weren’t going to leave her to the mercy of that monster.”

“Well, the mortician and the cosmetologist who worked on the poor old biddy whose eternal rest we disturbed,” Lestrade jerked his thumb over his shoulder, pointing at the body on the pew, covered by the altar linens. “Said they’re coming as fast as they can to put the old girl back to rights and into a new coffin.” He yawned again, his jaw wide and large. This time he didn’t apologize. “I’ve got to give a statement to the fucking press, so you two go out the back unless you want the vipers to gobble you up too. But I do need you two to come in tomorrow for the follow-up questions and paperwork then. You know… the usual post-case song-and-dance.”

“Get some rest, Greg, you’ve earned it,” John gave Lestrade a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Give Molly and Henry our love.”

Lestrade tried to respond but only yawned hugely again. He gave them a half-hearted wave then slouched off, to battle the press.

John turned to Sherlock, about to ask him about Holy Peters when Sherlock’s mobile rang.

Sherlock pulled it out of his jacket pocket and arched an eyebrow. “Yes, big brother?”

“It won’t happen overnight but your wife’s name is in the process of being cleared with the American government. In a few weeks’ time, she can return to London. Everything will be in writing. I’m even expediting her permanent residency status.”

“I don’t want to hear ‘in a few weeks’ time.’ I want a date, Mycroft.”

An exasperated sigh followed by an aggrieved, “The thirtieth of June, in the two-thousandth sixteenth year of Our Lord. Does that satisfy you?”

“Quite.”

“She still needs to submit testimony to the American government regarding her intrigues into the La Ligue des Roux.”

“Naturally, we didn’t expect this to be completely devoid of strings.”

“And of course, her employment options will need to be discussed. Deputy Director Marshall would like for her to return to the FBI, in a consulting capacity, maybe even as an instructor at Quantico. But she had expressed interest in joining MI-6, plus I doubt you would want your dearly beloved wife to go back to America, not after everything you went through to bring her back here,” Mycroft drawled, his voice as black and slick as oil.

“As you said, it will be discussed.”

“Mummy wants to have a garden party to celebrate your nuptials.”

“Of course she does,” Sherlock groaned as John stared at him bemusedly.

“All your little friends at Scotland Yard are invited, particularly the Lestrades. Mummy emphasized that Dr. Lestrade bring her little infant son to the party; any reason why she would be so insistent, Sherlock?”

“Mother likes babies. You know that,” Sherlock droned as his gut clenched. When he noticed John frowning at him, he realized he was fidgeting with the buttons of his suit jacket. Ignoring John’s
worried face, Sherlock smoothed down his jacket as if that had been his intent all along. “She would have had a houseful of babies if she could have had her way.”

“Hmm, yes, that is true,” Mycroft hummed as he looked at a picture on his mobile and a small photograph in his other hand.

The picture on his mobile was a recent surveillance photo of Molly Hooper Lestrade picking up her baby boy from his grandmother’s flat.

The small, yellowing photograph in his hand was a baby picture of Sherlock, back when he was called William, aged eight months.

A small red flicking light caught his eye. His other phone line, trying to ring through. “I’ll stay in touch, keep you informed.”

“Inform of what?”

“Absolutely no idea,” Mycroft smirked as he disconnected his call with Sherlock and hit the Line 2 button. Leaning forward, putting his face closer to the speaker on his expensive multi-line telephone, he asked politely, “Yes?”

“Apologies for disturbing you, Mr. Holmes,” his secretary sounded unruffled, as good secretaries do. “The Earl of Winchester is here, asking for an audience with you at your earliest convenience.”

“Send him in, but in five minutes, ring me; tell me I have a terribly important call I must take,” Mycroft silkily commanded her.

“Very good, sir,” his secretary remained unfazed, having performed this particular ruse before. “I’m sending him in now, sir.”

Mycroft did not get up as Lord Cullen-Culpepper stormed in, nor did he react when the irate earl slammed the door behind him. Mycroft merely lifted his eyebrows in polite inquisitiveness. “This is a surprise. How may I assist you, my lord?”

Lord Cullen-Culpepper plopped down in one of the leather chairs directly across from Mycroft without being asked to sit. “I think we can dispense with the pleasantries.”

“Quite so,” Mycroft leaned forward, placing elbows on the top of his spotless desk. Tenting his fingers together, he quietly demanded, “What do you want?”

“To make Appledore Go Away,” the Earl demanded, slamming his burnt hand on his thigh. His entire face pinked with anger, not just the burnt half. “This is intolerable.”

“Oh,” Mycroft leaned back in his chair, the leather squeaking. “But I can’t. Transparency and all of that, after all, that’s what you based your entire campaign upon. Clarity, honesty, modesty, that was your entire platform. And my, how your constituents ate that up,” Mycroft watched his barbed remark hit home and hook into the Earl. With a sugary, simpering smile, he added, “Besides, if you have no knowledge of the vaults of Appledore, what do you have to worry about, hmmm old friend?” He examined his nails, “Not as if you have any skeletons in your closet, do you?”

“Very well, I’ll get to the heart of the matter.”

“Ah yes, this is the part where you ask me to save your miserable pedophile arse from my brother. Go on then. Ask.”
The Earl blinked, utterly shocked at Mycroft’s blunt language. “William is trying to connect me to a crime in which I have no involvement. He rang me to taunt me, to blackmail me.”

“He rang you on a mobile definitely connected to the disappearance of former Metropolitan Police Sergeant Sally Donovan. The mobile had your number in its list of contacts. I’d think very carefully about your next move, old friend.”

Now the Earl licked his lips. Then he pulled one of his favorite tricks, smiling in a certain way that made his maimed face look even more terrifying. He had practiced this look in the mirror in the same way models study their faces to see which profile is the best for photographs. “You know I’m not stupid enough to use my personal or business mobile. You know I got rid of the burner the minute William rang me, stupid of him, really, to ring me, to show his hand.”

“Oh Heathcliff,” Mycroft rolled his eyes. He then tut-tutted him, “Heathcliff, Heathcliff, Heathcliff, when will you learn that my brother does nothing out of caprice. If he rang you, there was a very good reason.”

Then it hit him, like an avalanche, nearly knocking him over.

*Sherlock rang him because of Violet’s ultimatum. Sherlock wants me to kill the Earl… no.*

*He trusts me to kill the Earl.*

*He’s giving me a chance to finish what I started thirty-three years ago.*

Sitting up in his chair now, Mycroft stared the Earl down and gave him the coldest smile he could muster as he made a solemn, silent vow:

*Brother mine, I shall not fail you this time.*

*He will die.*

Under Mycroft’s glacial glower, the Earl squirmed, actually squirmed. “I’ll ram the Bill of Transparency down Parliament’s throat, just you wait and see.”

“Glad to hear it. That will make releasing the contents of the Appledore vaults all the more vindicating. I wonder, do you think your friends removed the files regarding your predilections in Thailand or left them there?”

Now, the healthy side of the Earl’s face blanched. Gripping the armrests of his seat, he snarled, “I’ll go public. I’ll tell the world how this,” he pointed at his damaged half of his face, “Really happened.”

“If you must,” Mycroft examined his nails. He frowned at them and reached for his diary to write himself a reminder to get a manicure, “But rest assured, if you go public, Sherlock goes public.”

“It’s my word against his. Who is going to believe a freak like him, against the word of a man like me,” the Earl sneered right back, rising to his feet, in a pathetic attempt to intimidate Mycroft.

Mycroft pushed his diary and pen away from him. He leaned back into his expensive chair again and tapped his fingertips together. In his mind, he saw his rook moving into the Check position on a chessboard. “Dr. Scott videotaped her sessions with Sherlock.”

The Earl sank back down into his seat. “The agreement was…”
“Oh yes. The agreement was no written record of the therapy. All the medical reports were expunged. There is not a single written document regarding Sherlock’s abuse at your hands. But Dr. Scott videotaped all her sessions with William.”

“You’re lying,” the Earl insisted as beads of sweat lined the undamaged part of his forehead.

“She hid the tapes, for years. When she learnt how far down Sherlock had spiraled into drugs, she gave the tapes to my mother, hoping that the information could help the drug counselors understand the extent of damage done to Sherlock’s mental health. But my mother decided not to risk it, not risk your father and your family learning that there was evidence proving what you did to my brother. So she entrusted the tapes to Ford.”

“And Ford gave those tapes to you,” the Earl sounded sick.

“Oh no, don’t be silly,” Mycroft lightly chided him. Then he delivered the killing blow, “Once the technology was available, he digitized them and gave copies to me,” He paused, savoring the moment, like he would the first sip of the finest wine, “And Sherlock.”

Just then his telephone rang. Mycroft apologized and answered. He made a token protest then said, “Very well. Give me a moment to say my farewells to the Earl.”

He looked up and saw the Earl visibly sweating. “So, unless there is anything else…?”

“I’ll kill the Bill of Transparency,” the Earl gasped. “MI-6 can keep its dirty secrets.”

“Just so long as you can keep yours. That’s entirely fair. Now, I do have to take this call.”

“I’ll show myself out,” the Earl rose again, stiffly. Smoothing his expensive suit, he studied Mycroft, as if seeing him for the first time.

And perhaps he was; perhaps this was the first time he saw Mycroft as the slender man with the reptilian black eyes, cool, clinical brain and the heart of stone. For until this very moment, he had still viewed Mycroft as the chunky, friendless, prepubescent boy with a sentimental attachment to his baby brother.

Mycroft regally inclined his head, as the man he was, the man he strove to be.

He was the king without a crown, the god without mercy, the destroyer and creator of destinies and the true Lord Protector of the Realm.

The minute the Earl staggered out, Mycroft rang Lady Smallwood on a secure line. “I need you to pass a word on the Earl of Rufton.”

He silently thanked Sherlock for making that dig about Lady Smallwood getting involved with that dolt. He wasn’t the brightest light on the Christmas tree, but he came from an old family and for some idiotic reason, he still wielded a great deal of influence in Parliament.

He was also an insatiable gossip. How Elizabeth was tolerating him was beyond Mycroft’s comprehension, but then, Lizzie always had appalling taste in men.

“Tell him that Cullen-Culpepper’s Bill of Transparency is dead,” Mycroft instructed his first and only love as icily as he would give Anthea an order. He then wrapped a lie around the truth like a bit of bacon wrapped around a chicken breast, making the information just that much juicier. “He wasn’t able to generate the votes, so he’s withdrawing to avoid embarrassment.”
“But if that leaks,” Lady Smallwood was no fool. “Won’t he look more foolish? Heathcliff?”

“Will he?” Mycroft feigned innocence. “Shame.”

He rang off with satisfaction.

The first domino was set up.

The others would line themselves up but Mycroft would have the pleasure of tipping the first domino over and watching them all fall.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone - I was a touch under the weather last week, so I decided to be lazy and not post. Hope this chapter was worth the wait!

Thank you again for all your comments, kudos, bookmarks and rec's. :^)

Have a fantastic week everyone!
Chapter Summary

J'adoube

A player says "j'adoube" as the international signal that he or she intends to adjust the position of a piece on the board without being subject to the touched piece rule. The local language equivalent, e.g. "I am adjusting" is generally acceptable.

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warning for talk about suicide.
Also... massive feels.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

3 June 2016
En route to John and Mary Watson’s residence
Friday afternoon
12:25 PM

The minute John sank into the vinyl cab seat, all his energy and adrenaline seeped away, as if his bones and muscles had been replaced by used rubber bands, all stretched out of shape.

The exceptions were his neck and shoulders; they were just as stiff and rigid as they’d been when he first got off the train two days ago, after returning from France. His left shoulder ached more than the right, of course. The old gunshot scar wasn’t screaming bloody murder quite yet, but getting uncomfortably close.

Wearily, he forced himself to stretch out his left fingers and rotate his wrist. He’d have to put the soft brace on when he got home. He probably was going to pay dearly for taking it off after leaving Sally’s bedsit, but he had wanted no hindrances. As he massaged his fingers one by one, he was pleased to note that his poor hand was holding up rather well.

“Don’t forget to put heat on it,” Sherlock rumbled, sounding a thousand miles away instead of right next to him.

“Hm, oh, yeah, good idea,” John stifled a yawn, exhaustion making itself comfortable in John’s rubbery body. “I’ll wrap it in a warm, damp flannel while I have a nice, long soak.” Now John didn’t bother to stop yawning. He couldn’t even if he had tried. “Sorry.”

“I know the difference between a bored yawn and a tired yawn.”

“Right, right,” John mumbled, letting his head loll back into the seat.

“You took your medication this morning?”
“Sorry?”

“You antibiotics, because of your spleen, or lack thereof.”

“Oh. Shit,” John fumbled in his coat pocket and pulled out a pill bottle. It took him two tries to get the lid off, as John swore under his breath, cursing child-safe bottle lids. However, Sherlock did not offer or assist in opening the lid and for that John was grateful.

He shook out a tablet and dry-swallowed it with a grimace.

“You should have some toast when you get home. Or else you are going to have a stomachache. Then you should sleep before having a bath. Else you might doze off and drown in the tub and who will help me with my work then?”

John chortled, “Did we do a body swap? Are you actually nagging me to take care of myself?”

“Rest assured my dear John, my motives are purely selfish. I neither have the time nor inclination to locate and train a new doctor in my methods.”

John snorted, “Dickhead. But you’re right, of course. I can barely keep my eyes open.” He rolled his head over, wincing as his stiff neck protested.

Sherlock looked, well, like Sherlock, sitting back against the seat, staring out the window, fingers steepled and his brows furrowed. London may not have even existed for all he cared, so lost in thought he was.

“Sherlock?”

“Hm?”

“Violet?”

“Hmmm.”

“She’s… she’s not alone, is she?”

Sherlock seemed to stir himself. ”No. Of course not,” he said crisply, sitting up, smoothing his jacket down, despite the fact he had been wearing it for the past two days. A hand down the lapels was not going rub away the large wrinkles now. “I wouldn’t abandon her. I also don’t trust her to stay put either.”

John grinned. “So, what poor soul is tasked with keeping her company?”

“There is only one person wily enough not to get tangled in her manipulations and clever enough to best her at her mind games, as well as possessing a skill set that could evade Mycroft and even outwit me, if the opportunity presented itself. Violet is… in good company.”

**

3 June 2016
Havana, Cuba
7:25 PM

“… but, of course, I knew what he liked.”

Violet stared at Irene Adler incredulously as she set a neat little cup in front of her, filled with the
steaming Cuban coffee she had gotten addicted to. “And he fell for it?”

“Hook,” Irene sashayed around Doña Nalda’s big, scrubbed table, her filmy green dressing gown floating behind her. “Line,” she pulled out the chair in front of Violet. “And sinker. Amazing the results one can get from a ball-gag and a good riding crop.”

As Irene settled herself on the rickety old wooden chair as if it were a golden throne, Violet stared at her, open-mouthed. Realizing she looked like an idiot, she decided to go for broke and sound like an idiot as well. “Wow.”

“Oh, I made a pretty penny off that moron; had fun doing it too,” Irene flipped her onyx hair over her narrow shoulders before reaching for her own cup of coffee. “But all good things come to an end, as they say.”

“So they say,” Violet arched an eyebrow, which was not nearly as dramatic as it used to be when her brows were chestnut or chocolate-brown. They were now the same color as a deer’s pelt, the same color as the roots of her hair as she continued to grow out her dyed chocolaty tresses. “You must be bored out of your skull.”

“Retirement suits me.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Violet called her bluff. “If it did, you wouldn’t be here.”

“And neither would you,” Irene’s sea glass green eyes danced.

Irene had appeared at the paladar’s doorstep shortly after Sherlock had departed for England. She brought with her three large Louis Vuitton suitcases, a matching carry-on bag and four enormous cardboard boxes filled with American toiletries and luxuries for Doña Nalda. The plump landlady nearly burst into joyful tears when she opened one box to find nothing but Charmin Extra Soft toilet paper. Proper bog roll was becoming an issue with the American tourists already starting to trickle in and going into shock finding none in public toilets.

“I know what she likes,” Irene winked at Violet as she helped herself to a tot of rum, as if she had always lived there instead of just arriving out of the blue.

Violet quickly learned that The Woman was just as observant as Sherlock, maybe even just a little bit more.

Irene, after all, dared to deduce the heart. Her nails were still perfectly filed and buffed but not painted. Tracing the rim of her cup with her perfectly filed, unpolished nail, Irene challenged her with the same seductive smile she gave Sherlock the first day she met him clad in naught but her battle dress, “Oh…You’re going to find a way back into the Bureau.” She pointed at Violet, as a dainty silver bracelet slipped down her wrist. She blew on her coffee. “Aren’t these tiny cups just darling? But what’s inside them can knock a man flat on his arse if he’s not careful.” She took a sip, eying Violet over the rim. “Even if the only thing you can move is that eyebrow of yours that you love to crook up like an evil queen, you’ll find a way to work.” Irene pouted mightily, her lower lip sticking out in exaggeration, “Then you’ll have to chase me because I’m still a bit of a naughty girl.”

Thinking of Mary, Violet replied dryly, “I have bigger fish to fry than you.”

“I don’t know if I should be pleased or offended,” Irene purred. Leaning forward, smiling wickedly now, she asked, “But enough about me. Tell me, what do you like?”
“Peace and quiet.”

“Oh, I doubt that. I imagine you to be quite… vocal. Pity you’re so stubbornly heterosexual.”

“It’s not stubbornness. It’s biology.”

“What if I blindfolded you? What if you didn’t know whose hand was under your skirt?”

“Oh my God,” Violet half-laughed half-groaned. “Is this how you wore Sherlock down? Kept talking until he gave in so you would shut up?”

“Oh, so he admitted it to you,” Irene sat up, sea glass eyes shining with interest. “So much for not kissing and telling, but since he did,” she leaned forward. “Want to compare notes?”

“Oh, God. NO,” Violet struggled to her feet. She hadn’t been able to sleep, so she had stumbled downstairs to the kitchen to make coffee and watch the sun rise.

“Oh, do sit down,” Irene flapped her hand at her, pretending not to notice Violet was having trouble standing up. “No reason to get your knickers in a bind. In a way, we’re sisters, you and I, having shared the same man and all.”

“I’m out of here,” Violet ignored Irene’s request to sit. She also valiantly ignored the pins-and-needles sensation running up and down her left leg.

“Don’t you think it’s fascinating from a psychological standpoint that the only women Sherlock had allowed any sort of emotional connection to, he has also slept with?” Irene placed her tiny coffee cup in its tiny saucer, “You, me, and the former Miss Hooper, now Dr. Lestrade?”

Violet plopped back down. “Well… now that you mention it… wait, but he’s close to Mrs. Hudson too but he’s never…”

Irene started humming *Here’s to you Mrs. Robinson.*

“Oh ick,” Violet made of moue of distaste. “Stop. His relationship with Mrs. Hudson is more like a son-mother thing, completely different from his relationships with you, me and Molly.” She clumsily tucked a piebald curl behind her ear. “I’m surprised he told you about Molly.”

“Mmmm… not so much that he told me, more like I deduced it, then confronted him, plus… well, the rumours. About her boy’s parentage,” Irene shook her head, somber now. “I do not envy that child. To be the son of a genius, it is a burden I would not wish upon my worst enemy.”

“Sounds personal,” Violet tilted her head.

“Mmm, yes, but that’s another story for another time. Something for you to look forward to,” Irene finished her coffee. She stood up and circled the table again, this time standing in front of Violet, “An incentive for you to stick around a bit longer, maybe?” She smoothed a strand of Violet’s hair back then surprisingly cupped her cheek. “By the way, I moved your gun to my bedroom. Just for a little while.”

Violet startled, nearly dropping her tiny coffee cup.

Yes, she had kept her gun under her pillow. Always had, even before being burned by the FBI.

She had started sleeping with it after she’d had to draw it on a shitty unfaithful boyfriend. He thought he’d cross the line from verbal and emotional abuse to physical.
He thought wrong.

However, she also had not been having healthy thoughts about her gun. Types of thoughts John Watson would be painfully familiar with because they were the exact same ones he had after his medical discharge from the army… and after he thought Sherlock had died.

Much like John, she didn’t want to die. Of that much she was certain. She just didn’t want to live like this either. Broken. Bitter.

But that was the path stretching ahead of her, yawning ahead, a black hole of promised misery and sickening uncertainty. When she had given up on sleep, instead of making coffee, she sat in the kitchen, her bare feet pressed into the cool stone floor, sitting as still as she could without moving. Then she ran her hands up and down her throat, imagining a plastic tube down it, forcing air in and out when her lungs gave out and could no longer do their job…

Before she knew it, Irene had appeared next to her, chattering about how she loved to do yoga in the morning, how it had made her feel so alive…. Then she started yammering about her former career as a dominatrix and Violet became fascinated by her tales. Eventually, she had forgotten why she had tossed and turned all night in the first place.

Belatedly, Violet realized Irene had done that on purpose, to get her mind off all the things plaguing her, nagging her, keeping her awake night after night, the constant fear of something is going to go wrong…

Meanwhile, Irene still cheerfully yammered on, “I’d feel better holding on to it while you’re in this dark place. I like you. I’d rather have you hang around for a bit longer.” She then started fussing with Violet’s curls. “We have got to do something with this though. This looks like Ombre Gone Wrong. In fact, I think I saw this exact shade and hue on one of those Pinterest Fail websites.”

Violet batted her hand away. “Stop, I’m growing it out. And I’m not suicidal.”

“Well, I would be, if my hair looked like this.”

“I think I hate you.”

“But you’ll end up loving me,” Irene sang. “They always do.”

**

3 June 2016
En route to John and Mary Watson’s residence
Friday afternoon
12:29 PM

“Good company?” John sounded sceptical as he lifted his silvery brows.

“Interesting company,” Sherlock amended himself. “Intelligent company, one who will be able to help Violet navigate the unfamiliar and tumultuous landscape she has found herself in. Knowledgeable enough to recognize depression but wise enough to know when to stay close and when to back off,” he closed his eyes. “The only one I could trust to be Violet’s companion in my absence.”

“I wish you didn’t have to leave her behind.”

“So do I, but until the UK and America recognize our marriage as legal as well as this nonsense
about Violet betraying her own country is cleared up, it’s not safe. Not to mention, if Peters is back in London, I am extremely glad Violet stayed behind.” Suddenly Sherlock’s face became pinched with worry as his eyes opened again. “You must exercise extreme caution.”

“Look at you, turning into a mother hen,” John chuckled. “Start calling you Mrs. Hudson.”

“John.”

John slowly rolled his head over, another quip on his lips. It died the minute he saw Sherlock’s ashen face, “Sorry, I’m sorry,” he spluttered hastily then in a serious tone, added: “I’m listening.”

“Promise me.”

“I will. I do, I promise,” John reached out with his fingertips, grazing the back of Sherlock’s hand. “But you have to do the same. No rooftop chases or dynamic heroics.”

Sherlock nodded but his face didn’t relax. “I need to think. I need to… deduce where Peters is hiding in London. He is not in Professor Moriarty’s good graces. You and Violet both survived, plus Violet shot him. Now Sally escaped with her life. Peters isn’t just hiding from us or the Met. He’s hiding from La Ligue des Roux too.”

“Does it make me a terrible person to hope that Moriarty’s people take him out before we can catch him?” John growled as the cab came to a stop in front of his terrace house.

“Yes. But that’s why I like you.”

John barked a laugh of surprise. Smiling fondly at Sherlock, he asked, “Come inside. Kip out on the sofa. You’re dead on your feet and besides… we haven’t…”

... kissed...

“… talked properly since we’ve both returned.”

Sherlock shook his head, but a loving smile warmed his thin, hawkish face, having deduced what John was thinking. “Later, not when we’re both this tired. Plus, I really do need to think.”

“Maybe take a shower?” John’s large nose crinkled, making him look like a bemused Labrador. They had been wearing the same clothes now for the past two days. They hadn’t even cleaned their teeth properly, much less taken a shower. “Or you could multi-task and think in the bath?”

“Oh… yes. That would be good.” Sherlock wrinkled his own aquiline nose after a deep inhale. “Dear God, I think I’ll need to burn this shirt. I’ll come by later tonight to pick up Gladstone. I’ll bring dinner too, to appease Mary since she is probably still very cross with me.”

“Yeah, good deduction,” John grimaced. “We need to talk about how you handled Susan when you scared the shit out of her to get the truth but… later. Go home.”

John slid out of the cab and shut the door as he heard Sherlock rattle off the address to Baker Street. As the cab pulled away, he dimly realized that he never paid for his half of the ride. *I’ll be buggered, he thought as a goofy smile creased his face. Sherlock actually paid for once.*

John fumbled with the key to the front door. His neighbors probably thought he was drunk, but he didn’t care.

All he wanted was a spot of tea, a bite to eat and to sleep for the next millennia.
But first… “To battle,” John said under his breath as he pushed the door open.

The house felt empty but of course it wasn’t. The two hounds, the sleek former police dog and the pudgy, ugly ex-bait dog, snored on the sofa. John sighed, remembering how both he and Mary had declared no canines would be allowed on the furniture.

“And hello boys,” he cooed as he shut the door behind him. Sweetie rolled off the sofa, plopped to the floor and made a galumphing beeline to John. Gladstone, however, leapt daintily down and warily loped to John, his black nose quivering. The Alsatian then started to pace when he realized Sherlock was not with him.

“It’s OK, Sherlock will be back soon,” John scratched Gladstone’s pointed ears.

A thump upstairs startled him. John all but leapt to his feet. “Mary?”

Then he looked down at the dogs. Sweetie continued to nose his calf, asking to be petted. Gladstone sat on his haunches, looking as mellow as a murderous Alsatian could be.

If there was an intruder in the house, Sweetie would be hiding and Gladstone would have his hackles up and snarling.

“Right,” he mumbled, taking off his black motorcycle jacket for what felt like the first time in days. He winced as the sleeve caught on his sore wrist. He was going to pay for taking the soft brace off for sure.

He ignored the twanging. “Come on, boys,” he patted his thighs, encouraging the dogs to follow him upstairs.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he heard dresser drawers opening and closing.

Peeking around the doorway, he watched Susan trot back and forth in her room, shoving clothes into a hold-all Mary must have gotten her. On the floor, a gym bag was full to nearly bursting at the seams.

“Susan?” John leaned against the door jamb as his stomach faintly started to protest the medication he had dry-swallowed. He steadfastly ignored it as he called Susan’s name again.

The second time he called to her, Susan jumped but didn’t turn around. “M-M-Mary got called in to the hospital. Short a nurse they were, they really needed her to cover a shift. I told her to go…I-I-I said I had plans to meet Anna at the cinema, but I thought it would just be easier…”

“Easier? For what, I don’t understand,” John lied in an attempt to calm her.

Still not turning around, Susan wiped her face and whispered, “Look, it’s been aces that you and Mary let me crash here, but I’d rather not wait around to be chucked out to the street or shipped to a kiddie gaol or something.”

“Why would we send you anywhere?”

Now Susan turned around, her face blotchy and her eyes bloodshot. She had probably been crying since Mary left for work. “Me. My stupid mobile and my mother’s stupid murderous boyfriend, that’s why. I wouldn’t want me to stick around either. I wouldn’t want to live with someone who helped a bloody criminal.”

“Susan, Jimsie hasn’t been caught yet. I’d rather not have you on the streets with that maniac loose,”
John frowned, his aching wrist and upset stomach forgotten.

“I wouldn’t be on the streets for long, would I? No, I’ll be in gaol instead,” her voice wobbled.

“The police know you’re not an accomplice. Sherlock and I already gave a statement that you had no knowledge about those apps and phone calls, that they were hidden in subfolders. I didn’t even know you could hide apps. I just use my mobile to make phone calls, send texts, and check my email and blog and to play *Angry Birds* once in a while.”

“Yeah, which makes me stupid, which is probably worse than helping a criminal; at least it probably is to Mr. Holmes anyway.”

John wisely held his tongue, but he moved aside so the dogs could enter the room. Sweetie immediately started whining and wagging what’s left of his tail. Gladstone started circling the room, looking for the threat that was making Susan cry.

As Susan knelt to pet the whimpering Sweetie, John crossed the short distance from the door to Susan’s bed and sat down. He felt the springs give underneath him and made a mental note to himself about getting a better box spring for this old bed. “So you were going to do a bunk without even saying good-bye?” John asked lightly.

Susan shrugged, “I was going to leave a letter for Mary.”

“And where were you going to go?”

“My mum’s,” Susan flipped her blonde plait over her shoulder.

“Your mother is very ill.”

“I know. Now that Jimsie’s gone, I can go home and take care of her.”

“Sweetie,” John started but when the bulldog lifted his head, John sighed, “Not you.”

Susan, despite herself, giggled.

“Susie,” John used Mary’s pet name for her. “Your mother needs to be in hospital. She will probably need to stay in hospital permanently. Her kidneys, well, they’re kaput.”

“I know. That’s why she does the dialysis. It flushes all the crap out of her.”

“Susie, dialysis doesn’t work forever. It only buys time,” John found himself using his Bedside Manner Voice. The one he always used when he had to deliver awful news.

“Oh,” Susan swallowed. “Well, then she… she can get a transplant, right? She can have one of my kidneys. Mine work just fine, and you only need one, right?”

“That is true, but you’re only fourteen. The doctors won’t let you donate,” John fibbed, feeling a tiny smidgeon of guilt. There really wasn’t a legal age a living kidney donor had to be, but typically only people over the age of eighteen were considered.

More importantly though, Mary had told him how poorly Marion Dobney really was doing. She needed more than a kidney. She needed the trifecta of organ replacement: kidney, liver and pancreas. Even if she was a viable candidate for a multi-organ transplant (and she wasn’t), there was no guarantee her body would accept the organs.

The poor woman probably wouldn’t see Christmas. John didn’t want to give the girl false hope.
“Well, that’s OK,” Susan replied briskly after pondering what John had said. “They’ll let me donate when I’m older, right? When I’m eighteen or something, yeah? You said the dialysis will buy Mumsie time…” she trailed off when she saw John’s face. “The dialysis isn’t going to give Mumsie that much time, is it?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Oh,” Susan’s voice became tiny and her already red, swollen eyes grew wet and shiny again. “Well, I guess, I can stay with Anna if it’s OK with her mum. Or I can ring one of the girls back in my old neighborhood. Couch-surf until I’m old enough to get a proper job.”

“How are you going to get a proper job without doing your exams?” John gently prodded her. When Susan folded her lips tight and started blinking her eyes rapidly, he told her, “Susie, we’re not going to throw you out. You can stay for as long as you need.”

“Are you sure, ‘cause, I thought I was just company for Mary. Since you were traveling and she was sad because… because…” her lip wobbled. She scrubbed a traitorous tear that had leaked out without her permission. “This house is too small for three people anyway. I can go. It’s OK.”

“It’s not OK,” John informed her, kindly but firmly. “Look, I know you and I don’t know each other as well as you and Mary do. But if you think Mary is sad now, she would be devastated if you up and left.” John leaned forward when Susan mumbled something more towards Sweetie than John. “Sorry, didn’t catch that.”

“I know Mary wants me to stay, but…” Susan looked at her lap. “I don’t know if you want me.” Quickly, she added. “To stay, I don’t know if you want me to stay.”

“Of course I do. I want a chance to get to know you better beyond just the Facebook messages and Skype chats we shared when I was traveling for work. Besides, I’d worry, if you left.”

Susan lifted her sea-foam green eyes up to John’s. “You would?”

“’Course I would.”

“But you just said you don’t know me, so why would you…”

She trailed off, but John heard the unasked question… why would you care about me?

“Maybe I don’t know every secret of your soul, but I think you and I have a bit more in common than you realize.”

“Like what?”

“Well, we both like dogs.” When Susan giggled and gave Sweetie a squeeze, John continued, “We’d both like to strangle Sherlock from time to time.”

Susan rolled her eyes and nodded in agreement. “He can be such a bell-end.”

John didn’t admonish her for language. Instead he said, “My father ran out on me.”

Susan blinked. “Why?”

“He was a gambler. He owed loads of people a lot of money. He skipped town, bailed on my mother, my sister and myself. I was twelve.”

Susan gave Sweetie one last pat on the head then stood up. She gave a waiting Gladstone a good
scratch on the ear before going to sit next to John. “That’s even worse than my dad. My dad bailed when I was just a baby. I don’t even know what he looks like. Your dad like got to know you and still decided to run away.”

“He was a shit,” John amiably agreed. Odd, how his hatred for his father had mostly faded. Only a residual sadness and a barely-registered pain remained. Instead of the raw, gaping wound it had been at first, it was now very much like the scar on his shoulder. Forgotten for the most part, except for an occasional dull, throbbing ache that was more annoying than anything else. Ugly to look at, but fortunately, he didn’t have to see it that often.

“And,” he played his ace, “My mother was terminally ill as well. Cancer. It was difficult.”

“Did she die?” Susan whispered. When John nodded, she swallowed and fiddled with the garish rings on her fingers. She sucked in a deep breath, gathering her courage. “I want to stay. But, you see, errr… well, I know that you and Mary have been… um, I mean, I try not to listen but when Mary is yelling at you on the mobile…”

John swallowed a sigh. “It’s true. Mary and I are going through a difficult time.”

“I know Mary wants to work things out. But if you and Mary do split up…”

“Then you’ll have two places to stay, instead of just here,” John said firmly.

Susan swallowed and nodded, still twisting the cheap rings on her fingers, costume jewelry only a teenager would like. “My mum’s not going to get better, is she?” she sniffled, finally saying it out loud, finally admitting it to herself.

“I’m sorry,” John put a comforting hand her thin shoulder. “But no. She’s not.”

Susan burst into tears, burying her face in her hands. Feeling a lump forming in his own throat, he drew her towards him. “I know, I know,” he murmured as he ran his hand down her plaited hair and patted her back as she ugly-cried into nice green-and-blue plaid shirt Mary had gotten him for his last birthday. *Never mind, it’s already filthy after two days of wear and I never liked it in the first place,* he told himself as Susan sobbed, getting tears and snot on the front of his button-down.

He didn’t tell her it was going to be alright or any other stupid platitudes. When her tears started to sputter out, he told her, “It’s not OK, but it is what it is. And we’ll be here for you, Susan. No matter what happens to Mary and me, we’re going to look after you. OK?”

“OK…” she finally said tremulously. She sat up and wiped her eyes with the cuff of her jumper.

“Dr. Watson?”

“You can call me John.”

She gave him a timid smile. “You smell kind of bad.”

“Oh. Yeah… I’ve haven’t had a chance to change or shower. Tell you what. I’ll go wash up. You go down to the loo downstairs and wash your face. Then pick out something on the telly for us to watch.”

“Like what?”

“Something stupid, something funny.” He stood up and smoothed a strand of hair off her damp face, “Something to take our minds off of these past few crap days, yeah?”
So instead of a nice long soak in the bath, he scrubbed himself down quickly in a boiling hot shower. He changed into an old British Army T-shirt and respectable track suit bottoms and headed downstairs. He dropped two Alka-seltzers into a tumbler of water to settle his grumbling stomach instead of having tea and sat down next to Susan to see what insipid film she had chosen, ready to just be done with the day.

“I made popcorn,” she shyly pointed at the opened bag of microwave popcorn on the coffee table next to two cans of fizzy drink that teenagers loved, but which made John’s upset stomach clench up even more as he became aware of the scent of slightly burnt popcorn. “And I found this old American film that’s supposed to be funny…”

“Um,” John looked at the telly and saw Austin Powers’ infamous yellowed toothy grin plastered on the screen. “Yeah, it’s not that great,” John muttered as he searched for the remote control. He really wasn’t in the mood to see every British stereotype hyperbolized for cheap laughs plus he vaguely remembered it being a bit dirty. Not that Susan was a little girl, but she would probably feel awkward watching a film full of dick jokes with him.

John knew he definitely would feel awkward watching a film full of dick jokes with Susan.

“Let’s see what else is on,” John quickly changed the channel before anything really raunchy was said or shown.

As they channel-surfed, they sat companionably side-by-side on the sofa. The dogs joined them by their feet, Sweetie by Susan and Gladstone by John. Struggling to stay awake, John glanced at Susan as she munched popcorn, picking out the burnt bits and eating the good ones.

He felt a shiver of protectiveness shoot down his spine when he realized how young and vulnerable she really was. Despite her awful upbringing plus her brief stint on the streets, there was still a sheen of innocence to her, like she really didn’t know how bad bad could be.

If Crusher hadn’t found her and brought her to Sherlock, the streets would have chewed Susan up and spat her back up.

That’s not happening again, not on my watch, John vowed. She wasn’t going to be homeless, or shunted off to some youth crisis centre or foisted onto an indifferent, or worse, an abusive foster family. She was staying here. She was going to stay put, go to school, make friends, play with the dog and burn microwave popcorn.

Still… he couldn’t help imagining another blonde-haired girl, a different girl, a much younger girl, a toddler, his toddler, eighteen months old now.

He hoped and prayed that his own little girl was being cared for and loved as much as Susan was by Mary. He also hoped he’d have a chance to be a real father figure to Susan, so he could show her that not all men are shits who leave their children or psychos who carve people up and cut off their ears just because they knew Sherlock Holmes.

He also miserably realized that he could not let Mary go to prison. Not now.

Susan was already losing one mother. She couldn’t lose another one.

Shit... John felt the pressure inside his skull starting to expand as one more bleeding problem landed on his shoulders.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow…?
Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween everyone!

:^D
Building a Bridge

Chapter Summary

Building a Bridge

Making a path for a king in the endgame by providing protective cover against checks from line pieces.

OR

Making a path for a king... or to a king???? :^)

Chapter Notes

No trick, here's another chapter for a treat :^)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty-seven: Building a Bridge

17 June 2016
John and Mary Watson’s residence
London, England
5:17 PM

The fight started the same as a blizzard does. Like snowflakes, the small insults floated lightly down, nothing significant at first. The pettish comments were like the smallest pinpricks of cold on bare skin, easy to brush off and forget about them.

Only the invectives and snipes didn’t stop. They swirled around, flurried down and accumulated.

The cold front that had been building since That Night at Leicester Gardens broke one muggy summer evening. John and Mary found themselves in their bedroom, having a long overdue row. Everything that had been lurking beneath their cool, calm surface finally burst forth. Soon they were shouting at each other. Mary still clutched the laundry basket even though she had long ceased gathering dirty socks. John gripped the laptop he had pretended he had needed when he initially went upstairs to get away from Mary’s pecking, hoping to avoid a row.

His hopes had been in vain.

Earlier that morning, Jimsie Browner, the daft nincompoop, had been arrested at Heathrow with the worst fake passport ever created. Maybe not everyone knew that American passports had a blue cover but even a moron knew that a UK passport cover was brown.

Lestrade had quipped that maybe whoever issued the fake passport for Browner had hated him and wanted him to get caught. Sherlock had merely hummed and drifted away, his brows knitted so tightly together it looked like he had a great bushy uni-brow.
Lestrade had naturally made the assumption that Sherlock was already losing interest in the case. It 
was a fair assumption. The case was solved, the villains were caught and his murdered friends from 
the Homeless Network, Raz, Sarah Cushing, Michael Paganini, Gus Aldridge, and Alec Fairbairn 
had been avenged. The work was complete, the case was done.

But it was still an assumption.

As Sherlock slunk away, Lestrade had called after him, reminding him that he needed to question 
Sherlock, to document how he had made his deductive leap from the Earl’s offhand comment about 
boxing John’s ears to determining that Jimsie Browner had been the Cardboard Box Murderer (as the 
tabs had gleefully just named him.)

Sherlock had whirled around, looking so ferocious, even John took a step back, and John was used 
to Sherlock’s mercurial mood swings. “Sherlock…” John had tried as usual to intervene.

“I will give a statement when the case is concluded. It is not solved.”

“It’s not… Sherlock!” Lestrade had spluttered. “We caught the guy. You bloody solved two 
unrelated cases at once. I need your statement.”

“Jimsie Browner was not working alone, and neither was Holy Peters when he abducted Donovan. 
They are merely puppets, idiot Punch and Judy dolls. I need to prove who the puppet master really 
is.”

Lestrade had given John a nervous glance then all but ran to corral Sherlock, with John and Sergeant 
MacDonald in tow. “Sherlock,” Lestrade hissed at his friend and colleague. “We’ve been over this. 
In fact, I got another nasty phone call from your brother about this. You need to leave the Earl alone. 
His involvement is being handled by MI-5.”

MI-6, John had mentally corrected Lestrade.

“You did a good thing, you did a great thing, two great things in fact,” Lestrade raced on. “You 
saved Sally from that berk Peters who nearly killed John.” Sherlock’s eyes had darted away from 
Lestrade, flicked to John then back to Lestrade, but only John had noticed this tiny sign of distress 
from Sherlock. Meanwhile Alex maintained her usual stony silence while Lestrade prattled on: “And 
you saved that kid from her shit of a kinda-sorta stepfather. If he thought she had found the crap he 
had hidden on her mobile, he probably would have killed her too.”

Remembering Sarah “Crusher” Cushing’s mutilated corpse back at Bart’s made John’s stomach hurt. 
The very idea of Browner getting his hands on Susan and…. John pushed the gory notion from his 
mind straight away. “Sherlock, he’s right. Let your brother do what he’s good at. You carry on with 
what you’re good at. We’ve got Browner in custody, yeah, but he hasn’t cracked yet. See if you can 
go interview him and find out why Browner did all those sick things?”

Sherlock had snarled, “I know why. It was all to prove a point.”

“What point?”

Alexis “Call Me Alex” MacDonald had answered, “No one is safe. No one is untouchable.”

“Precisely,” and with that pronouncement, Sherlock had stalked out of New Scotland Yard, leaving 
John to answer any questions and handle the paperwork… as usual.

When John texted Mary to let her know he wasn’t going to be home in time for lunch, he got the 
worst text a husband could get from his wife:
“Shit…” John had sighed in the canteen then resumed getting coffees for himself and Lestrade so they could carry on with their work.

Mary, very very surprisingly, had pitched a massive fit when John told her he was going to New Scotland Yard that morning. Her unhappy and disapproving outburst had been a borderline temper tantrum, which was completely out of character for her. Shocked by her white-hot anger, John futilely explained he was receiving multiple texts all at once, starting with Lestrade, then Sherlock, then Lestrade’s colleague DI Montgomery, the DI who helped give Sherlock a leg-up on the case, then Alex naturally, and last but not least, MacPherson the hipster forensics tech who took Phillip Anderson’s place after he died.

All the texts were a variation of the same theme: Browner captured, come to the Yard, now.

“Mary, my mobile is blowing up,” John had held up the mobile. “I have to go.”

“Fine,” she finally had snapped, turning her back on him to wash the dishes.

Trying to dismiss her pique, John had stormed downstairs to ring a cab. Still, her rage irked him. Mary rarely objected to John working with Sherlock. Casework meant money in their pockets. John still wasn’t practicing medicine, the traffic on the blog hadn’t quite picked up yet again, and Mary’s shifts at St. Bart’s barely covered the bills. Going to New Scotland Yard meant another consulting fee, meaning another cheque that Sherlock would split with John, and unfairly split, as in Sherlock only taking ten percent of the fee and giving the rest of the money to John.

When John tried to protest, he had shrugged languidly and explained, “I was born into privilege, therefore it is my privilege to give you money that I don’t need and you do.”

John, at first, had been mightily offended, not liking that he was being treated as if he were a charity case. But that had been in the very early days, before the rooftop of St. Bart’s, before that night, meeting Moriarty at the swimming pool even. Now, he realized that Sherlock was attempting to be kind.

*Points for effort*, he supposed.

When he returned shortly before suppertime, with a cheque for five hundred quid in his coat pocket for the day’s work at the Yard, he hoped that Mary would have thawed out a little. Especially now since Susan’s maniac stepfather had been arrested, booked, and was now cooling his heels in a tidy little cell, howling for a lawyer.

Plus, the last thing he needed was an assassin pissed off at him.

He found Mary in their bedroom, sorting laundry into darks and lights, getting ready to throw them in the washer later that night. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Mary kept her back to him as she pulled dirty clothes out of the hamper.

“Where’s Susie?”

“With her friend Anna,” Mary dumped her dark blue scrubs and John’s navy blue jumpers into a pile by her side. She then tossed one of his vests and a few of her knickers into the laundry basket to take downstairs to their tiny washer. “She won’t be back until Sunday night. They’re going to the country. Apparently Anna’s grandparents have a proper farm. Anna claims she’s going to teach Susie how to ride a horse,” her voice warmed up a bit.
John couldn’t help but grin at the idea of Big City Girl Susan trying to ride a horse. He also couldn’t help but wonder if Anna was merely good friend or a potential girlfriend. Either way, Anna seemed like a nice kid, shyer than Susan and a bit plumper, but more importantly she had a sweet deposition. The girl also had the very rare gift of being funny without ever being cruel. Susan always had fun with her when they went out and about, and when they weren’t together, they were texting each other nonstop. If Anna didn’t fancy Susan back, John felt confident Anna could break the news to Susan gently without hurting her feelings or damaging their friendship…

… but he did catch Anna making cow’s eyes at Susan a time or two, so….. who knows?

“Well, I hope she has a good time, or at the very least, doesn’t fall off and break her arm. We don’t need two of us in casts or braces,” he looked at his soft brace. He had been taking it off and leaving it off for longer periods of time. He was definitely looking forward to the end of the tedious physiotherapy. But at least it didn’t ache like it had in the beginning.

“That’s true,” Mary murmured, focused on her laundry sorting.

In his braced left hand, he held up the cheque, “Good news, we can take care of your car now.”

Mary’s beloved little car needed all new tyres; the left rear one was practically bald.

“Good, thanks,” Mary stuck her hand up one of John’s socks. When she found a hole in the toes, she stuck her finger through it then wiggled it. Pulling the sock off her hand and binning it with an easy toss across the room, she asked, “Did you have to collect the cheque in person, or was the Met trying to save a stamp by not sending it in the post?”

There was a nasty edge in her voice now that John simply did not like.

“Oh for… it didn’t come directly from the Met. The Met made out a cheque to Sherlock for coming in to help interrogate Jimsie today. Sherlock knew we were short on funds, so he wrote me a personal cheque, paying me out of his personal account and not the business account we set up for the business. Plus, I’m sure he gave me too much. He made a comment about your shoddy tyres, and I can’t remember the last time he saw your car.”

“When he brought Chinese over after you two had brilliantly saved Sally Donovan,” Mary muttered, “Because egg rolls and cashew chicken fixes everything, never mind the fact that he scared Susie out of her wits and put his hands on me, pushing me to the floor.”

“Put his hands on you?” John crumpled the cheque in his fist. “You fucking shot him and you’re whinging about him giving you a little push?”

And with that comment, everything between them exploded.

“Don’t you curse at me,” Mary bolted to her feet, clutching the laundry basket filled with dirty white clothes. She gripped it as if she longed to hurl it at his head. “How dare you be so disrespectful to me, especially since you have no idea why I’m cross with you?”

“You’re always cross with me. Why is today different?”

“We were supposed to meet with the marriage counselor this morning!”

“Oh balls,” John closed his eyes and ran his hand down his face. It had completely slipped his mind. “Look, I’m sorry, really I am. That’s on me. But, Mary, we caught Jimsie Browner. He might have tried to come back and hurt Susan, or worse.”

“I can protect Susan,” Mary reminded him icily. “And here I thought you understood that I was sorry
for what I did to Sherlock! I thought you said that was water under the bridge and yet you bring it up again and again and again.”

“Did you honestly think trust would automatically be rebuilt in a day or two?” John demanded incredulously. “For God’s sake, Mary, other men would have divorced you or turned you in.”

“You’re not like other men. We’re not like other couples!”

“That’s for bloody sure,” John grumbled.

“The whole point of the marriage counseling is to rebuild what had crumbled away. How can we accomplish that when I can’t even trust you to keep one appointment, one,” her cornflower blue eyes blazed. “That’s all I asked for John, just for you to keep your mind open, to come to one bloody appointment. If you hated it, then we wouldn’t go back. That was the deal, John. And you broke your word again.”

“You’re complaining about you not trusting me?” John barked out an astringent laugh.

“You can trust me! You’re not giving me a chance.”

“Not giving you a… You’re free. You should be in prison! What more do you want?”

“To forgive me!” Mary cried out. “To stop holding it over my head, it was a mistake!”

“No,” John pointed a finger at her. “A typo is a mistake. You shot him!”

“He should have gotten out of my way! You both should have left Magnussen alone!”

“No. You should have told me the truth about Magnussen, about the CIA, about all of it.”

“You would have left.”

“You don’t know that! You never gave me a chance!” John kicked the bedpost out of sheer frustration. Mary jumped but didn’t flee. John winced in pain, his big toe smarting. Still, he added, “You assume, you never ask.”

“Oh yeah, because you’re so communicative,” she sneered. “I find out about the worst details about a case in your fucking blog. You never think to tell me. You come home covered with bruises or with broken bones or… sometimes you don’t come home at all,” her voice quavered. She pressed her trembling fingers to her whitened lips. “When Holy Peters snatched you last January, I… I couldn’t breathe. I just sat in whatever chair in whatever room I was led to and waited and tried to take a breath but I couldn’t. The only thing I could do was to wait. And it was hell.” A tear slid down her face and she impatiently wiped it away with a shrug of her shoulder while still holding onto the laundry basket. “Then when you were found, when I saw you, lying in that hospital bed after surgery. Your hand and your wrist, your face so swollen with bruises that I almost didn’t recognize you, that was when I finally realized that the Work, the God Almighty precious and holy Work,” she spat out the word, “Was going to get you killed.”

“You knew the Work was dangerous,” John could hear himself capitalize the word Work. “What Sherlock and I do… we don’t take weird, quirky little cases for fun. Magnussen, everything that’s happened with Violet, the fucking Copper Beaches massacre when the Black bloody Lotus showed up and tried to take us all out, you know. Then there’s fucking Moriarty, that entire psychopathic family and what they’ve done to us, you and me… You know what Sherlock and I do is dangerous. You’ve always known.”
Mary steeled herself. “No. You romanticize what you and Sherlock do in your blog. You make the casework sound thrilling, not deadly. That it’s fun, that it’s a game. You don’t tell me all the details of your cases. You never told me Violet was an American, or that she was an FBI agent. She could have made me, John!”

“But she didn’t.”

“But she could have and you knew about her double life and you didn’t tell me! In fact, you and Sherlock deliberately kept Violet and I apart during our trip to Edinburg when we went on that wild goose chase looking for Moriarty. You didn’t want me to talk to her, to find out her secrets.”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell!” John protested. “And I don’t romanticize the cases for my blog. Sometimes I have to leave out details because of national security. Remember that Big Brother is always watching,” John added acidly.

Mary snorted in disbelief, “The Sussex Vampire case, remember that one? That had nothing to do with national security or Mycroft. You didn’t tell me that the boy, Jack Ferguson tried to kill you, with a poisoned dart though a blowgun? I mean, who does that?”

“You wouldn’t have believed me if I had told you!”

“What about the Sumatra Rat case?”

“I am not talking about the Sumatra Rat, I am never talking about the bloody Sumatra Rat,” John shuddered while pulling a disgusted face.

“Are you ever going to tell me more about The Six Thatchers case? Or what about that psychopath Culverton, the nutter who was killing people in his own hospital, going to tell me about him and what he did to you and Sherlock?” Mary challenged him. When John only replied with a hostile glare, Mary scowled, “Unless I’m actually with you and seeing the events unfold before my own eyes, I have to find out what happened like everyone else. By reading your blog,” she spat out. “I’m your wife. I should rate higher than Sherlock.”

“Oh Christ, now you’re jealous?”

“Of course not! Don’t be stupid,” Mary slammed the laundry basket on top of the chest of drawers. “This has nothing to do with jealousy and everything to do with the fact that you lied to me about forgiving me for shooting Sherlock. In fact, you hold a grudge.” Her pretty cornflower eyes narrowed at him. “And I am weary of you holding that over my head, John. If Sherlock, the one who got shot, can forgive me, why can’t you?”

“Because he doesn’t have to live with you,” John snarled at her. “Because he doesn’t have to second-guess everything you say. Because he doesn’t worry about the next lunatic thing you might do if you have another lapse in judgment.”

Her brows lifted, “Lunatic? You think I’m a lunatic?”

“Well, what sane person solves problems with a gun?”

“Sherlock killed Magnussen.”

“Like I said, what sane person solves problems with a gun?”

“I don’t see you getting rid of yours,” Mary hissed coldly.
“You also don’t see me breaking into an office to murder someone.”

“No, you just broke into his office to implicate him in a crime. God, John, you are such a filthy hypocrite! You’re just as much of a murderer and criminal as I am, as he is. You can just dress your crimes up with a soldier’s uniform and a medical degree. You are no better than me, John Watson. In fact, you’re worse.”

John barked a harsh, humourless laugh. “Oh, this will be rich. How am I worse than you?”

“Because I’m actually trying, John,” Mary pressed her hand to her chest, over her heart. “I’m actually trying to be a good person now. I’m doing everything possible keep this family together, no matter how hard it gets, I still believe in us, in our wedding vows.” Then she snorted, “You? You run. You don’t want to deal with what’s happening with us, you hope things either right themselves on their own or fall apart so you can escape. Well, I will tell you right now, I will never give you a divorce.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Mary…” John stuffed the cheque back into his jeans’ pocket then ran both hands over his face.

“I mean it. Marriage to me is forever, ‘til death do us part,” she crossed her arms tight against her body. “So you need to start being a husband; you need to stop running off with Sherlock in order to avoid our problems.”

“In case you haven’t realized, working cases is how I earn a living,” John frostily reminded her.

“You can make a more substantial living by being a doctor again.”

“I’m not cut out to be a GP,” he reminded her, again. “And with the nerve damage to my arm and hand,” he flexed his left hand as he rubbed his right hand over his scarred left shoulder. “There’s not a single hospital in Great Britain desperate enough to let me into a surgical theater ever again. I can’t even perform a simple single-interrupted suture now, especially if my hand starts shak-”

“Excuses,” Mary harshly cut him off. “You are more than cut out to be a GP. You don’t want to be. It doesn’t satisfy your adrenaline cravings. It’s boring. You’re rather be in Sherlock’s shadow, be his devoted little sidekick than have a life of your own.”

“I am not his sidekick,” John bridled, more insulted at the adjective “little”, not by the noun “sidekick.” He knew he wasn’t the tallest bloke in the world, but dammit, his own wife doesn’t need to rub his short stature in his face. “I am his partner.”

“Oh, please, who are you kidding? John, don’t be an idiot. You’re not his equal. He doesn’t respect you or your opinions. He drags you around like obedient lapdog on a leash and you are more than happy to follow your master, even when the leash is bloody choking you!”

“He is not my master, he’s my best friend and work colleague. Of course I’m going to go with him when we’re on a case.”

“It’s not just cases,” two red splotches appeared on Mary’s cheeks now. She was properly angry now. “You do his bidding no matter what. You didn’t have to go with him to Appledore!”

“I went to Appledore for you, not him,” John gave her a tight, murderous little smile.

Enraged now, she spat out, “I needed you to be there for our daughter! Where were you then?” Before John could answer, she accused him hotly: “If you hadn’t gone off with him that day on a goddamned case, those bastards wouldn’t have taken her!”
The room went deadly silent. John blinked owlishly at Mary. She might as well as slapped him.

“Oh,” he said faintly. Then he furrowed his brow and thinned his lips. “Oh, I see now.”

“John,” Mary held her hands out, realizing a second too late she had finally gone too far.

“No, I understand now. It’s all come out now,” he breathed. “This… all of this… rubbish about keeping our marriage together, it’s not about love or honouring our vows. It’s to punish me for losing her. Losing Maisie,” His tight, murderous little smile returned to his normally open, friendly face. “You want me to miserable.”

“John, plea-”

“You think I don’t already blame myself for losing her?”

Mary actually took a step backwards. “John…”

“She’s just as much my child as she’s yours,” he finished quietly.

His soft voice chilled Mary more than his shouting had. “John, I’m sorr-”

“Don’t bother with the apology,” John shook his head. “I can’t deal with one more lie.”

“John, don’t, please…”

John ignored her pleas. He turned on his heels and stormed into the bathroom. He didn’t even bother to close the door behind him. He just opened the medicine cabinet and grabbed his antibiotics and jammed them into pocket of the coat he hadn’t even taken off yet.

Then he marched out of the bedroom.

His feet pounded down the stairs as he hurried to get away from the ugly truth that had finally been aired. His head buzzed, his stomach knotted, his mouth was utterly dry.

Mary followed him, in tears now. Saying over and over, I didn’t mean it, I didn’t mean it…

He ignored her. He snatched up his umbrella, in case the summer rain shower the meteorologist kept threatening the nation with all day actually came.

“John, where are you going?”

“Out.”

“Will you come back?”

“Dunno,” John scooped up his keys, mobile and wallet.

“Please don’t do this,” Mary grabbed his shoulder, her fingers clawing the plaid fabric of his button-down in a death grip.

“Just, stop, OK,” he peeled her hand off him.

Tears streaked her face, “Please stay.”

“No.”

“John,” her voice wavered again.
“I don’t need you to trap me in a loveless marriage to make me suffer. I’m already in hell.”

John slammed the door in Mary’s face.

Chapter End Notes

For all the Mary-haters out there... YOU'RE WELCOME.

I wish there was a way I could have posted my beta cadogan’s running commentary on this chapter. It made me LOL for real. :^D

Spoiler alert - shit's about to get real in 221B very soon.

Thank you for sticking with this series for so long. XOXOXO
Endgame

Chapter Summary

Endgame

The third and last phase of the game, when there are few pieces left on the board. The endgame follows the middlegame.

~* OR *~

The official start of Part Three...

Chapter Forty-Eight: Endgame

As he stalked down the pavement, the burning tightness in his chest loosened. The farther and farther he got away from the house, that perfect fucking house, the more he felt like he could finally breathe. *I'm going to have a heart attack if things don't change*, he thought as the skies continued to darken, the promised rain finally making an appearance.

He saw the Tube station just as giant droplets started spattering down. Hurrying, he struggled to pull on his black jacket, feeling raindrops slide down behind his ears then down his neck as his hair started to get damp.

There was no need to pop his brolly open as he had just reached the entrance just before the deluge began. As commuters trying to escape the rain swarmed the Tube, he lost his umbrella when he switched trains.

*Just as well*, he thought with an aggrieved sigh, starting to sit down. Then he sprang right back up again, gesturing towards an elderly woman burdened with her shopping and handbag to take his seat.

He felt his mobile vibrate in his jeans pocket. Holding onto the handrail with his left hand, he clumsily fished his mobile out with his right. Mary, as he had assumed.

He sent her to Voice Mail and shoved the mobile back into his back pocket.

He realized he couldn’t ride the Tube indefinitely. He had to decide where he was going, where he was going to spend the night. He hadn’t been exactly sure where he was going when he initially boarded the carriage. He had switched lines out of instinct, no… out of habit. When he looked up at the map, he realized where his subconscious had sent him.

A wave of exhaustion hit him unexpectedly. Selfishly he realized that he… was… *done*.

And all he wanted was to go home.

So he continued his journey until he reached Baker Street Station. As he made his way out, he discovered that cold rain now gushed down from the skies, much to his dismay. But there was nothing he could do but pull his jacket over his head the best he could and make his way down
Baker Street. Despite his best efforts, he was thoroughly drenched by the time he reached 221 Baker Street. His socks squished uncomfortably between his toes. His jeans stuck to his thighs. His hair was plastered to his head.

*Might as well have jumped fully clothed into the Thames,* he groused to himself as he opened that dear and familiar glossy black door.

Heart pounding, he slipped off his soaked brown leather shoes and sopping wet socks. Like a burglar, he crept past Mrs. Hudson’s door, hoping against hope it wouldn’t fling open. He adored Mrs. Hudson, but he didn’t really want to be fussed over or coddled. True, Mrs. Hudson made a nice cuppa and always had a lovely bit of sponge or a tin of rich chocolate biscuits to go with it. But she would always want to talk, and he didn’t want to talk about it, about Mary, or about any of it… he just wanted a drink, maybe some Chinese take-away and to sleep alone in his bed for about a hundred years.

The closer and closer he got towards his heart’s desire, he could hear the soft strains of a violin, playing what John thought was maybe a waltz. But it was nothing he recognized. It wasn’t Schubert or Chopin or Strauss… *original composition maybe?*

It was lovely, light and spritely but there was an undercurrent of something sad and unspoken…

John paused, straining to hear more. Abruptly though the song cut off with an ear-piercing shriek of the violin. John winced and continued plodding up the stairs. *Must not have liked how it sounded,* he thought wryly. *Sounded fine to me.*

At the top of the stairs leading to 221B however, he hesitated. Drumming his shortly-clipped fingernails on the banisters, he vacillated. He longed to go inside and dry off then sit in his chair in front of a roaring fire. But he hadn’t called or texted. Sometimes Sherlock didn’t like company… no. Scratch that. Sherlock never liked company, unless it was a client with an interesting case. He hadn’t been joking when he had informed John he could go days without speaking. When they used to live together, whenever Sherlock had suffered one of those fits of ennui, John had felt like an unwelcome interloper. Sherlock later explained to him that being surrounded by so many stupid people at one time drained him. The silence recharged him. “Helps me think,” he had added as a postscript.

“So, I don’t drain you then?” John had joked.

The look Sherlock gave him had unsettled John. It wasn’t his usual piercing, deductive look. It wasn’t his usual scathing *God, you’re such an idiot* look either. His long, pale face became breathtakingly sad, like the face of a child realizing the adult hadn’t understood one word of what he just said.

“No, you don’t,” he had muttered then snatched up his coat and scarf. He had stalked out of the flat without another word, even when John called to him to come back.

Realizing what an idiot he had been, John took the final step up, raised his hand to knock on the door. Then he turned around and started walking back down again, deciding it was still rude to drop by unannounced. Especially after all the times he had lectured Sherlock time and time again about dropping by his house at odd hours without so much as a text.

*I’ll go to Speedy’s,* he decided. *I’ll text him, saying I’m in the neighborhood, can I drop by?*

He looked at his soggy socks and shoes, tucked under his arm. He groaned. *God, if I go back out, I have to put these back on.*
The door at the top of the stairs suddenly swung open, the hinges squeaking. John jumped and dropped his waterlogged socks and shoes.

“For God’s sakes, would you come in?” Sherlock stuck his head out the doorway, his inky black hair a riot of curls as usual. “You’ve been dithering on the stairs for three minutes and twenty-two seconds.” He then stepped out onto the landing, obviously not dressed for company, but not lounging around in one of his ratty old T-shirt and pyjamas bottoms either. His aubergine shirt was tucked neatly into his slim-cut black trousers. But the top two buttons of his shirt were undone and he was barefoot.

*Sherlock’s idea of “causal,”* John thought with a grin. “Sorry.”

Sherlock sniffed and crossed his arms. “You’re also dripping everywhere. Mrs. Hudson just polished the woodwork and hoovered the stairs this morning. She’s going to have a conniption fit if you leave puddles for her to mop up.”

“Right, sorry again,” John scooped up his shoes and socks.

The flat was not warm but not uncomfortably cold either. It was also a complete shambles.

“I see you’ve not been pulling your weight,” John quipped to Gladstone, who was curled up on the sofa, as usual.

When they had lived together, John naturally had been the one in charge of the housekeeping… and the dishes… and the dusting… and the laundry… and taking out the rubbish… and doing the shopping. John wasn’t even sure if Sherlock really knew how to use a broom. He dropped his shoes and socks into a pile next to the door. As he peeled sodden black jacket off, John took a good look around the lounge. He heaved a sigh when he counted all the towers of books and sheaves of paper stacked on almost every imaginable surface. But he was oddly relieved when he saw that wall behind the sofa and noted that the hideous Victorian wallpaper with the bullet-holes and yellow spray-painted smiley face was actually visible for once. However, his eyes widened at the sight of an antique Okinawan sai impaling the loathed deerstalker to the fireplace mantle, next to the skull.

“How do I want to know?” John joked, pretending to ask the dog as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the sai.

Gladstone just licked John’s hand and thumped his tail up and down on the sofa.

However, John did note that while everything was untidy, it really wasn’t filthy, just terribly cluttered. There weren’t any cold mugs of half-drunk tea or plates of stale, uneaten sandwiches lying about or sweets wrappers littering the floor. Thankfully, there weren’t any ashtrays overflowing with ash and cigarette butts either.

There actually weren’t any strange aromas wafting from the kitchen either. No smoke, no sulfur.

“If you’re quite finished mentally criticizing my housekeeping skills, go change out of those wet things before catching your death of cold,” Sherlock tossed John a bath towel before ducking into the kitchen to put the kettle to boil. “You left a jumper and a pair of jeans in your old bedroom, among other things.”

John grinned, knowing full well what clothes he had left behind. He had learned to leave clean clothes at Baker Street after that one miserable case forever dubbed as “The Case of the Sumatra Rat” (which neither John nor Sherlock had any desire to discuss… ever...)

When they had both arrived back at Baker Street after that peculiar case was solved, they were
bruised, bloodied and coated head to toe with offal from possibly every sewer in all of London. John had two black eyes and Sherlock’s nose bled profusely. John had been too tired, too sore and too disgusted to swear at Sherlock, even though he could not remember the last time he had gotten this angry at Sherlock on a case. Not even the Hound of Baskerville had infuriated him as much as the so-called Sumatra Rat.

To his credit, Sherlock had meekly offered to let him shower at his flat and loan him some clothes, but John was shorter Sherlock. While he had lost quite a bit of weight, he still was nowhere near as slim as Sherlock. Nothing Sherlock owned would have fit John, except maybe a dressing gown, and he probably would have still tripped over the hems.

The idea of showering only to put sticky and foul-smelling clothes back on put John right off. Not wanting to wake Mary, he had naively thought he could get a cab home. But alas, no cab would take John back to the house he shared with Mary.

He ended up having to take the Tube back, covered head to toe in grey slime and God-only-knew what other filth from the sewers he and Sherlock had slogged through. There was sludge in crevices and orifices of his body he hadn’t even known could get dirty. When he finally made it home, leaving muddy footprints through the house, he had plodded straight for the bathroom. He showered for over an hour and a half, covering the bottom of their tub with greyish-silt.

After that horrific experience, John always made sure he had several pairs of spare jeans, boxers, jumpers, socks and T-shirts as well as an extra pair of shoes in his old bedroom.

Glad for his own foresight, John hurried up to his old room, clutching the towel. He stripped quickly, leaving his waterlogged clothes in a pile as there was no longer a hamper in the empty room. His flesh broke out in goose-pimples. Shivering, he toweled himself off as fast as he could then he pulled on a white button-up shirt and jeans. He tried to dry his hair, but the towel was already damp. Giving up on that, he pulled on a pair of woolly socks. He sighed and shook his head when he realized his socks didn’t match.

Placing his wet clothes in the middle of the soggy towel, he bundled them all up and brought them down stairs. “Any place I can put these?” he asked just as Sherlock came out of the kitchen, bearing two mugs of tea.

“En suite hamper is fine,” Sherlock informed him, setting the Union Jack mug down on the side table next to John’s chair. “There’s no milk.”

“What else is new,” John grumbled, but it was a good-natured grumble.

Soon, he felt warm and cosy, sitting in his good old overstuffed plaid chair, the ugliest and most comfortable chair he had ever sat in. Sherlock had kindled a small fire to get the chill out of the air. He had even produced a box of Jaffa Cakes, not quite stale yet but getting close.

“I must look like a wreck if you’re putting the dog on for me,” John quipped through a mouthful of the spongy cake-like biscuits.

“You’ve looked better,” Sherlock took a prim sip of tea.

“Sounds like a monsoon out there,” John cocked his ear towards the windows as the rain pattered against the glass panes. “Got indoors just in time.”

“John, it’s not necessary to fill the air with unnecessary banter about the weather,” Sherlock murmured. “I’m not going to press you about Mary. It’s obvious you don’t want to discuss it.”
John opened his mouth then closed it again as Sherlock took another placid sip of tea. Staring at the lees floating in the remaining amber liquid, he gruffly said, “Thanks.”

“Mm.”

Sherlockian for You’re welcome.

“Was that an original composition you were playing? When I was dithering on the steps?”

“Yes,” he said softly as a pinkish flush tinged his cheeks.

“Could you play it again, from the beginning?”

“It’s not complete,” the pink deepened to salmon.

“Can I hear what you have so far…” John started to ask then trailed off when Sherlock shifted in his seat, as if there was something sharp poking him from behind and underneath. “Never mind, you don’t have to,” John said quickly. “Just you’re usually not shy about playing your compositions,” John floundered when Sherlock scowled at him. So quickly he added, “Anyway, it’s lovely, what you have so far. I’d like to hear it when it’s finished.”

“Don’t think it’ll ever be finished,” Sherlock said more to his cup of tea rather to John. “This waltz goes on and on, I think…” then he dropped his voice. “At least, I would like it to, anyway…”

How many times has this happened? John rested his chin on his hand, his elbow on the chair arm. That he has had his heart out on a sleeve but I missed it?

You see, but you do not observe…

John decided to gamble. “Shame you won’t play it again though,” he said lightly. “I think I like it better than the waltz you composed for me and Mary for our wedding day.”

Sherlock’s head snapped up, “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Sherlock’s black brows beetled together as he pierced John with those unnerving blue-green-gold eyes of his. His nostrils flared ever so slightly as he gave John a good hard look, trying to determine if John was telling the truth.

“Oh, knock it off, Sherlock,” John waved his hand as if that would stop Sherlock’s deductions, “You know I’m a shit liar.”

“You’ve gotten better,” Sherlock snipped, but his face as softened. He sprang out of his chair and padded towards his music stand, surrounded by ink-blotted sheet music.

Carefully, as if it were made from crystal and glass instead of wood and wire, he lifted his glossy violin from its case. He swung it up and around resting it lightly on his shoulder, then lowered his chin to the black chin-rest. He took a breath then without another word, touched the bow to the strings.

John leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers over his belly. The song started off slow, alternating between Sherlock teasing the strings with his bow with long slides and plucking the strings with his nimble fingers, the music soft and haunting. The tempo gradually increased, became a true waltz. John found himself bobbing his head along with the tune, smiling a little, remembering
his failed dance lessons with Sherlock as he had tried to teach John to waltz.

It was never the slide of the bow that fascinated John, but the movement of the fingers on the neck of the violin, how Sherlock knew, without looking where his fingers needed to be and how quickly to move them to the proper place. His eerie, omniscient eyes were closed as his entire body moved to the cheerful, almost joyous singing of the strings.

A change of key changed the bright tune to a dark song of longing as the music deepened and swelled to a crescendo. Sherlock’s face was pressed hard against the chin rest now as his fingers flew frantically across the neck. John was surprised the strings didn’t slice the pads of his fingers open.

Sherlock drew the bow over the strings rapidly, his back arched backwards as he played the last frenzied yet jubilant notes, the music at first high and pleading then deep and demanding.

John could clearly see the two of them together. Running through the darkened streets of London, hunting their prey as the thrill of the chase pumped through their veins.

_Catch your breath?_

_Ready when you are._

Sherlock finished with a flourish of his bow that was not quite necessary and unnoticed by John, who still had his eyes closed. “That’s all I have right now,” he mumbled, lowering his bow and violin. A light sheen of perspiration appeared on his face.

John opened his eyes slowly, drinking in the sight of Sherlock, silhouetted in front of the window by the street lamps as the rain continued its assault on the windows. “I do like it better than the waltz you composed for me and Mary,” John murmured lowly.

“I’m pleased that you would say so,” Sherlock gruffly acknowledged John’s praise. He began whipping his bow up and down, as if it were a riding crop. “Another cup of tea?”

John shook his head. “I don’t want to inconvenience you…but I may need to…what I mean is…” John looked down at his hands, watching his wedding band catch the light from the fireplace. He wished there was a volcano nearby so he could toss the cursed thing into it. “I would like to stay here…indefinitely, if you’ll have me,” he finished in a small voice.

Sherlock continued to swish his bow back and forth. “I told you, you can always come home, John.” He looked down at his bow and violin as if he had never seen them before, “Any other requests? Brahms? Or maybe something Gaelic, I learnt a few Highlands tunes, a long time ago. I’d have to visit my Mind Palace to retrieve the memory on how to play them…”

“It’s alright, you don’t have to entertain me and I’m not Scottish. My mother was, but I was born in London,” John chuckled. “I really should be the one apologizing to you…”

…for so many things…

“…for dropping by unannounced,” John pulled his wedding ring off with a decisive yank.

Sherlock’s brows disappeared into his hairline as John lifted himself out of his chair.

Suddenly the short distance between them yawned wide like a chasm. John felt golden warmth steal over him as he languorously ambled towards Sherlock, a sensation he thought he’d never feel ever again...
Desire…

He tucked the ring into his jeans pocket.

As he drew closer and closer towards Sherlock, he thought, *He is truly oblivious the effect he has on people. Yes, he’s vain about his clothes, but his face, his body… he really has no idea. He’d laugh if he realized how very attractive he is…*

John knew his face was an open book to him.

He didn’t care.

“I should have called first, or texted,” John unconsciously wetted his lips, the old nervous tic. Sherlock’s blue-green-gold eyes locked on John’s face and his bushy brows furrowed as he immediately started making deductions. John didn’t flinch, didn’t even bat an eye. He did, however, smile when Sherlock’s eyes widened and his eyebrows flew up in apparent surprise.

Toe to toe with Sherlock now, John breathed in his scent, the lingering odor of tobacco, formaldehyde and that exotic cologne he always wore. John didn’t know what the name of cologne was, but could recite the scent notes without even thinking… *sandalwood, with faint hints of cinnamon and cedar.*

“You didn’t have plans this evening, did you?”

“No,” Sherlock’s voice was barely a breath.

“No?” John kept his voice light and casual.

“No… just working on my music then going to… to bed,” Sherlock flushed as he stumbled over his words.

John reveled in the shift of power, he the sleekly confident one, Sherlock the one out of his element. However, John had no desire to make Sherlock feel uncomfortable or wrong-footed.

He only felt a white-hot yearning to make Sherlock feel completely and totally loved from the top of his shaggy black curls down to the very tips of his bare toes.

He also wanted to make him beg for mercy… thrice.

“Did you… want to go to bed alone then?” John lightly rested his fingers on the tops of Sherlock’s hands.

Sherlock blinked. He had the strangest look on his face, the same frozen, confused one he wore when John asked him to be his best man. Then his face softened, looking human at last. His lips crooked up in a half-smile as he shook his head.

“Good.” John huffed in satisfaction as he gently plucked the bow and violin from Sherlock’s hands. As he placed them in their case, he could practically hear Sherlock mentally screaming *OH MY GOD THAT IS NOT HOW YOU PUT THEM AWAY!*

He fought down a giggle trying to bubble up.

Truth was he couldn’t stop smiling.
Mating Net

Chapter Summary

Mating Net

A position or series of moves that leads to forced mate.

Chapter Notes

So not only am I excited to post this chapter because I've been sitting on this moment for SO LONG (#slowestburnever) but also I am posting this on my BRAND NEW COMPUTER! After having too many frozen screens plus one panicky almost heart-attack inducing night where I almost lost ALL of this story after I had written the final chapter, I realized it was time to upgrade. LOL

After the data transfer was completed, the Geek Squad guy was like "You had a lot of data on your old computer."

Me (blushing and mumbling) "I know..."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty-Nine: Mating Net

He turned around again and put his hands on Sherlock’s bony hips, his thumbs moving up and down. He rose onto his toes as he closed his eyes. He felt Sherlock’s fingertips touching the side of his face, guiding him until their lips met, then their tongues.

John dimly heard Sherlock fumbling with the curtains, the rings jangling noisily on the rod as he drew them closed, shutting out the rest of the world. Then he felt his long, wiry arms wrapping around him, possessively, felt those long, nimble musician’s fingers rake through his hair and massage the back of his head.

Not to be outdone, John slid one arm up Sherlock’s back while pulling him closer to him with the arm snaked around his narrow waist. Never breaking the kiss, John backed Sherlock into the wall and proceeded to snog him senseless. As he nibbled on his ear and laved his neck with long, teasing swipes of his tongue, he slipped his hand underneath his dress shirt, skimming his hand up the flat abdomen.

Finally, Sherlock pulled away, gasping for air. “John...”

“Yeah?”

“Bedroom’s in the other direction,” he mumbled sheepishly.

“Oh... right.”
Their eyes locked again, dark midnight blue losing itself in the aurora borealis.

Then they both started to giggle, like idiots.

Pressing their foreheads together, John clasped his hand behind Sherlock’s neck. “Well… this is a first,” He ran he knuckles across Sherlock’s chin. “Never snogged someone with stubble before meeting you.”

“This is a first for me as well. Never snogged a hobbit before you.”

“That’s… so not funny.”

“It’s a little funny, emphasis on little.”

“Oh shut it,” John gave one of Sherlock’s curls a good-natured tug.

You’d rather be in Sherlock’s shadow, be his devoted little sidekick than have a life of your own…

“John?”

“I’m fine,” John cradled the side of Sherlock’s face with his other hand. Sherlock pressed his thin cheek into the palm of his hand as John reassured him, “Everything’s fine now.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” his large hand loosely clasped John’s thin wrist.

“So everyone keeps telling me,” John breathed as Sherlock ran his hand slowly up and down his forearm. “And you need a shave, mate.”

Sherlock snorted then pressed his lips to John’s again, an innocent little peck. “Meet me in the bedroom. I’ll be there in a moment.”

“And why am I meeting you in there?” John reached up and loosened one of the buttons of Sherlock’s dress shirt then another and another until enough of the shirt gaped open so John could press his palm to Sherlock’s chest. Running his thumb over his collarbone, he asked, “Why aren’t you coming with me?”

Sherlock craned his neck so he could huff into John’s ear. His breath sent shivers down John’s spine. “Because, John, you don’t know how to put a violin away properly.”

John snorted then giggled, “Only you would put proper care of a musical instrument before…” he trailed off, trepidation starting to mix with his anticipation…

Of course I’m nervous, how long has this thing between us been building up?

“…you know,” John finished lamely.

“Go,” Sherlock gave him a gentle shove. “I have to loosen and clean the bow as well as the violin before shutting it up in its case. And I should probably let the dog out as well.”

“Are you stalling?” John teased.

“Don’t be absurd.”

John heaved an aggrieved sigh but he knew better than to argue. The rest of the flat could be coated with dust and debris, but God forbid if the violin was not in tiptop condition at all times.
Plus, the last thing he wanted was to be interrupted by a dog that needed to answer nature’s call. So he placed a feather-light kiss on Sherlock’s lips and mumbled, “Alright, alright.”

Trance-like, John all but floated down the hall towards the bedroom. He didn’t bother turning on the lights once he entered. The only light came from the weak overhead light in the hallway and flickering streetlamps trying to stay on during the torrential downpour. Blindly, John stumbled into the master bedroom and sank down onto Sherlock’s bed. He ran his hands over the satiny duvet then bent down to remove his socks. Only when he held his socks in his hands a spasm of alarm rippled though his body.

A faint echo of his misspent youth sounded in his ears, a girl he had met at a party, his first party where there was booze and marijuana and no parents or chaperones. The first party he had disappeared into an unoccupied bedroom with an extremely willing partner. He had been so off his face he had actually admitted to the girl as she took off her top…

This is my first time…
Trepidation mutated into blinding panic.
This is my first time…
I have no idea what I’m doing…
I have no fucking clue what I’m supposed to do next…

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered, clutching his mismatched socks, one navy blue with a white and grey argyle pattern, the other also navy but with cream and pewter stripes.

As a doctor, he knew how men in same-sex relationships achieved carnal satisfaction, but he had absorbed that information with clinical detachment. He had also seen a variety of sexual mishaps during his time in a variety of surgeries, from both straight and gay couples. All of those mishaps appeared to be quite painful as well as mortifying.

He also realized he had been using his clinical detachment to deny his true inclinations, his true preferences, his own truth.

On top of that, he knew that his own preferences in the bedroom were hopelessly old-fashioned, what people mockingly called “vanilla.” He thought dressing up in costumes was silly. There was nothing wrong with a sexy bit of lingerie of course but a French maid outfit or a naughty Catholic schoolgirl uniform made him giggle instead of turning him on.

The idea of Sherlock dressing in drag however… no, John shook his head, smiling a little.

He didn’t want Sherlock to look like a woman. He wanted Sherlock to look like himself.

His fingers itched to open Sherlock’s night stand drawer but at the same time, he was terrified what he would find, especially if it was something he considered out of character for his eccentric friend… and soon to be lover ohmyGodpleasedonotletthisgetweird…

He threw open the drawer and breathed a sigh of relief when all he found was a tattered copy of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, some throat lozenges that had been in the drawer so long, the wrappers were sticky and a bit of loose change.

No lube, no condoms and nothing that vibrated… thank God.
John closed the drawer as quietly as he could, feeling guilty now. He wasn’t a snoop by nature (except for cases, of course.) But… he had to know. He did not want to be surprised, at least in that particular area.

Sex toys simultaneously irritated and embarrassed him. After all, he was not insufficiently endowed (thank you VERY much…) so it insulted him whenever one of his partners suggested some sort of “bedroom aid”, claiming that it would be “fun.”

It was rarely fun.

The last woman John went on a date with before meeting Mary had surprised him with a gigantic bright pink dildo that not only vibrated but lit up (and what was the point of that?) She had coyly asked him if he wanted to watch at first. When he stiffly told her he most certainly did not, she had gotten miffed. Asked him in a nasty voice if he worried he couldn’t compete.

“A sperm whale couldn’t compete with that thing, madam,” he had snapped while reaching for his pants and jeans.

Finally, anything involving pain and bondage unsettled him. He could never bring himself to tie a woman up; especially after some of the more horrific cases he had worked on with Sherlock. He had also stubbornly refused to be the one bound. The idea of being rendered powerless like that threatened to trigger his post-traumatic stress disorder. Whenever fuzzy handcuffs or silken cords were introduced into the bedroom, he would go as limp as a wet dishrag.

He suspected some of his ex-girlfriends sneered about how boring he had been in the bedroom.

At the same time, John immediately decided if Sherlock brought his riding crop into the bedroom and announce he wanted to “perform an experiment,” he was going to run for the hills.

As footfalls grew closer to the bedroom, John’s anxiety ballooned, pushing away any and all previous feelings of lust and desire. Panicky thoughts flew through his head like an emergency news crawl scrolling below a television programme already in progress…

I have no idea what I’m doing. I don’t know how to do this. I don’t know how to be with a man, I don’t know how to get a bloke off. I don’t know what he likes, what’s OK, what’s not. Shit, do we need condoms? Wait, I’m definitely not ready for anything that requires condoms, what was I thinking, oh fuck, I just wanted to tell him that I wanted to come home and I never want to leave him again and that it’s him, it’s always been him I’ve wanted, that I’ve loved but he’s also my best friend and I don’t want that to get fucked up either, oh fuck me, I didn’t think this through, I never let myself think beyond the fact that he’s brilliant and amazing and yes, fine, fucking smoking hot but most importantly I love him dearly, more than anyone ever but now we’re beyond that and we’re here, I’m in here on his bed waiting for him, but waiting for what, I don’t know because I don’t know how to do THIS… he started to twist his mismatched socks again in his clammy hands.

John’s panic-stricken thoughts screeched to a halt when a soft, unsure voice murmured “Hey,” from the doorframe.

John’s breath escaped him with a soft, “Hey…” as he lifted his head up to see Sherlock framed in the doorjamb, the weak hallway light illuminating his profile. He couldn’t see his face, so John fumbled for the small lamp on the night stand. Switching it on, he blinked as he let his socks tumble from his hands. The pearly light was a slight shock after the dim greyness of the bedroom. Rain continued to rap loudly against the windows, almost sounding like a hailstorm instead of a downpour.
John’s heart also beat at staccato rate as he fixed his eyes on Sherlock’s familiar face, hoping for some sort of clue, hoping he could deduce what was the next appropriate step in this dance he had instigated.

Sherlock’s long fingers rested lightly on the doorknob in an attempt to look dignified and calm. Anyone else would have believed so, if they saw how he held himself tall, almost regal.

John however had learned how to observe him. Over the years he had learned how to read Sherlock’s micro expressions as well as the subtle body language that other people either dismissed or didn’t observe.

So John knew he was posturing, hiding some emotion he was not prepared to deal with behind a façade of good posture. John also noticed how his black brows beetled together, as they often did when he found himself in unfamiliar territory. Sherlock’s eyes were unreadable as usual. But the burgeoning crow’s feet surrounding them and faint lavender smudges beneath them were far more telling. So were the permanent creases in his forehead and the barest etchings of smile lines around the ridiculously full lips. The years of work and exile and the…

(…loneliness…)

… stress caused by both had finally etched itself permanently on his previously ageless face.

However his mouth wasn’t pulled down in its usual scowl. Rather he held his lips tightly together as if that was the only way he could restrain himself from speaking. It was almost as if he was worried he would say something that would ruin everything.

Oh… stupid me. He’s just as nervous as I am.

Sod experience… I’ll wing it. He’ll tell me if I’m doing something wrong. He’s never been shy about pointing that out.

Then he smiled, wanting nothing more than to take him into his arms.

“Well?” He asked lightly, still smiling.

That one simple syllable was all it took. In a flash, Sherlock took two long-legged steps away from the doorway then dropped to his knees between John’s slightly spread legs. To John’s surprise, he buried his face into John’s chest, tucking his black curly head beneath his chin while wrapping his long arms around his torso.

“Oh,” John rested his own face against Sherlock’s silken hair, slightly damp from taking the dog outside. He wrapped his arms around him, relaxing into him as he felt the tension leave Sherlock’s tight, rigid shoulders.

“Apologies for the delay,” Sherlock kept his face hidden in John’s chest, his voice muffled as he spoke into John’s white button-down instead of looking at him. “I, ah, broke a string when I was loosening them and, err, I… I wanted to take care of that right away. Before I forgot… you see. Plus, I had to tend to Gladstone. Let him outside to do his business then feed him and whatnot.”

“’S’fine,” John had dipped his head down as Sherlock rambled. Resting his cheek against Sherlock’s riotous curls, he crooned softly, “It’s fine. It’s all fine.”

Then he cupped Sherlock’s thin face and tilted his face up for a kiss, running his thumbs along those impossible cheekbones again. He sighed against Sherlock’s mouth as he felt Sherlock’s hands move slowly up and down his back. He smiled as he felt Sherlock’s inquisitive and clever tongue nimbly
prodding his open mouth. As John gladly reciprocated, he felt Sherlock un-tucking his button-down. John pressed his thighs around Sherlock’s hips as Sherlock started un-buttoning John’s shirt.

John broke the kiss, needing air but also to give Sherlock more room to maneuver… or rather to essentially manhandle him. Licking his lip in anticipation now instead out of unconscious habit, he lifted his dark eyes back up to Sherlock’s face. The soft hesitancy had completely disappeared now. The familiar wicked glint was back in his eyes as well as the know-all smirk as Sherlock spread John’s shirt open.

“You could assist,” Sherlock huffed as he pushed the shirt off John’s shoulders.

“I could,” John replied angelically. “But you’re doing a fantastic job so…”

“At least un-do the cuff buttons,” Sherlock grumbled as he pressed his cheek against John’s, quite on purpose, huffing warm breath into the sensitive shell of John’s ear. He all but purred when he felt John shiver with pleasure. Then he nipped at John’s ear and ran his tongue down John’s throat as John gasped with mingled shock and delight. “That’s the least you could do,” he growled again into John’s ear, practically predatory now.

John awkwardly un-did the tiny buttons in his cuffs then pulled his arms out of his sleeves as quickly as he could while Sherlock sat back on his heels and watched, his hands ghosting over the top of John’s thighs. Once the cuffs were undone, Sherlock sat forward as John pulled his arms out of his shirt. He locked his lips against John’s again, his tongue seeking his, greedy for more instead of tentatively exploratory. John carelessly tossed his shirt behind him, unsure where it landed and really not caring.

He thought Sherlock would want him to remove his vest as well. Instead, Sherlock rose off his knees and slowly, maddeningly pushed John back onto the bed until he lay flat on his back, with Sherlock hovering above him on his hands and knees. His aubergine shirt flapped completely open, exposing the marmoreal chest and abdomen. John propped himself up on his elbow, then reached for Sherlock again, threading his fingers through the riotous curls again, black as sin in the barely lit room. Tugging on his hair, a bit more insistently than he had in the lounge, John drew Sherlock to him again as he sat back up. Soon, John was sitting as Sherlock knelt in-between his legs again. The height difference now became a bit of a challenge, but Sherlock managed to bow forward, kissing John over and over again as John tugged and yanked on the expensive shirt until he had freed Sherlock from it.

Swallowing hard, John stared at the bullet scar.

A pinkish-peach divot smaller than a penny, it was nothing like the spongy, ropy mess on the back of his upper shoulder.

It had been infection, not the actual bullet that nearly cost John his life. He had lain in febrile delirium for days until the antibiotics finally got around to doing their job. Only when he was finally strong enough to sit up on his own had the surgeon consented to let him see the damage.

Shaky, ashen-faced, slightly nauseated and stricken with survivor’s guilt, John had sat in front of a larger mirror while a nurse held her compact mirror so he could see the reflection from the larger mirror. When he finally saw the extent of the damage caused by the sniper’s bullet, the first thought that flashed through his mind had been worms, a giant mess of dead earthworms curled up on his shoulder.

Then he had asked the nurse for a bin as he felt his tea and chicken broth rushing back up.
But it wasn’t the scar that destroyed him though. True, it was ugly, but he wasn’t that vain. The nerve damage which rendered his left hand, his dominant hand, utterly unpredictable was what undid him, effectively and decisively ending his surgical and military career, shattering his self-worth, making him a statistic as he pretended to listen to his therapist while idly wondering if today was the day he should put his gun barrel in his mouth…

…he sometimes wondered what would have happened if he hadn’t run into Mike Stamford that day in Regents Park.

John put his hand over Sherlock’s heart, spreading his fingers wide, needing to feel his heart beat. Needing to cover up that small, innocuous scar as he thought… But at least, when I got shot, it wasn’t bloody personal. He didn’t know me, didn’t act like he was my friend, didn’t get me to trust him, he was just doing his fucking job. This… this tiny hole that nearly ended it all just when we all just fucking got him back, this was personal.

“John?”

John shut him up with a rough and voracious kiss, not wanting his murderous wife to ruin this.

“I want you,” he said in a gravelly voice as he lay back down again, with Sherlock slowly sinking down on top of him.

And it was lovely, in the simplicity of it all.

No fancy aerobics, no additional battery operated devices, just the two of them, together at last.

Sherlock reached over and turned off the lamp. The only light now came from the dim overhead light in the hallway. The streetlamps barely shone through the continuing onslaught of precipitation. The only sounds were the rain continuing the crash down, the rustling of sheets, the slide of bare sweaty skin against each other, the swish of expensive trousers against blue jeans and their combined heavy breathing.

Lying crosswise on Sherlock’s bed, he arched his back as Sherlock slowly peppering kisses across his chest, his throat, his face. Every kiss was differently from the last, a plan devised solely to torment and arouse him, licking here, nipping there. Some kisses promised to leave bruises while others were lighter than a butterfly.

His shorter legs tangled in Sherlock’s, he ran his ankle up and down Sherlock’s calf as he explored Sherlock’s back with his fingertips. Ignoring the whip marks, he focused rather on his spine, tracing his fingers up and down it one knobby vertebra at a time, making Sherlock shiver and moan as John teasingly stopped just above his waistband of his trousers then slowly slid up again as he nibbled on Sherlock’s ear while skimming Sherlock’s backside with his free hand.


“Mmm, no you don’t.”

Sherlock found his mouth again and John clung to him, his arms curled up under Sherlock’s shoulders as he felt Sherlock’s hips start to rock back and forth against John’s thighs, desperate for friction now. He wasn’t the only one as John felt his jeans grow more and more uncomfortably tight. He let loose an involuntary groan as Sherlock rolled against his thigh again.

This they had done before, frotting against each other. This was also when the height difference stopped being a challenge and started being a pain in the arse.
This was also when John lost his nerve again.

Kissing again, hot, wet and longing, Sherlock rolled John over to his side. When he heard the jangle of a belt buckle and the soft hush of the zip being pulled down, John’s eyes popped open.

They had never, ever, gone this far before.

Suddenly he felt like the nervous fifteen-year-old in the back bedroom with the horny, experienced sister of one of his rugby mates.

This is my first time…

He tucked an arm underneath his head and continued to run his other hand through Sherlock’s hair as Sherlock divested himself of his trousers. He resolutely kept his eyes on Sherlock’s eyes as he heard the whisper of expensive fabric sliding off and away from Sherlock’s long legs.

Hoping to cover up his nerves, John kissed Sherlock’s brow, then nuzzled his nose underneath Sherlock’s, asking for a kiss. Trying to buy time now, John slowed the kissing down, drawing it out, lazy and languorous. He wrapped his arms tightly around Sherlock then let Sherlock roll him over to his back again, so he was lying vertically on the bed instead of sprawled across it.

His face shadowed, Sherlock half-sat up half-lay on John as he toyed with John’s belt buckle.

I trust him… John closed his eyes as Sherlock pulled the leather belt free from the buckle. I trust him with my life… but his heart had started to race as he heard the button unsnap and the zip of his jeans pulled down.

“Oh Jesus,” he gasped when Sherlock slowly tugged his jeans down. He tensed, expecting… what exactly, he wasn’t sure. But he jumped again when, catlike, Sherlock started to inch up John’s body, licking and nipping and kissing.

John knew what he wanted to do, what he would have done in other situations…but those other situations involved women.

He knew how to please women… most of the time. He had no idea how to satisfy a man… especially a man like Sherlock Holmes… brilliant and damaged.

John fisted the bed covers as Sherlock found the hem of John’s vest and agonizingly slowly, peeled the soft fabric up John’s body, then over his silvery head, tousling his hair as he did so. Then he bent over him, sliding his hand over John’s flat, soft belly, over his lightly-haired chest and up his throat as he lapped at his nipple. John shuddered and his hips gave an instinctive thrust. He wished he could shut his brain off again and let his body take over...

But what am I supposed to do, exactly? Is one supposed to be submissive and the other dominant? There’s no way Sherlock would ever consent to being submissive… or am I confused and that’s something entirely differe- ohsweetfuckingChrist… John moaned Sherlock had pressed himself directly on John’s groin and rolled himself against him. His bare, nearly hairless legs straddled John’s hips his hardness pressing down on his, the only thing separating the most private parts of their bodies was the thin cotton of their boxers. All the while, Sherlock kissed him, one hand cupping his neck while his thumb slowly ran up and down his tendon, the other cradling the side of his head.

But while his heart said Yes, his brain said Not Yet, so his poor confused cock started to wilt.

Numbly, he realized Sherlock had stopped kissing him… and his fingertips rested right on the carotid artery…
“You’re not ready for this,” Sherlock intoned, sitting up.

As Sherlock slipped out of bed, John sat up, “No, wait, I’m sorry,” he switched on the small lamp on the night stand. “Please, I know you’re angry bu-”

Sherlock stared at John as if he suddenly started speaking Portuguese. “Why would I be angry?” he asked mildly as he took his second-favorite dressing gown off its hook.

John blinked. Sherlock’s face was contorted in genuine bafflement. As Sherlock pulled his dressing gown on, John stammered, “Err… well, I started all of…” John gestured helplessly, indicating the bedroom. “I kind of started something I couldn’t finish, didn’t I?”

“Clearly,” Sherlock knotted the sash around his narrow waist. “Why would that make me angry?”

“Because, I…” John flustered. “Well, I led you on, didn’t I?”

“How is changing your mind leading me on?” A small smirk quirked Sherlock’s lips.

“Well… because… I mean… it’s rude.”

Sherlock laughed, a rare sound, like a bell suddenly ringing in an abandoned church. He tucked his long, elegant hands into the pockets of his dressing gown as he rocked back and forth on his bare feet. “Heaven forbid we don’t mind our manners in the throes of passion.”

“Shut up,” John jerked the duvet over his legs, glad his pants were still on.

“John, what makes you think I would expect you to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable?” Sherlock asked quietly, his voice devoid of any mockery.

“Oh,” John felt incredibly stupid, “Right.”

“Before you start bringing up the past in that tediously persistent manner of yours,” Sherlock sighed, “I want to assure you that I had determined long ago that if my past had been perfectly idyllic and demon-free, I more than likely would still have a relatively low libido. Rest assured, I am not offended or inconvenienced that you realized you had drifted out into uncharted waters and were starting to flail about like a panicking man when he realized he was out of his depth.”

“Great,” John felt a flush creeping up on his face. He flopped down onto the pillow. “Good to know that my failure isn’t inconveniencing you.”

“What failure?” Sherlock sounded puzzled again. “There was nothing wrong with your prowess. In fact, I was rather enjoying myself, despite your completely mistaken fears about your sexual techniques being considered lackluster and unimaginative.”

“Oh God,” John threw his arm over his eyes.

“You were enjoying yourself as well until your nerves got in the way. But now I finally understand why you always had a slew of girlfriends and why they all stayed with you longer than they actually liked you. I had suspected it was due to your performance in the bedroom, I just didn’t have hard data to draw an accurate conclusion, until now, of course.”

“Can we not have this conversation?”

Sherlock, as usual, steamrolled over him, “I mean, honestly, after The Blind Banker case, I believed
Sarah was going to throw you over. After all she had been kidnapped and nearly murdered by the Black Lotus gang because those imbeciles believed you were me. Not exactly a promising beginning to a conventional relationship. To my surprise, she stayed with you until your disastrous holiday to New Zealand, which goes to show that I’m not infallible. There’s always something I miss.”

“I’m going to post that in my blog. ‘Today, Sherlock admitted he is not God’,” John grumbled.

Sherlock threw him a dirty look and continued peevishly, “However, I did not miss your uncertainty regarding going further than we had before physically. You became preoccupied, started worrying that you didn’t know how to please a man the bedroom, which I assure you, you do, you just haven’t realized it yet. Your anxiety has clouded the answer you already know. Also, you became too preoccupied over the issue of dominance and submission, which you erroneously categorized in your mind as dominance equals masculinity and submission femininity. Your preoccupation was obvious as you stalled the natural progression of sexual release by changing tactics by slowing down as well as your heart rate remained elevated though your erection flagged.”

“Please stop talking now,” John whimpered.

Sherlock, in full sway now, could not stop. “Your anxiety stems from the discord sown between your homophobic father and your lesbian sister. When you first began to feel latent tendencies towards bisexuality, you repressed those leanings, afraid to disappoint a disappointing father with your true self since Harry’s sexuality drove a wedge between her and your father. But after Harry moved out and your father disappeared, your mother leaned on you, perhaps too much. You hid your sexuality from her as well, not wanting to worry her as Harry did. Because you had kept a photograph of her in your room and the regularity with which you visit her grave to clean it and leave flowers, you bear your mother no ill-will for her high expectations of you. However, it drove you to try and achieve a level of perfection that I regret to inform you, does not exist. Your overcompensation to be perfect is obvious if one examines your school reports, your military records and your medical career, not to mention how you dress.”

“How I dress?” John let his arm fall as he turned his head towards Sherlock.

“The smart button-downs? The comfortable yet neat jumpers, always clean, never rumpled? The ironed jeans, and honestly who irons jeans? Someone desiring precision, rules, clear and concise direction on how to behave, which is why you were attracted to the military,” Sherlock sounded like his usual smug, insufferable self. “You joined the military during a time when any deviation from heterosexuality was frowned on. So you pushed your attraction towards men further down, so far down that you failed to recognize it when you were sexually attracted to a man, as you had been toward James Sholto. That was obvious at your wedding.” Sherlock sniffed, jealousy colouring his deduction with the slightest shade of green. “You never acted on your feelings for Sholto because you refused to admit you had feelings for him that were more than platonic. You were afraid to act on them. Afraid of how Sholto would react, what your comrade-in-arms would say. You were worried that people would talk. Now that you’re acting on your feelings for the first time, your deeply ingrained need to be perfect is interfering with your ability to act on your sexual desires as you are afraid that you are going to do it wrong.”

“Really not in the mood to have my insecurities dissected, mate,” John turned his face back toward the ceiling and put his arm over his eyes again.

Sherlock trailed off. John kept his eyes covered. He heard Sherlock pad over to the bed. He felt the mattress dip slightly as Sherlock sat down. The silence hung heavy, cut only by the rain’s continued assault on the window panes.

“I love you.”
John slid his arm off his face. Slowly, he sat up, propping himself up on his elbows. He stared at Sherlock, who sat as close to him as he could without touching.

“What?”

“Oh, you heard me perfectly well,” Sherlock snarled. John couldn’t help but grin as Sherlock sourly continued, “I will never understand why you constantly ask me to repeat myself. I merely wanted to even the playing field so you and I experience the same degree of humiliating vulnerability. So… there, feel better now?” John opened his mouth to speak but Sherlock bolted off the bed. “You’re hungry, you missed dinner. Stale Jaffa cakes probably weren’t that filling. I’ll fix something, tea and… find something edible.”

With a swish of his robe, Sherlock stormed out of the bedroom.

John ran his hand down his face as his stomach growled.

Then he threw the covers back and hopped out of bed.

*Oh no, Sherlock. You don’t get to run away from this conversation…*

He snatched up Sherlock’s discarded dress shirt and tugged it on as he hurried after Sherlock.

Chapter End Notes

You know... to be perfectly honest... this story would have been finished months ago... IF IT WASN’T FOR ALL THE P0RN AND FEELS. :^)

Hope it will be worth the wait!

XOXO thank you as usual for reading/commenting/kudo’ing/recommending, etc...
Chapter Summary

Technique

The manner in which a player converts an advantageous position into a win.

Chapter Notes

Feelssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss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“I brought my own antibiotics so I don’t need the penicillin, thanks,” John grinned.

“Oh, right,” Sherlock studied the greenish-white bread. “I wonder what kind of mould this is…”

“You’re stalling.”

Sherlock scowled and binned the disgusting bread. “Well… obviously, I immediately noticed that you… weren’t ugly,” he muttered to the floor as he stomped over to the refrigerator. Throwing the refrigerator open, he bent over as he examined the interior. “But in regards to what you’re asking…” He took out a jar filled with a murky brownish-orange fluid and shut the refrigerator door. “I’m not sure if these are lentils or gallstones.”

“Since lentils or gallstones aren’t that particular shade of brown, probably neither one,” John helpfully pointed out. “Or they’ve disintegrated to the point where neither one would be useful to you.” John shuddered, already picturing the horrors that lay inside the fridge, already not looking forward to binning all the contents and giving the insides a good scrub-down. “I’m not going to starve to death anytime soon. Now, you were saying?”

Sherlock folded his lips tightly together and opened the fridge again to put the brownish gunk back inside. John groaned internally but then from behind the open fridge door, Sherlock mumbled, “Finally admitted the truth to myself at Dartmoor.”

“Admitted?”

Sherlock slammed the fridge door shut as the kettle whistled. Still refusing to face John, Sherlock busied himself with tea preparations. “The sentiment had been building slowly and quietly, like a snowfall in the mountains. Not a wild storm that blew in out of nowhere but,” he waved his long fingers around before pouring the scalding hot water over the tea bags neatly placed in the mugs. “Rather like a gentle snow, falling quietly and insidiously flake by flake until you realize too late that you are buried, that I was buried, up to my eyebrows. I didn’t want to admit how very fond I had grown of you, how… much I needed you. I dismissed the emotion, deleted it. Emotion has no use to my work except for determining the criminal’s mindset that motivated him or her to commit the crime. But when we were at The Woman’s house when the CIA agent held you at gunpoint and threatened to murder you if I didn’t open the safe,” Sherlock fiddled with the string of his tea bag as he watched the water darken to the color of creosote. “I knew I would be lost without you. Still, I refused to label it as love, how could I? Not after I had belittled The Woman for her affection for me. I all but called her a loser. But when we went to Dartmoor, I knew,” his lips twitched. “I knew I was not the intellectual god I deigned myself to be, or to be more accurate, desired to be. I was a fraud. I possess the same chemical defects that I mocked others for having. I’m just as susceptible as anyone else to the needs and desires of love and all of it,” his voice had quieted as the rain had. Now the rain was a pleasant pitter-patter on the window panes as Sherlock finally confessed, “I’m not all you think I am, John. In the end, I’m just a hypocrite.”

“Sherlock…”

Sherlock picked up both mugs, “So, in a way, I was relieved when I returned from the Great Hiatus and you had found Mary. I thought my feelings were nothing more than infatuation and, like most infatuations, would dwindle away to nothing. You and I would resume our friendship and working relationship,” he carried the mugs to John. Holding a NHS mug out to him, he said in a clear, confident voice: “You would be happily married, creating the perfect family with Mary you never had with your parents and sister. I could focus one-hundred-percent of my intellect on my work, once again. Everyone would be content.”

“Except,” John took the cup, purposely placing his fingers over Sherlock’s. “We weren’t.”
Sherlock’s throat worked. “No. We weren’t.”

“You never said anything.”

“You were with Mary,” Sherlock broke away from John, heading towards His Chair.

John followed him until they both reached the chairs in front of the fireplace but John continued walking to the sofa. “Come here,” he pleaded, settling in on the sofa after shooing a grumpy Gladstone off by giving him a gentle nudge in the withers, “Come on, off you go. You’re not supposed to be on the sofa as is.”

Gladstone sulked off with a disgruntled whine, then in an act of defiance, hopped into John’s chair. He curled up in a giant brown and black furry ball. Then he plonked his long head on the armrest, facing John.

If a hound could give a human the stink-eye, then Gladstone had achieved it.

“You spoil him,” John sighed as he made himself comfortable. “Come here,” he asked again. He refrained from patting the seat next to him, but he did add a very soft, “Sherlock, please.”

Sherlock, with his shoulders bunched up to his ears and lips held tightly, dallied. Then he plodded over to the sofa, clutching his plain white mug as if it could shield him from whatever John planned on throwing at him. He sat gingerly down next to John, his posture rigid.

They both sipped their tea. Wordlessly, they listened to the now-soothing sound of rain falling in sheets across London, soaking earth and concrete alike.

“You never said anything,” John repeated himself then added, “You should have. You probably deduced she was a filthy liar when you first met her.”

“I deduced she was a liar,” Sherlock stiffly amended John’s statement. He leaned back into the sofa. In the same rigid voice, he added, “I also deduced you were in love with her. Genuinely in love; you cannot re-write history, John.”

“I know,” John said shortly. Then he gave himself a shake, “I know,” he said again, more calmly.

“Her motives do not stem from evil intent, but from fear. Fear provoked her into making some incredibly bad decisions. But then… the same could be said for me,” he blew on his tea. “As I’ve told you over and over, don’t make people into heroes, John. They don’t exist. Even if they did, I wouldn’t be one of them.”

“You’re going off-track,” John gently prodded him as he picked a dog hair off his boxers.

“So I am. I never said anything because…” Sherlock squirmed then bolted forward to put the tea on the coffee-table. He folded his knees up to his chest and wrapped his long arms around his legs. His long toes coiled over the edge of the ratty old sofa. “I never said anything because I wanted to respect your decision to stay in the closet-”

“Wow, thanks,” John said dryly.

“And… I thought Mary would be a better companion for you than me,” Sherlock finished softly, then chuckled, “Before I realized she was an assassin, of course. Even after we learned the truth, I thought she’d still be better… I mean,” he tilted his head towards John and gave him a sly smile, “She does cook for you.”
“Cleans too,” John joked as he pushed his shirtsleeves up. Sherlock’s shirt was far too large for him, of course. His arms and torso were much longer than John’s. Yet, it was oddly too small as well, since he still managed to be thinner than John, despite his height.

Meanwhile, Sherlock tried to laugh, but faltered when he realized how fake his chuckle sounded. Somberly, he added, “Mary wouldn’t put you second place to The Work like I do. Even though the Work is meaningless now since I’m always in some sort of emotional fog… just like everyone else.” He rested his chin on his knees. “You deserve someone less ordinary, John.”

John leaned forward, looking for a coaster on the coffee-table. Finding none, he put the mug on an old copy of *Toxicology and Industrial Health* journal. Then he leaned back on the sofa and slung his arm over Sherlock’s shoulders. “Come here,” he breathed into his ear. Sherlock slowly, as if against his will, leaned into John, awkwardly resting his head on John’s shoulder. As Sherlock inched towards him, John curled his other arm around Sherlock’s folded-up body, linking his fingers together, holding him tight. Pressing his forehead against Sherlock’s temple, John willed Sherlock to relax.

“There are worse things to be than a hypocrite, you know,” John said before leaning back enough to kiss Sherlock’s brow. When he heard Sherlock snort derisively, John let Sherlock go, but still kept his arm around his shoulders. He arched his back slightly when he felt Sherlock’s hand between his back and the sofa. As Sherlock wound his arms around John’s torso, John started running his fingers through Sherlock’s hair. Feeling Sherlock’s tightly coiled body finally unspooling, John draped his arms lightly around his back. “Your work is not meaningless,” he whispered fiercely. “It’s not. I never want to hear those words from your mouth again. Even though the way you go about things is a bit different than what I first met you, that doesn’t make your work meaningless. Even though I know you tell yourself you don’t care, you help people. You’ve brought them justice and when you can’t give them justice, you’ve brought them closure. You’ve sent some really nasty people to prison that might have gotten away with it if not for you and your work.” He ran the back of his hand across Sherlock’s cheek. “And I’ve lost count how many times you’ve saved my life, in ways you don’t realize.” Lightly he added, “So, you see, it’s a bit of a shock to me to hear an arrogant dick like you think that you’re not good enough for me.”

Sherlock mumbled something inaudible. John poked him gently in the ribs and asked him to repeat himself, “I actually didn’t hear you that time.”

“I said… even if I can’t find your daughter?” Sherlock slipped out of John’s embrace. “You still think I’m good enough even though I have failed you in the greatest way anyone can fail the father of an abducted child?”

John felt his eyes beginning to prickle. It was a struggle to keep his voice even when he said, “Are you giving up then?”

“What? No! We do have the lead in Salt Lake City. Mycroft wouldn’t have sent Anthea there without a good reason. Violet has been investigating when I cannot, so no. We’re not giving up. I’m not giving up.”

“Good,” John exhaled shakily. “Cause neither am I.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he took another shuddering breath then he confessed: “That’s what Mary and I rowed about. She blamed me for losing Maisie.” A dry, brittle chuckle passed his lips. “Finally she told me the truth.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Sherlock mumbled, arms tightly crossed against his midsection. “She’s an idiot to even think that, much less say that.” He leaned his head back, resting it against the wall, his inky curls blending into the hideous black wallpaper. “But, she is unwavering, our Madame Mary. She’ll never give up, John. Not on Marissa and not on you.” His toes curled over the edge of the sofa like a
monkey’s. “She is bound and determined to remain by your side ’til death do you part. No one else can take her place, as far she is concerned.”

John reached for Sherlock again. Feeling him shivering, John ran his hands up and down his arms, “What can Mary give me that you can’t?”

“Children,” Sherlock whispered in heartbreakingly earnest voice as he bowed his head again. John had to pause to fight tears once more.

“Well,” John finally croaked out as he gripped Sherlock’s upper arms. “That’s not quite true. You introduced me to Susan, didn’t you?”

He deliberately left Mary out of that equation. But Sherlock immediately factored her back in, “Because I knew you and Mary could provide her stability.”

“Stability? Mary?” John snorted, closing his eyes in disbelief. “You knew it wasn’t going to be Mary who provided Susie with stability, didn’t you?”

Sherlock relented with a grumbled, “No. It was always you who kept us all grounded.”

“Right,” John said firmly. “So there’s Susie, and… well, there’s little Henry, isn’t there? Now that we’re almost out of shit, we can talk to Greg and Molly about co-parenting. None of this crap about visitations on Molly’s terms, yeah?” When Sherlock didn’t answer, only dipped his head further down until his chin touched his chest, John gave Sherlock a tiny shake, “Hey, eyes up here. I’m talking to you.”

Sherlock didn’t move his head, but his eyes flicked open, focused on him. They were shiny and over-bright but they stayed fixed on John’s face.

“We discuss Henry’s well-being, together.” John said firmly, “All four of us, as a family, yeah?”

“Five,” Sherlock added as his lips quirked up. “You forget. I’m also married. My wife will insist on having a say. She’s quite irritating in that aspect.”

John laughed as he hugged Sherlock. “God,” he giggled into Sherlock’s shoulder. “We’re completely fucked up, aren’t we?”

“Well,” Sherlock rumbled, “You are.”

“Oi,” John gave Sherlock a good-natured tug on his curls, making Sherlock snicker. Then he sat up and cupped Sherlock’s face in his wide, calloused hands. “In case you hadn’t already deduced it, I’m in love with you too, git.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock huffed as he brushed his lips against John’s.

This kiss was one of the best kisses, like a Sunday drive. Long and meandering, with no particular destination, just enjoying the ride.

But like all rides, it had to end. Threading his long fingers through John’s hair then dragging his fingers lightly down John’s face, Sherlock cleared his throat, “Did you… would you… I mean, if you’re more comfortable sleeping by yourself out here, I’m amenable of course…”

“On this saggy old thing?” John stood up, stretching his arms out over his head. “I’ve kipped out on this particular sofa enough times to know that while it’s good for a nap, it’s murder on your back if you spend enough nights on it.” He held his hand out. “Your bed is closer and far more
comfortable."

Sherlock slipped his hand into John’s. Knitted his long, elegant fingers with John’s short, stubby ones and ran his thumb over John’s warm skin, enjoying the novelty of actually holding his hand, “Very well, if you insist.”

He let John help him to his feet.

Then he let John lead him to his own bedroom.
Chapter Fifty-One: Zwischenzug

An "in between move", where a player, instead of playing the expected move, first inserts a move which the opponent must answer, before making the expected move.

Chapter Notes

Smut and feels...

Thank you all for the lovely comments and kudos. I'm not the best at timely replies but I read and appreciate every one of them and every one of you who are reading! :^D

Happy Monday!

Chapter Fifty-One: Zwischenzug

18 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Westminster, London
5:47 AM

The nightmare was always almost the same. Sherlock stood on the roof’s ledge, toes just over the edge. He could feel the wind on his face and his coat billowing around him. Then he would hop down to the safety of the rooftop, smiling smugly at Jim Moriarty, informing the villain he had no intention of jumping to his death, he knew he could force Moriarty to call off the snipers.

But here was always when the dream diverted from reality. Here, Moriarty smiled and said in that high, silky voice of his “Oh I know… that’s why there’s no sniper…”

Then Sherlock would see John on the roof, kneeling down behind Moriarty. Not standing below, safe on the ground, on his mobile, begging him not to jump. But here on the roof, on his knees, hands on his head, starting to say his name: “Sherlo-”

But before he could finish, Moriarty pulled out his gun and shot John in the head. John slumped down, face first into a pool of his own blood.

Sometimes Mrs. Hudson was a hostage in the dreams too, sometimes Molly. Sherlock never fully deduced why Moriarty targeted Lestrade, instead of Molly. Yes, Greg was his friend, a good friend. True, they had their ups and downs, but he was nearly as loyal of a friend as John was.

However, to be perfectly honest, Molly would have been a more logical target than Lestrade. Unless Moriarty had developed a sentimental attachment to the girl during the brief time he “dated” her to get closer to him. Sherlock doubted it. However that seemed to be the only logical reason why the hit
was on Lestrade rather than Molly. Lestrade’s death would have been regrettable but Molly’s death would have cut Sherlock to core. She counted.

And yet, in the dreams, it was always John getting murdered, always John getting hurt because when he wasn’t dreaming about what could have happened, he dreamed about what did happen… the last fight they had before the Fall, where John called him a ‘machine’, John pleading with him on the mobile not to jump, his farewell at the cemetery, his solitary fight to restore Sherlock’s reputation postmortem, John leaving Sherlock behind to be married…

Tonight’s dream had a new and horrifying twist…

He opened the door to the rooftop as usual. The wind was balmy, thanks to the summer sun. The heat made him uncomfortably warm, but he couldn’t risk removing his scarf or woolen coat. That would give away the fact that he wore a neck guard, protective vest, knee pads and shin guards. Those things wouldn’t stop him from being injured if he had to jump, but at least they would keep him alive and hopefully not paralyzed…

He turned, expecting to see Jim Moriarty sitting on the roof’s edge, as he had done in real life. But in this nightmarish alternate universe, Jim stood behind John, running the muzzle of John’s own Army Browning up from his chin to his temple and back down again…

Sherlock…

But it was not John who called his name in terror. It was a woman’s voice, a very distinct woman’s voice calling for him, adenoidal and husky, with a flat Middle American accent…

He looked over Jim’s shoulder, who very obligingly stepped around John to point the gun at John’s right temple instead of the left…

Richard Brook, the deranged Moriarty twin, wearing his Storyteller costume, stood on the roof’s edge with his manic grin creasing his lips upwards. He clenched Violet’s delicate wrist, obviously causing her pain judging by her creased face, her crumpled eyebrows.

Violet wore the electric blue ball gown Rucastle had designed for her. Not the sluttish, skin-tight mermaid dress he had forced her to wear to her “birthday dinner.” But the long-sleeved, full-length dress with billowing skirts comprised of layers and layers of almost-see-through chiffon with embroidered and sequined designs of flowers and ivy leaves artfully and strategically stitched here and there on the dress in a slightly darker shade of blue. The frock had been truly a work of art… until Violet had ruined it by beating up the Earl and one of his henchmen not to mention getting tossed into the boot by the Tollers, Rucastle’s mother-son murder team…

Violet’s hair was long again as well as chestnut-coloured. She didn’t wear her fake spectacles or her heavy mask of make-up. Her freckles stood out of her stark-white face. Even her lips were pale. Her curls and gauzy gown rippled in the wind as she struggled to maintain her balance, standing on the edge of the roof, with only Richard Brook to steady her…

Richard locked eyes with him, smiled wider and drawled out a single word: Hi…

But Jim announced: Wait, there’s more…

He heard footsteps behind him. He whirled around and saw the Earl of Winchester, holding Henry Lestrade in his arms, as if he were a doting uncle…

He cried out and lunged for the boy, his son. But the Earl took a step back and drawled: You can only save one… looks like you made your choice… William…
He whipped around in time to see Richard push Violet off the roof in a blur of chestnut and electric blue. She didn’t even have time to scream. Just a startled gasp, then she was gone…

Then the sound of the gun discharging deafened him and he jumped back as John’s blood, ruby red, viscous and awful, began to ooz and pool around his expensive shoes…

Sherlock jolted awake, swallowing a shout. Confused, he wondered why it was so dark in the bedroom, why his duvet was tangled around him.

Wondered why he was alone.

“Sherlock?”

He tried to inhale, feeling his lungs quivering as if they had transformed into fluttering, panicking wings. His exhalation was just as shaky, his chest threatening to collapse upon itself.

“Sherlock,” John immediately slid back into bed. In the gloom of the room, all Sherlock could see was John’s outline. Still, he closed his eyes in relief when he felt John’s hand cupping his clammy, sweating face, the other smoothing his unruly hair.

Not a dream…

“Deep breath, now.” Dr. Watson cajoled. “Come on, for me.”

“You smell like rain,” Sherlock muttered, after he got his breathing under control. “Where did you go? Did you take a walk?”

John took walks when he was upset. And some bits of last night were upsetting.

“A brief walk around the block,” John assured him, “To the let the dog out for a piss, that’s all.”

“What time is it?”

“A bit before six, I dunno, I left my mobile in my coat pocket.”

“Didn’t you take your coat when you went out?” Sherlock slowly started to wake fully up, his magnificent brain coming online. “John, you shouldn’t have. You could have caught cold.”

“I didn’t wear my coat,” there was a smirk in John’s voice. “I wore yours.”

“Great,” Sherlock grumbled, scooting closer so he could rest his head on John’s shoulder. “You probably dragged the hem in the puddles.”

“Oh go on. That poncy greatcoat has seen far worse than a bit of rain,” John scoffed as he coiled his arms around Sherlock. His hand running up and down Sherlock’s biceps, John murmured, “Bad’un, then? The dream?”

Sherlock’s first impulse was to lie. He swallowed that desire down, “Mmm… it wasn’t wonderful.”

“I hate PTSD dreams,” John kept his voice light, conversational. “I think I hate them the most out of all the bloody symptoms.”

“Why?” Sherlock couldn’t help asking even though he knew John was being casual on purpose in order to draw him out of his usual reticence.

He didn’t care.
John had nightmares too. He wasn’t chatting to pry or to analyze or dissect.

He simply just… understood.

Sherlock let his entire body go limp as John began to talk: “Because I’m so bloody worn out from all the other symptoms, the fucking panic attacks, the paranoia, just the general stress that your body is under after a prolonged bout of fear… all I want to do after a long day is sleep. And even that’s robbed from me.”

“Then the next day, you’re exhausted,” Sherlock murmured. “Your defenses are weakened by lack of sleep, making you more prone to panic attacks, making it even more difficult to sleep when it is bedtime, so you lay awake again until to drift into some semblance of sleep only to be interrupted by another nightmare, thus an ugly cycle has been born.”

“Yeah,” John ran his fingers slowly through Sherlock’s hair then down the side of his neck, his thumb skimming his cheekbone. “It sucks.”

“Hmmmm. Have I told you recently what an eloquent wordsmith you are?”

“No. Not recently.”

“Might be a reason for that,” Sherlock teased as he felt some of the awful panicked hopelessness dissipating. His chest and throat didn’t feel as tight as before…

… and John running his fingers through his hair felt lovely.

Until John gave one of his curls a good-natured, gentle tug, “Oi, there,” he mock-scowled, “My eloquent wordsmithing is how we make a living.”

Sherlock smiled.

We.

Such a lovely, little word.

“Wordsmithing isn’t a proper verb,” Sherlock rumbled before pressing a kiss between that vulnerable bit of flesh between John’s neck and shoulder. “Or even a real word.”

“If Shakespeare can make up words, so can I,” John declared with cheerful resolution. He fumbled a bit in the gloom of the pre-dawn room, dragging his stubby fingers across Sherlock’s face then finally finding his jaw. With a well-practiced smoothness that sent shivers down Sherlock’s spine, he traced his fingertips along his jaw-line, until he found the very tip of his chin. With his first two fingers and thumb, he tilted Sherlock’s face upwards.

“’Morning,” he breathed before kissing him.

The tight bands of despair and terror uncoiled completely, making room for only a hazy golden glow instead. Sherlock’s toes curled in anticipation as he and John turned towards each other, kicking away the top sheet and duvet as their hands began a slow exploratory journey.

“You have too many clothes on,” Sherlock huffed into John’s ear before giving the tender earlobe a mischievous nip. “Most inconvenient,” he started un-doing the buttons. He then realized, from the smoothness of the buttons and the texture of the material that the shirt John had put on was the one Sherlock had been wearing last night, the aubergine shirt the Internet had irritatingly dubbed: “The Purple Shirt of Sex.”
First Violet, now John, Sherlock internally sighed. Why do people want to wear my clothes?

But then John had slipped away from him. As pearly morning light attempted to brighten the room through the cracks between the drapes, Sherlock could see John’s silhouette but not much else. He toyed with the idea of asking him to turn the lights on, at least the little lamp on the nightstand. But John had undressed with his usual militaristic efficiency. Sherlock stretched out on the side of the bed he had already decided was now “his” as John re-joined him. He sucked in a surprised breath when he felt John’s hands, completely steady and sound, on his bony hips, thumbs hooked into the waistband of his boxers. But he didn’t fight him; he lifted his hips up and let John peel them off with agonizing, deliberate slowness.

Sherlock shivered, not from anticipation this time, but because there was a slight chill in the air, thanks to the ongoing rain. Just as he was about to complain, the bedsprings creaked as John straddled him, his knobby knees bracketing his skinny thighs.

Resting on his forearms, John hovered for a moment, as if he could see Sherlock’s face clearly. Then, as he ran his hand over Sherlock’s hair again, he lowered himself on top of him and for the first time, they lay skin to skin.

John started kissing him again. The chill completely forgotten, Sherlock curled one arm underneath John’s arm so he could reach up and touch John’s hair now, cradling the back of his head. His other hand lazily skimmed up and down John’s entire back and beyond. He started with the scarred left shoulder, indolently trailing his fingertips down his spine, pondering over the differences in texture from the hardened scar tissue and soft, healthy skin. Far from being revolted, he was fascinated. However, there would be time to investigate that mystery later… he was much more intrigued by John’s fairly impressive backside.

Sherlock immediately decided John wasn’t allowed to wear his god-awful “dad jeans” ever again. He vowed to find a way to ensure he would only wear properly fitting denims and bespoke trousers, starting as birthday and Christmas presents, so he wouldn’t be offended. John could be tetchy sometimes when it came to his clothes.

His imagination then gave him a flash of John in his full military kit. He then felt all the blood diverting from his precious brain and going straight south to the basest part of his existence.

For the first time in his entire adult life, he gave not one solitary fuck that he was acting like everyone else. He didn’t care that he was no longer behaving like the most intelligent being in all of England, possibly the world. He didn’t care that he was no different from the herd, the sock puppets, the zombies, the sheep, the goldfish, the ordinary people.

Why were ordinary people only allowed to feel this way? Why he was excluded? Why should he be excluded?

Besides, how could they be ordinary, when this emotion, these powerful, contradictory sensations of security and excitement, of lust and purity, of home and adventure, was absolutely the most extraordinary thing in the entire world? And this feeling was the driving force of their very existence, their reason for living?

How could he, born with beautiful gifts like his high IQ and hyperactive senses that he then honed into razor-sharp observation and deductive skills, how could he have ever dismissed love as a chemical defect?

What he felt for John was no chemical defect.
And also…. As the kids say… *that arse…*

He gave that arse a naughty squeeze, then repeating the process in reverse, sliding his hand back up John’s spine to his damaged shoulder.

John however was no passive partner. His kisses bordered on nearly perfect. None of these pathetically chaste little pecks but no drooling, clumsy smacks either. There was also no question that John was used to being the dominant partner. His kisses were a brand, a claim and a conquest… *mine, mine, mine*… he imprinted on Sherlock’s skin as he curled his fingers in Sherlock’s hair, not quite pulling, but definitely not being gentle either.

Sherlock was fine with that… for now.

“So,” he finally asked in a voice heavier than usual due to desire. There was also a husky rasp normally not present when he was fully clothed and allowing the Mind precedence over the Transport when he spoke. “You finally figured it out.”

“Mmm, yeah,” John reached up to press a kiss between that incredibly sensitive bit of skin behind the ear, right where the jaw and neck met. As his palms ran over Sherlock’s arms until their hands met, he purred, “I did, during my walk this morning.” His voice, normally higher-pitched and usually extremely stressed had mellowed, deepening into an octave Sherlock had never heard before. “I know how to please a man because I am one, and I know what turns me on so…” he repeated his toe-tingling kiss on the other side of Sherlock’s neck. “Easy, once I stopped agonizing over it and started thinking logically.”

“Finally, I’m rubbing off on you.”

“Yeah, well, speaking of rubbing off…”

Sherlock, normally either immune or impervious to double entendres, actually snickered. He gave John a gentle shove, rolling so they faced each other. He hooked his longer leg over John’s hip and rolled his own hips against John’s. Hearing John hiss in unexpected pleasure caused a soft involuntary moan to slip past his own lips.

So he sought John’s mouth again, greedy for more.

Their arms and legs tangled together, they pushed and ground against each other. They had to breathe from their noses as they couldn’t get enough of each other’s mouths and tongues. Time ceased to exist, the world beyond the bedroom ceased to exist. Every single person who was out for their blood, from Moriarty to Mycroft to Mary could have been waiting at their bedroom door with pitchforks and torches and neither one of them would have given a damn.

But when it was John who reached down to take both of them in his hand, Sherlock, needless to say, was shocked. He broke the kiss in amazement, but then felt all of his bones in his body melt away as John started moving his hand up and down. He groaned again, thrusting against John’s hand. The silky hardness of John’s cock gliding against his own erection as John’s calloused palm encircled them both almost pushed him over the edge.

However, Sherlock managed to grit his teeth and not come, as much as he desperately wanted to, to the point where pain was intermingling with pleasure. But he had a plan. He had something he needed to show John, to teach him.

Sometimes John could reach on his own, provided he was given enough time to ponder over it. Other things, John needed an instructor. In regards to topping and bottoming, Sherlock knew he
needed to show John it wasn’t about dominance and submission.

It wasn’t about making someone beg for mercy, as the Woman mistakenly believed.

It wasn’t about maintaining the upper hand, as Violet mistakenly believed.

It was all about pleasure, all about worshipping the body beneath while sating his own needs.

So Sherlock grabbed John by the wrist, pulling his hand off of him. He could feel John’s confused look, so he kissed John’s palm before rolling him over to his back. Now the one hovering over John, he found John’s mouth again, his tongue languidly sweeping inside John’s, roaming and tasting. He felt John trying to sit up but he gently encouraged him to lie back down by lowering his own head as he continued to kiss him.

Determined to only touch John with his lips and tongue, Sherlock hovered over John as he worked his way down his body.

He kissed. He licked, he nibbled, he teased. He brushed his lips against sensitive creases and crevices. He blatantly lolled his tongue around each nipple then giving each one a sharp little love bite, causing John to jolt and curse then implore him not to stop.

He wasn’t acting completely selflessly. He indulged in everything he had imagined those lonely nights during the Great Hiatus. Wherever he had hidden, from posh hotels to squalid flophouses, he had found himself daydreaming about going down on John when the loneliness reached peak levels. It distracted him from the pain of their separation, imagining the sounds he would have made, what he would taste like…

Now he knew John would pant and curse under his breath, his voice smoky like a good whisky. He now knew that John tasted like salt and raw, unprocessed honey.

The nights he had been held prisoner in Eastern Europe, he had desperately tried to conjure up that unique John scent. The gun oil and the old paperback books and the good Earl Grey tea he liked, all smells that seemed to have absorbed into his skin.

Now Sherlock inhaled them as greedily as he used to snort cocaine, until he discovered it was more expedient to inject, of course.

This was so much better than cocaine. The added odor of salt and musk enhanced John’s normal scent and Sherlock had to slow down and think about something decidedly unsexy for a moment so he could continue his journey before becoming undone.

His go-to for those kinds of situations was always Mycroft boffing The Queen.

He grimaced and could actually feel himself wilting a bit.

“Sherlock?”

He looked up when he felt John touching the top of his head. “Lie down,” he ordered him with a predator’s smile, his voice a force of nature, voracious and dangerous.

*My turn to leave a mark... mine, mine, mine...*

*My love.*

He then kissed John’s navel. Finally, he touched John with his hands again, parting John’s legs so he
could kneel between them. Then he ran just the tip of tongue down his belly, observing how his belly hair changed from soft to wiry as he reached his destination.

Still with only the tip of his tongue, he traced that thick throbbing vein in his cock from root to tip. Then repeated the action, then repeated it again, lowering himself onto his belly, with John’s legs over his broad shoulders. He ground himself against the bed a bit to give himself some relief. Electricity flooded his body as he found friction while continuing to tease John with only the tip of his tongue.

He nearly forgot how he meant to pleasure John when he felt the sole of John’s foot rubbing his back up and down. Sherlock nearly started purring like a contented cat.

Finally, he took all of John into his mouth.

“Oh God,” John reached down to touch Sherlock’s hair again. “Oh God, yes…”

Sherlock placed his hand over John’s, linked his fingers with his and pulled his hand away as he began to move his head, bobbing in a steady rhythm.

_Not that, anything but that…_

The bastard, the monster, the Earl, used to like to hold his head down….

But John seemed unfazed, probably had others who didn’t like having their heads touched during fellatio either. However, John kept his body curved at an awkward angle so he could keep his fingers intertwined with Sherlock’s.

Sherlock could feel his fingers falling asleep because of this. But it was a small thing in the grand scheme of things. Hearing John groan with pleasure and feeling the tenseness of his body as he valiantly tried to be polite and not gag Sherlock by thrusting into his mouth outweighed the minor inconvenience of tingling fingers.

Needing air and to rest his throat, he decided to pay attention only to the tip; sucking and lapping with his tongue while tickling John’s testicles _can’t neglect those after all…_ John was muttering something, but Sherlock wasn’t quite sure if it was English. It was a heady mixture of cursing, helpless moaning and dirty talk.

When Sherlock took him all into his mouth again, John’s hips thrust up uncontrollably. “Sorry, sorry,” he gasped, “Trying not to be a dick, but… fuck, Sherlock…”

Sherlock released him again and smiled angelically up at John. Despite the pressing need for release pooling between his own legs, Sherlock felt immensely pleased with himself as well as absurdly happy to see John enjoying himself, for once. He placed a kiss on the inside of John’s thigh then licked his own palm.

Stupid of him to be caught so unprepared, but he didn’t have proper lubricant. When he did, it was medical grade, mostly used for scientific experiments, but on the rare occasion to relieve personal needs…

_… and how did I know that this was going to occur?_

He took the tip back into his mouth while slowly rubbing the shaft, then speeding up, then slowing down, then speeding up…
Soon, too soon, John gasped out as he squirmed underneath his touch, “Sherlock, Sherlock… I’m… oh God, I’m coming… I… don’t want to, like this…”

Sherlock felt John reaching for him again and deduced that John did not want to come into his mouth. A flood of genuine affection spread throughout his entire being, his body and soul.

He never minded fellatio, even enjoyed giving it from time to time, except for the ending bit when he was on the giving end, of course. Messy. Unseemly. Distasteful, that stupid myth about semen tasting good was just that, in his opinion.

But his first boyfriend Victor had always gotten put out whenever Sherlock didn’t want to finish “the job properly”, as he had always sourly phrased it. So, to avoid an argument, Sherlock often just gave in. Even pretended he had enjoyed swallowing… until he realized that being guilt-tripped into a sexual act was just as immoral as being physically forced into one.

And here was John, being his usual considerate self, not assuming that it was OK to just let go.

Sherlock hurried to crawl on top of John again. His mouth crashed down on his with zero finesse this time. Cursing their height differences, he wrapped an arm around his back so they were both sitting up. His neck hurt from the angle he lowered it to, but it was little importance. He had to keep kissing John, and John seemed to need to kiss him back with the same ferocity. He felt John’s fingers overlap his as they both reached down to finish each other off.

It was awkward, slippery and unbecoming, writhing in each other’s embrace, nearly toppling over. The kisses grew messier and messier and there was no elegant rhythm to the jerking of their sweaty hands. Their hips bucked against each other as they frantically thrust into each other’s hands, their co-mingled pre-come acting as lubricant. Sherlock was almost bowing over backwards as John leaned forward, one arm tightly around Sherlock as Sherlock coiled his free arm around John’s shoulders, convinced he was going to fall…

_I have fallen… I fell long before the rooftop of St. Bart’s…_ he grabbed the headboard to steady them both.

To this day, Sherlock still had no idea who climaxed first. All he knew was he felt that intense white-hot jolt of pleasure surging through him, powerful enough to blind him, potent enough to make his brain go completely offline.

“Hey…”

Sherlock slowly became aware of a warm, sticky residue sliding down his chest, belly and hand.

He had been resting his head on John’s shoulder, panting. He could feel John’s chest moving rapidly as well. Feeling sleepily content, he ran his hand down slowly down John’s back before sitting up to deliver a kiss to John’s stubbly cheek.

He sat back on his heels, blinking his eyes, still seeing stars. John looked utterly debauched, his lips puffy and even in the dim light, Sherlock could see the promises of small, lip-shaped bruises on his chest. A lock of John’s silvery hair had fallen onto his forehead, so out of character for the militarily neat man, but suddenly so endearing.

_I cannot lose him. Ever…_

“Hey,” Sherlock reached up and smoothed the silver hair back.

John looked down at his chest and hand, his face crinkled with amusement and disgust. The rain had
finally stopped and enough sunlight had seeped in through the cracks between the drapes to dispel
the gloomy greyness. “What a mess, I don’t think I’ve had to deal with this shit since I first started
having wet dreams.”

Sherlock reached for the top sheet bunched up at the foot of the bed, “Here, it’s laundry day
anyway,” he held out a corner of the sheet to him. “We can use Mrs. Hudson’s washer, it’s nicer
than the community one in the cellar.”

“Thank God, Mrs. H is still in rehab, I’d hate to have to explain this to her.”

Sherlock felt a bit of his heart crumble.

Still in the closet…

Stupid me, I’m still a secret…

But John was still talking as he cleaned himself, “She’d be planning our wedding before we’ve even
divorced our respective brides. Probably pick something ghastly for our wedding colors, like blush
and bashful. Pink and uglier pink, if you ask me, but what the hell, I thought purple was just purple. I
didn’t know there was a difference between purples, like lavender or lilac.”

“Wedding?” Sherlock blinked.

John shrugged, “Maybe. Maybe not. Dunno. But I love you,” he started mopping up Sherlock’s
chest. “I don’t want to pretend anymore that I don’t.”

Sherlock felt a great big stupid smile split his face in two.

John rewarded him with one of his rare genuine smiles, the one that actually showed his teeth and
reached his eyes. “Right, I’m a mess and I’m starving. Shower, then breakfast?”

Sherlock suddenly realized he was famished. His stomach promptly gave a hearty growl. “I could
eat,” he admitted agreeably. “But John, you know we can’t run both showers at the same time, we’ll
use up the hot water before we’ve finished shampooing our hair.”

John, looking about ten years younger, gave Sherlock a wicked smile. He slid off the bed and chided
him, “I know, idiot. That’s why we’re going to share one.”

And, as naked as the day he was born, he strutted out of Sherlock’s bedroom. He went not towards
the tiny half-bath adjacent to Sherlock’s bedroom, but right towards the master bath with the proper
tub and shower.

I could get used to this, Sherlock thought as he stripped the soiled sheets from his bed.

Then his blood ran cold.

I could get used to this…

I can’t lose him… not again. Not now.

Bonelessly, he sat down on the mattress, fidgeting with the semen-stained top sheet.

How long do I have before Mary makes her next move?

She won’t give up. I can see why now.

“Sherlock?”
He snapped up his head.

He heard the shower running, water pelting the enamel bottom of the tub.

“Coming.”
Overloaded

Chapter Summary

Overloaded

A piece that has too many defensive duties. An overloaded piece can sometimes be deflected, or required to abandon one of its defensive duties.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Fifty-Two: Overloaded

20 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Westminster, London
Monday morning
7:47 AM

John had half-expected Sherlock to still be lazing in bed when he returned from his early morning run. John had also thought he would have a lie-in as well, but his eyes popped open at half past five as usual, despite enjoying yet another late night with his former flat-mate.

With Sherlock snoring like a buzz-saw, John had slipped out of bed, borrowed one of Sherlock’s tracksuits, groaning about how ill it fit his own short, slim frame as he pulled it on. He had crept into the lounge, and whistled for Gladstone as he reached for the dog’s leash.

He had meant to take a leisurely walk, but something had compelled him to try a cautious jog instead. Gladstone kept up with him like a trooper.

Feeling immeasurably pleased with himself, it had been difficult to force himself to walk back home. But the last thing he needed was to give himself a Charley horse or some other horrible cramp by overexerting himself. So, walk he did, enjoying the cool morning and the solitude before the sun fully rose, bathing the city with a brassy summer heat as the workers spilled out of their houses and flats to overtake the Tube, the buses, the cabs and the streets.

He stopped at the closest Pret’s and picked up coffee for himself and bagels for everyone, a mix of plain bagels, five-grain oatmeal and his personal favorite, Energy bagels, full of all things he loved and Sherlock hated… in other words, healthy stuff like rolled oats, cracked wheat, sunflower seeds, wheat bran flakes, and raisins.

The way Sherlock pulled his nose up at raisins always made John giggle.

“Honestly John, they’re disgusting. They’re dried out. They’re dead, John. Dead grapes.”

As he had made his way up the stairs, balancing the coffee and bag of bagels while holding onto Gladstone’s leash, he made a mental note to go do the shopping. They had been living off of take-away for three days now. While not cooking was nice, John cringed when he thought about all the sugar and sodium they were consuming.
He also made a mental note not to think about Mary’s phone calls and texts. Calls and texts he deliberately ignored after reading the text informing him that Susan would be spending the week in the country with her friend (maybe girlfriend) Anna now, instead of just the weekend.

After reading that, John felt relief wash over him. Then he immediately felt guilty. The girl adored Mary and was positively blossoming under her care. She really was like a neglected flower, forgotten in a greenhouse until she had been discovered by someone who knew how to make her bloom, give her the proper sunshine and fresh air and stability she needed.

He wasn’t ready to deal with arguing with Mary about sharing custody of Susan, because there would be an argument. Even though technically there was nothing illegal about Susan living with them, Mary would demand the lion’s share of Susan’s time with her, which wasn’t fair. After everything she’d been through, Susan definitely needed two parental figures to care for her.

And yet, John felt profound relief he didn’t have to deal with that challenge yet.

He knew he was being childish. He didn’t care. He needed this time away from Mary.

*Remember how Mary was supposed to be a one-night stand?* He chided himself. *Just some bird you chatted up at a pub? You had to go and fall for her, didn’t you? Idiot…*

Gladstone whuffed at him in annoyance, piqued at his navel-gazing.

“Yes, yes, sorry,” John awkwardly fumbled for his keys to 221B, trying not to drop his coffee and the bag of bagels. “I know you have a busy schedule of lying on the sofa you need to get back to, so… hang on.”

Like a good boy, Gladstone plopped onto his haunches and waited for John to open the door.

“Hey,” John lifted his brows in surprise when he finally managed to get the door open. As Gladstone trotted inside, “If I would have known you’d be awake, I would have gotten you a hot breakfast and coffee.”

Sherlock sat on the sofa, in his very best dressing gown, cross-legged, fiddling with something or other. Only when John sat down next to him, did he see that Sherlock was in the process of taking his epinephrine auto-injector apart. “What *are* you doing?”

“Experiment,” Sherlock grunted, delicately removing the globule of medicine with tweezers.

John felt a stab of jealousy as he watched Sherlock work with surgical precision. Precision he used to have until… well.

He looked down at his hand and wrist. Unlike the massive scar on his shoulder, the ones on his hands were minimal, one would really have to look to see them, but they were there.

“Sherlock, you shouldn’t be messing about with that. What if you need it?”

“I haven’t had an outbreak of hives since The Copper Beaches Massacre last summer,” Sherlock kept his eyes on his task. “Besides, I have others.” Without missing a beat, he asked, “Did you take your medication?”

“Oh damn,” John sighed, already getting to his feet. Sherlock had turned into a worse Mother Hen than John had ever been to him, at least when it came to John’s medicine. John hadn’t had a problem remembering to take his pills in the morning when he was released from hospital. It had just been so easy to slip back to his old habits and routines at Baker Street, he had forgotten that his antibiotics
were part of his new normal.

He had noticed that Sherlock really hadn’t made a fuss over any of his scars during sex and he was grateful. He had always hated it when his previous girlfriends (and yes, even his wife) made a big to-do about kissing his scars. He knew they all had good intentions. That they were showing him that they didn’t care how the scars looked, that they cared about him, the entire package… but kissing and touching the scars was rather pointless. The tissue was dead, he couldn’t feel a thing whenever someone pressed their lips to the back of his shoulder.

He also knew Sherlock was dying to examine all of his scars, from the gunshot wound to the dog bits to his splenectomy… from a purely scientific point of view, naturally. John also knew that Sherlock was working very hard to restrain himself from asking.

He leaned down to kiss Sherlock’s temple, then went to the loo to get his pills, grumbling about his coffee growing cold as he did. He took his medicine, drank a glass of tap water and peeled off the track suit jacket. He didn’t want to spend the entire morning pushing up the sleeves. Bad enough he had to turn up the bottoms multiple times so he wouldn’t trip.

*I need to figure how and when I’m moving back in permanently, getting my things without an altercation with Mary,* he mused as he made his way back to the lounge. *How we’re going to arrange a schedule with Susan. Because one of her arguments will be how time-demanding the Work is… and she wouldn’t be wrong…

*And if Mycroft’s people do find something in the Appledore vaults about Mary, then Susan will be here permanently… and to be honest, not sure how that’s going to work out… too old for a nanny, too young to be left unsupervised for long stretches of time… oh shit, Sherlock’s got his Not Pleased Face on…

What fresh hell now?

“Sherlock, what is it?”

Other than wrinkling his nose and furrowing his heavy brows, Sherlock didn’t respond.

John had to ask twice then had to actually sit down and tap Sherlock’s shoulder to get a verbal response, “What’s going on, Sherlock?”

“Mycroft,” he snarled, his lip curling. “Get dressed.”

“What?”

“He said he’ll be here in thirty minutes, which means he’ll be here in-”

“Fifteen,” John groaned. “Yeah, right. OK. Thank God we did do the wash otherwise I’d have no clean clothes.”

“Wear the red button-down,” Sherlock advised. “It suits you.”

“The red button… Mary donated that to a church jumble, said it was too faded.”

“And I retrieved it from the jumble, so go,” Sherlock flapped his hands at him as he rose. “It’s hanging in the wardrobe of your old room. I need to decide if I’m going to dress as well or if I should just greet him at the door in a sheet.”

“Well, I can’t be responsible for my actions if you do,” John quipped.
Sherlock scowled but leaned over to give John a quick kiss on the cheek. “You need a shave. I will not permit you to grow a hideous mustache again.”

“Fine, then you need a haircut.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and tossed a New York bagel to Gladstone. “Hurry,” Sherlock advised him as the dog gnawed on the crusty bagel. “We may be able to salvage this morning after my detestable brother departs.”

“Are you being delicate?” John arched a silvery eyebrow, a cheeky grin quirking his lips up.

“Fine, I’ll be indelicate. I wish to shag you into the carpet, but the Work comes first.”

That sobered John, “You think Mycroft has a case?”

“What else would he want to speak to me?”

Ten minutes later, a clean-shaven John sat in his comfy plaid chair, wearing neatly-pressed jeans and his red button-down. Sherlock sat in his green vinyl chair, wearing, to John’s surprise, a dark navy suit and a crisp white dress shirt. John decided he liked it. The navy didn’t make him look like an undertaker as some of his black suits did.

Before he could ruminate more, there was a tap on the door. Then Mycroft let himself in as if he owned the building.

John rolled his eyes behind the sheltering pages of The Guardian.

“Dr. Watson,” Mycroft feigned surprise. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Most people don’t,” John said placidly behind his newspaper.

“My little brother’s secret weapon,” Mycroft’s beady eyes flicked between John reading the paper and Sherlock scrolling through his mobile. “Ah,” he finally breathed, his nostrils flaring. “When can we expect the happy announcement regarding you two?”

“When your obituary is printed in The London Times, for that shall be a very happy announcement, knowing you’re finally out of my hair,” Sherlock grumbled, not even looking up. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?” he drawled, not even bother hiding his irritation with good manners.

To his credit, Mycroft did not sound as oleaginous as usual. “To listen.”

“Why?”

“William, please.”

John lowered his paper at Mycroft’s use of Sherlock’s hated first name. Sherlock locked the screen on his mobile and tucked it into his pocket.

Both men looked at the sealed file in Mycroft’s hand.

“Neither one of us likes to admit how alike we really are,” Mycroft spoke slowly, obviously choosing each word with great care. “For example, neither of us cares to admit when we are wrong. But too much blood has been split because of my pride, my need for control.”

John furrowed his brow, thoroughly confused. Was Mycroft actually about to eat crow in front of
them? Or was this a great big act? Sherlock wasn’t the only accomplished liar in his family.

He wished Violet was there so she could profile Mycroft’s performance.

Then he felt a twinge of guilt, as he always did when he thought of Violet. She had told Sherlock that their relationship was over and he needed to pursue John… but… it still made him feel terrible. He had liked the idea of Sherlock and Violet… but that was back when he had been happy with Mary.

John ordered himself to focus.

“It was a mistake to order you to drop Lady Smallwood’s case when she hired you to protect her from Magnussen. I should have known better, I should have realized that only would have fueled your curiosity.” He wetted his lips.

Both John and Sherlock blinked and glanced at each other. Mycroft, the Ice Man, never showed his nerves, never let the mask slip. Never, never showed his hand.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” John fell back into good old-fashioned courtesy. “A glass of water, perhaps?”

“No, thank you,” Mycroft shook his head. Knowing that he had Sherlock’s full attention, he locked his black lizard eyes on Sherlock’s opal irises. “I see the error of my ways now. I will keep my promise never to coerce you or blackmail you into working for MI-6 ever again. As far as we’re concerned, you acted in self-defense. Our tech agents are working on altering the surveillance footage now, so if it ever comes into question, we can show without a shred of doubt that Magnussen threatened you and Dr. Watson first.”

“You can do that?” John blurted out.

“Shut up, John,” Sherlock snapped with his old abrasiveness. “They obviously can.”

*Good to know love hasn’t made you soft,* John thought with a touch of annoyance.

“Well, if George Lucas can alter a well-known and loved film to have that silly green alien shoot first instead of the anti-hero, then yes, we can re-write the past,” Mycroft sounded more like his smarmy self and John found himself wanting to punch him again.

*Git,* he fumed.

“Get to the point, Mycroft,” Sherlock’s voice was deceptively light.

Mycroft held out the file, a peace offering, “Here, take this. At least get all the facts before pursuing the Scowrers Family. Educate Dr. Watson as well. Then, remember, before diving in the deep end, that I begged you not to chase this. Not for my sake, but for the sake of our parents…” he frowned as Sherlock rolled his eyes and shifted away from him, “Very well.” Mycroft pursed his lips like a fussy, disapproving old lady, “If not for them, then at the very least for your son.”

*Fuck,* John thought as he struggled to keep his face pleasantly confused. Sherlock naturally hadn’t so much as fluttered an eyelash.

“Beg pardon?” he queried politely.

“You heard me just fine, Little Brother,” Then Mycroft’s thin lips crooked up into a thin, cold smile. “I didn’t know you had it in you, to be perfectly honest.
“I’m quite sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sherlock replied just as coolly.

John decided that keeping his face neutral would be too much of a give-away so he allowed himself to get pissed off. “Of all the stupid things to say, Mycroft.”

“Oh, seriously? How long did you two expect to fool me? La Ligue des Roux has had an unusual interest in Dr. Hooper-Lestrade’s son for quite some time now. Also, do you really think it’s a coincidence that the child just happens to look like Sherlock when he was the same age? Oh, I know the eye colour and the hair colour are all wrong but do not underestimate me or my powers of observation, Dr. Watson. That boy is a Holmes, not a Lestrade.” He gestured with the file again. “Take the file, Sherlock. Read the facts, then decide if you’re going to take the case.”

“What’s the catch?” Sherlock demanded.

“The catch is our parents don’t want to lose you. You have a child who will need you someday, even though his adoptive father is a perfectly satisfactory parent.” Finally realizing Sherlock was not going to take the file, he handed it to John instead. Adjusting his impeccably pressed cuffs, he added lowly, “You’re all I have left as far as family goes. I will never marry. I will never have children of my own. I have affection for Anthea because she is Ford’s daughter, but she is not my daughter, plus I must temper my fondness for the girl as she is a field agent and my subordinate.” He fiddled with his brolly for a bit as he spoke.

Never in a million years had John expected to feel pity for Mycroft, of all people.

And yet… he did.

*What a lonely life he has…*

As if to confirm John’s thoughts, Mycroft added *sotto voce*, “There is no one else I love.”

Mycroft turned to leave when Sherlock sneered, “So will Henry Lestrade be unfortunately kidnapped and re-homed to someone else as if he were a stray puppy?”

While he knew those words weren’t aimed at him, they still felt like a kick to the gut to John.

Mycroft’s shoulders sagged. “No, of course not. He’s a Holmes. He’s family. That’s why he stays.”

“But the hell with my daughter, isn’t that right Mycroft?” John’s mouth twisted up into a positively murderous smile. “She’s not your family, so who cares about her.”

“It’s quite possible he doesn’t care about Marissa because she’s also a girl,” Sherlock unhelpfully added.

Mycroft shot Sherlock a nasty glare then turned around, facing John. “I assure you her gender has nothing to do with the decision to not return Marissa to her biological parents when she was retrieved from Moriarty’s men after they had abducted her from hospital. I have asked to have Marissa returned. To you,” he fixed his beady eyes on John, letting the implications of those words sink in.

“So if I leave Mary…” John felt a flutter of hope.

Mycroft immediately crushed it. “My superiors say no. I will ask again, but it looks bleak.”

“Because of Mary,” John whispered, digging his nails into the arms of his chair.

“Because of Mary’s crimes, which we all know, but cannot prove because no one will speak up,”
Mycroft actually sounded gentle, as if he really wasn’t trying to hurt John.

“Fine! I’ll fucking speak up. She shot Sherlock! She admitted it!”

“John, please, shut up,” Sherlock snarled. “You’re not helping. MI-6 wants to catch Mary in the act of a crime, preferably treasonable, don’t they? I’m small potatoes, she’d just go to prison for a spell. Catch her in an act of sedition, and John, you would be a happy widower.”

John’s gut contracted in an anguished spasm as his legs went weak.

*Widower…*

*I don’t want her to die. I don’t want anyone else to die…*

“England doesn’t have the death penalty,” John sagged back down into his chair.

Sherlock’s snort of derision reminded John that Sherlock had not been ordered to Serbia after Magnussen’s murder for a nice holiday. Still, he persisted, “Mycroft, please,” John finally allowed himself to beg. “Whatever you want or need, I’ll do it. I’ll sell Mary out. Set her up, whatever… just… Mycroft, my daughter…” he trailed off lamely, seeing Mycroft’s answer in his eyes before he spoke.

“Do you really think that matters to him?” Sherlock snarled. “I am his brother,” he narrowed his eyes, silvery and mean, at Mycroft. “And look what he allowed to happen to me.” In a deadly quiet voice, he asked, “I noticed in the papers that Lord Cullen-Culpepper is no longer a person of interest regarding Sally Donovan and Walter Mason’s abductions.”

“That true, Mycroft?” John felt the urge to hit him rise again.

How could he have felt pity for this reptile, this… monster.

When Mycroft didn’t reply, Sherlock lowered his voice, “Get. Out.”

“Marissa Watson really is safer with her new family,” Mycroft looked and sounded more like himself. In other words, he looked exceptionally cross and irritated with Sherlock. “Magnussen and Moriarty weren’t the only enemies Anzhela Anasenko made, especially now that the Scowriers Family are in play. They too have a vendetta against Madame AGRA. But, I will try again, for Dr. Watson’s sake.”

Without another word, he slipped out, umbrella hooked neatly over his elbow.

After Mycroft left, Sherlock slumped forward in his chair, covering his face with a shaking hand.

John bolted to him, kneeling before him. “We won’t let him,” he promised him, gripping his wrist. “We won’t let him take Henry from his mother, from Greg, from *us*.”

Sherlock lowered his hand and gave John a watery smile as he cupped John’s cheek with unspoken gratitude. “He’s lying about Marissa.” He tried to sound certain and strong, like himself, but instead sounded dubious, a younger, uncertain version of himself.

“I figured,” John lowered his own head, bitterness filling his heart. “But you said you and Violet had a lead, someone in Salt Lake City knows something. Anthea definitely knows something.” He looked up at Sherlock, “I believe in you. You’ll bring her home, I know it.”

Sherlock leaned further forward to kiss John’s brow, then down to kiss his mouth. “Your faith in me,
while undeserved and unprecedented, is always, always appreciated.” He pressed his forehead against John’s, his hand clasped behind John’s neck. “Do I tell Molly?”

“I don’t know,” John replied, his own hand gripping Sherlock’s arm. He sought Sherlock’s free hand with his own and they clung together, fingers twined together tightly. “I don’t know. She is very sensible, we know she can keep a secret. It feels wrong to keep her in the dark, but… she could also panic. Fear makes the best of us do stupid shit. Plus, what if Mycroft is lying, having us on again, as usual? Maybe he’s using reverse psychology to make you want to take on these Scowrers nutters, do MI-6’s dirty work again.”

“Maybe,” Sherlock still hadn’t moved, still kept his forehead pressed to John’s.

“Then he could say he never forced you to take this case,” John persevered, running his free hand up Sherlock’s neck and into his hair. “It’s the same dirty trick he pulled on us with the stupid Letter from that stupid princess last December.”

“Agreed,” Sherlock nodded, sounding more certain now. “So let us not succumb to fear. We will examine this situation as if it’s a new case. Determine the best course of action based solely on facts and logic.” He released John after another kiss, then relaxed into his chair. “Bring me the Scowrers file.”

“Are you sure?” John stood up, his mouth turned down into a mighty frown as his silver brows knit together.

“One hundred percent,” Sherlock nodded. “I did get a rather odious member of this particular crime family incarcerated. We should learn what exactly we are up against should they demand retribution, better to be prepared than risk surprise. And I hate surprises,” He held out his hand. “Besides, there is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.* The obvious fact being, of course, that this is another criminal organization masquerading as one big happy family.”

John rolled his eyes, realizing that Sherlock was being lazy, refusing to get up and walk the three steps to retrieve the file where John had left it. Still, with a magnanimous sigh, John took the three steps to retrieve the file and brought it to him. He glanced at the file label: MI6-0522 The Scowrers of Gilmerton, Lodge 341.

Wonderful, he felt his stomach churn again. Can’t wait to see what kind of hornet’s nest we kicked this time. “Well, you should still have something to eat and I don’t want to hear a word about digestion slowing you down,” John scolded him mildly. “What you want on your bagel? I think the butter might still be edible in the fridge and I know there are still unopened jars of honey and strawberry jam on the shelf.”

“Honey’s fine,” Sherlock broke the seal of the file with his thumbnail.

“’K,” John retreated towards the kitchen. “I’ll put the kettle on as well.”

“John?”

“Yeah?” he spun around, wearily waiting for the next command.

“I’m glad you’re home.”

John nodded in agreement, “Yeah. Me too
Apologies for the unexpected hiatus! Long story short, work, part-time work and school collided and I chose sleep over fanfic. Bad author, bad!

I see all of your lovely comments and kudos and appreciate every single one of them. Maybe I'll even stop being a piece of trash and start replying.... but I'm choosing sleep again because I am trash.

Have a wonderful pre-holiday week! XOXO
Brillancy

Chapter Summary

Brillancy

A game that contains a spectacular, deep and beautiful strategic idea, combination, or original plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Fifty-three: Brillancy

20 June 2016
Thames House
Monday morning
9:27 AM

Even though he was technically MI-6, there was an office available for him to use at his convenience and leisure at MI-5 Headquarters.

He wanted to be seen at SIS Headquarters on Vauxhall Cross as little as possible. After all, what business would a low-level bureaucrat have at MI-6 HQ?

Not that he wanted to be seen at Thames House often either. However, sometimes he needed a proper office for his work and this location would do nicely for today’s odious chore. The office was utterly utilitarian, no frills, no fuss, nothing like his many bolt-holes across the city. But it was best not to use the same location frequently.

As the MI-6 motto goes, Semper Occultus.

He hoped he hadn’t entrusted his greatest secrets to the wrong person.

Perhaps sentiment is blinding me, he worried as the receptionist buzzed him.

“Miss Bellamy is here, sir,” droned the innocuous, anonymous voice.

“Send her in,” Mycroft switched the speaker phone off and folded his hands, prepared for battle.

Anthea walked in, her pretty face a vapid, docile mask of polite interest.

I taught her well, Mycroft felt a bubble of pride floating up inside him.

Anthea stood politely in front of Mycroft’s boring metal desk. She kept her hands behind her back. An image of Sherlock popped into Mycroft’s head. He always held his hands behind his back to hide nerves.

So did he.

So had Ford.
And Father.

Interesting, he tucked that observation away for later. Unlike Sherlock, he was not distracted by minutiae. “This is the second time you have failed me,” he informed her bluntly.

“I know,” Anthea did not offer excuses or invite pity. She also did not apologize. Mycroft felt another bubble of pride expand his gut.

“My superiors are suggesting that we pull you from Operation Cossette.”

“I see,” Anthea did not look surprised at all.

“In fact,” Mycroft leaned forward, “My superiors are suggesting demotion, even termination.”

“What?” Now Anthea lost control and balled her hands into fists. Her face mulish, she snapped, “Uncle Myc, how can th-”

“I am not your uncle here,” Mycroft’s voice went from cool to frosty. Anthea buttoned her lip and swung her hands behind her back again. “I am your immediate supervisor and I am telling you the facts of life, agent. The death of the nurse, Jennifer Kay Boyle, was indeed caused by your hand and was tragic. However, you acted on bad intel, since at that time, there was no way of any of us knowing that the mole had hacked our computer systems. However…”

“Baden-Baden,” she closed her eyes, her shoulders slumping. “Mr. Holmes, I’ve read and re-read the files and I’ve watched the German CCTV videos. I don’t know what I could have done differently. I checked and double-checked the intel, I did learn from what I did to that nurse. I swore to myself I would never cause harm to a civilian ever again, if and whenever possible.” Realizing that she sounded a bit melodramatic, she pulled herself together. “Everything indicated that Violet Hunter had been in Lausanne and had moved to Baden-Baden. I have no reason to believe otherwise.”

“I agree,” Mycroft said simply. Anthea’s pretty blue eyes rounded with surprise but other than that, she showed no other emotion.

With a pang of loss and regret, Mycroft again noticed that Anthea had her mother’s eyes, as well as her mother’s magnolia-white complexion and backbone of pure titanium; she was her mother’s daughter all over again.

She had even had her mother’s lolling, elongated American Southern accent. Or at least she did as a child. After Mycroft became her legal guardian, he immediately enrolled her in diction classes and had the drawl drilled out of her.

Mycroft missed Section Chief Adrienne Melrose. Not only had she been the love of Ford’s life, Adrienne had been Mycroft’s friend. Maybe even his best friend, after Ford, of course.

He hadn’t been lying when he told John and Sherlock there was no one else he loved.

He wanted to be Anthea’s doting uncle, the kind who bought impractical presents and gave treats like trips to the zoo or pantomime. But he wasn’t her doting uncle. He was her guardian.

And her boss.

And mentor.

She was the last Holmes capable of carrying on the family tradition of duty and service…
…unless little Master Henry Lestrade shows promise later on down the road…

He tucked that thought away for future contemplation as well.

In a dry voice, he continued, “I told my superiors that there was nothing you could have done. I also told them of your exemplary work when you worked undercover to expose Irene Adler as a spy for Moriarty.” His face turned stern and his voice changed again, from frosty to glacial. “The issue with Baden-Baden wa-

“My stolen Blackberry,” Anthea interrupted with a groan.

“Precisely and do you know who masterminded the theft of your mobile?”

“Sherlock, of course,” she replied without hesitation. “The minute I got my hands on a laptop, I did a remote wipe of the devic-”

“You weren’t fast enough,” Mycroft interrupted quietly. “He still found your travel itinerary. Do not give me any detail regarding your travel plans,” Mycroft ordered sharply as he rose from his desk. “Just be advised that Sherlock asked me a very pointed question about Salt Lake City. Fortunately, I could not answer. Please keep it that way. As long as I do not know locations or names or any vital information, I can continue keeping my brother and his…” his nostrils flared, “Partner in the dark.”

“Maybe it would be more practical to pull me from Operation Cossette, then,” Anthea sat down without being asked but Mycroft did not comment on it.

Sometimes he forgot how young she was. Most girls her age were still in university, pursuing higher degrees, or starting boring entrance-level jobs.

Anthea, in her limited spare time, was studying physics… for fun.

Mycroft idly wondered how his little brother would react if he found out that Maud Andrea S. Bellamy Holmes had a higher IQ than both Sherlock and Mycroft.

Then, evilly, he imagined telling his Little Brother that Ford had been very sentimental when naming his daughter and the S stood for…

Well, that could be a treat for another time…

Suddenly, he remembered an old conversation he had with Anthea’s father like it was yesterday…

You find her. You get her out of whatever hellhole the Yanks hid her in. You raise her…

Me? I despise children, Ford…

Mikey, please, you’re the only one who can protect her. Her mum can’t and neither can I…

How can you trust me after I failed so with William…

Then Ford had said the most extraordinary thing: I trust you because you failed with William.

“Practical, perhaps,” he strolled around the dull, stainless steel desk then leaned against the front. Arms crossed, he stared down at Anthea, “Logical, no. You know everything about Operation Cossette. The time it would take to get another agent trained on how to handle this delicate situation would be just enough time for Sherlock and John to find the child. The minute John Watson locates his daughter then Mary Morstan would steal her and disappear.”
“We still haven’t found anything linking to her to AGRA?”

“Our people are still going through the files found in the Appledore vaults, but there are literally thousands of files. I’m cautiously optimistic something damning will be discovered.”

“So… I’m still lead on Operation Cossette?” Anthea tried not to sound hopeful or excited.

Mycroft arched one slender brow. “Consider yourself on probation and final warning. Proceed with extreme caution.” He leaned forward and hissed, “Get that brat and her new minders out of America posthaste, assuming that is where you stashed her.”

“The adoption has been finalized,” Anthea informed him, squaring her shoulders. “Legally, the Ferriers are her parents now.”

“Impressive,” Mycroft nodded in approval, “Kudos on cutting through American red tape. That is no easy feat. That will help proving you are up to the task as well as an asset.”

“I do need to ask for your advice,” Anthea let her arms fall to her sides. ‘Do you think I should risk going back to Sa-” Anthea caught herself and cautiously asked, “Continue with my travel plans? Now that Sherlock and Joh-”

“You leave Sherlock and John to me. I can handle them. I’m the only one who can handle them.” Mycroft rubbed his mouth then his chin, thinking. “Is it vital that you go?”

“Yes. After the two blunders that happened under my watch, I want to make sure that Dr. Ferrier gets the job offer, and more importantly, he accepts.”

“Then go, I can distract Sherlock.”

“The Scowrers?”

“They, and also Violet Hun- I mean, Violet Holmes,” he amended himself sourly.

“Our family keeps growing,” Anthea said, with just a bit of sass in her young voice.

“Lucky us,” Mycroft rolled his eyes.

“May I ask you a question?”

“I may not answer, but you may ask.”

Anthea gave him an affectionate smile, even though he had just informed her he was not her uncle at the moment. Her question and his answer was an old joke between them. “You always told me we work for the greater good? Why this child? Why are we protecting this one little girl? What puts her above the thousands that need to be saved?”

“That is classified,” Mycroft solemnly informed her.

Anthea hid her disappointment. “I’ll need to leave at once.”

“I gave Sherlock the Scowrers file. He may not pursue locating Marissa Watson, once he realizes that the Scowrers are worse than the Moriarty Family.”

“One can hope.”

“One can hope,” Mycroft agreed then lightly added, “Dismissed.”
Once Anthea departed, Mycroft put his hands in his trouser pockets and strolled over to what appeared to be a small cupboard meant for coats, briefcases and other small personal effects. There were even coats and scarves hanging from the pegs.

Crouching down, Mycroft entered the cupboard. His shoulders and back protested his unnatural posture. Ignoring the ache, he located the secret panel, slid it up and typed in a five-digit code.

He stepped back as the wall soundlessly slid inside a hidden pocket door.

Shutting the actual cupboard door behind him, he all but duck-walked through the hidden doorway. He straightened up and adjusted his tie as the secret door whooshed shut.

The room he stood in was just as dull and utilitarian as the room he had just been in. The desk was even the same, bland and metallic. Only this desk had a very large computer monitor on it.

Lady Smallwood looked up from the computer screen, her ash-blonde hair perfectly coiffed as usual, pearls around her throat, navy jacket and matching pencil skirt impeccably tailored to her tiny frame.

Mycroft’s nostril twitched as he detected the subtle aroma of Clair de la lune.

“Well?”

Lady Smallwood rose, stiffly. Mycroft hid his distress behind his usual expressionless face.

Despite being the same age, Lady Smallwood looked fifteen years older than him. She had never looked young, even when she had been young. Just as some people looked years younger than their actual age, she had always looked older. Mycroft had thought that had been due to her maturity and good-breeding. She never had that daisy-fresh, sweet naivety other girls had. She had been a rose surrounded by prickly thorns from Day One.

But her idiot husband’s philandering had aged her significantly. Oh, the idiot girl Lord Smallwood penned odes of lust and longing for had not been the only girl he had thrown a leg over. Just the only underage girl, which was all Magnussen needed to blackmail him about. He didn’t need to out the rest of the sluts Lord Smallwood had been with, just the one teenage girl.

Despite his infidelity, his death crushed her spirits utterly. If it had been a different decade, she would have worn widow’s black until her dying day and been perfectly content.

Mycroft hurt for her and hated her.

Lord Smallwood had been a rebound for Lizzie after she and Mycroft had ended things. She had married His Lordship for love and attention. He had married her for her family money.

Now she apparently had taken up with another member of the peerage, and another idiot at that. But at least the Earl of Rufton was a silly sod who only wanted pleasant company, someone to go to dinner with and see the occasional film… for now.

And he was easily manipulated, someone Mycroft could use to his advantage.

Lady Smallwood smoothed down her skirt, wincing as her hands brushed her swollen, tender knees. “Well, Mr. Holmes, I will talk to the council and advise that we keep Agent Bellamy on.” She stood up tall again, trying not to wince as she did so. “However, if she fails in this task, I will recommend immediate dismissal.”

“Well, and agreed. Are you alright, Lizzie?” Mycroft’s question was more than policy interest.
Her recent joint stiffness troubled him. Rheumatoid arthritis ran in her family. “You look like you’re in considerable pain.”

“Quite well, Mr. Holmes, thank you,” Lady Smallwood snapped. “You should realize that Anthea shall not receive special favors just because she’s your kin.”

Mycroft lifted his brows, “Who asked for special favors?”

Lady Smallwood gave him a foul look and started collecting her things.

“Anthea did ask a valid question,” Mycroft couldn’t resist poking the bear. “Why exactly are we protecting the Watson girl?”

She looked up after popping her mobile into her Chanel handbag.

She smiled, batting her eyelashes, “That’s classified, Mr. Holmes.”

**

22 June 2016

Salt Lake City, Utah

Wednesday evening

7:27 PM

“Sydney?” Hope Jefferson Ferrier stared blankly over her shoulder at her husband while trying to hold onto a very wriggly little blonde girl in order to keep her sitting in the bathtub. “You mean… Sydney, Sydney? Australia?”

Dr. John Ferrier, PhD, leaned against the doorjamb. “Be fitting, wouldn’t it? End up right back at the beginning, where we met?”

“John, I don’t know,” Hope fretted as she turned her full attention back to her daughter, “Lucy, Mommy needs you to stay in the tub.”

Lucy responded by trying to stand up again, thinking this was a fun new game.

“Let’s talk more when I get Miss Squirmy-Wormy here in bed,” Hope pleaded, flinching as Lucy plopped back down into the water, sending up a big splash. Water and bubbles splattered onto Lucy’s face and soaked her ancient Greenpeace T-shirt. “Lucy, no-no, that’s not nice.”

Lucy laughed and started slapping the soapy water.

“I’ll bathe her and tuck her in,” John offered. “You go put the kettle on, put your feet up.”

Hope hesitated then smiled.

Even after all this time, she still found his Welsh accent sexy as hell.

“She’ll try to escape,” she warned him.

“Oh, I don’t think you shall, my little mermaid,” he growled with fake-gruffness, causing his daughter to squeal with loud laughter.
She only legally became their daughter a week ago. Poor little moppet, orphaned, abandoned, no living relatives found.

The Ferriers had taken her in last January as a foster child with the intent to adopt.

They knew by the second day they wanted to be her forever parents, not just her foster parents.

After all they had been through, the infertility, the failed IVF treatments, the previous adoptions that fell apart; it was as if God had finally decided to give them a break.

Lucy’s social worker, or rather miracle worker, a woman named Josephine Stangerson knew what buttons to push, whose palms to grease.

Lucy’s adoption was put on the fast-track.

Then, another miracle was granted. Lucy’s adoption was finalized last week.

She was theirs. She was no longer “Lucy Doe”, a little girl lost in the system, but now was legally Lucinda Kay Ferrier and she belonged to them.

No one could take her away from them.

But oh, it had not been easy. Lucy had night terrors and was definitely behind on her development milestones. The pediatrician theorized that she might have been born premature, but couldn’t confirm, since no one had her medical records prior to her being entered into the social work system. Then, she had gotten a brutal case of bronchitis that meant missed work and scary trips to the ER as she gasped and wheezed while her little lips turned blue.

Then she was diagnosed with asthma after another panicky ER trip when Lucy started gasping for air again. Now they had to deal with expensive breathing treatments, trying to convince a cranky baby that the nebulizer was her friend.

She also startled easily, crying whenever the garbage truck came by or a thunderstorm rolled through. The new parents were honestly dreading the coming Fourth of July.

Also to her parents’ collective dread, she had discovered Caillou and was enraptured.

John Ferrier started desperately looking on the Internet if there were support groups for parents who had children obsessed with the whiny, bald-headed animated brat. Remembering her days babysitting her younger siblings, Hope reasoned that Barney the Dinosaur had been far more obnoxious… at least that was what she told herself when Lucy wanted to watch the Caillou Goes to the Zoo episode… again… for the five-hundredth time.

But, Lucy had a dazzling smile and craved hugs and kisses. She liked her dollies and her stuffed animals, especially a pink bunny that grew more and more bedraggled every day with every hug and every kiss. She giggled more and more as she grew more secure in her new surroundings. She also was becoming more and more vocal, finally babbling like a normal sixteen-month old, getting closer to saying “Mama” and “Dada” every day now.

The Ferriers were convinced Lucy would catch up.

But the money, oh the money, after the expenses of the medical bills as well as the adoption itself, plus all the additional expense of therapy and tutoring she would need if she still wasn’t developing as she should at her age… the money wasn’t stretching as far as it needed to go. Not on John’s salary as a professor at Salt Lake Community College.
Hope had actually been desolately resigned to going back to work full-time instead of continuing her independent research into Reverse Electro Dialysis, a clean energy source.

Then as she had been bathing Lucy, John had made his stunning announcement.

Hope decided the conversation she was about to have with her husband required cookies.

She had just shut the oven door and set the timer when John entered the kitchen.

“Clean nappy and fuzzy jim-jams on,” John announced, now wearing his Oxford T-shirt and a pair of well-worn and well-loved running shorts. “Whinged a bit, but was out like a lamp only after the second page of Goodnight Moon. She’s all tucked in her cot, with Pinky the Bunny in her arm, thumb in her mouth and her bum sticking up in the air,” He snatched up an egg beater and began licking it enthusiastically. “Oatmeal raisin, my favorite,”

“Don’t eat that, there’s raw egg in cookie dough,” Hope scolded him for the millionth time.

John gave her an impish grin, waggled his dark eyebrows and started on the second beater.

Hope sighed and went to make coffee.

She had indeed met him in Australia of all places. They had both been eighteen. He had been hitchhiking through Australia for his Gap Year. She was doing missionary work for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, handing out tracts in Sydney. She had appraised his dark brown hair and deeper brown eyes and alabaster skin and had smiled. Her smile had broadened when she’d heard his Welsh accent. He’d taken one look at her shiny blonde hair and big sky-blue eyes and tanned skin and was a goner.

They fell in love. They stayed in touch through the technological miracle of AOL Instant Messenger. Then he had decided to attend college with her at the University of Utah.

Afterwards, they set out to travel the world to try and save it. England to study at Oxford, then China to work as lab chemists at BP’s facility in Taicang, then back to England to work at the UK Energy Research Centre. Then off to the Netherlands when Hope got a fantastic opportunity to work at REDstack BV while John could work on his doctorate.

Then they moved back to Salt Lake City to care for Hope’s ailing mother, as her father had already passed away. John never once complained. He had been the one who had said, “We need to go take care of your mum.”

And here he was, almost twenty years later, still as handsome as ever. He had crow’s feet and smile lines and there was silver in his dark brown hair. But he was a good man, a supportive husband and most important, her best friend.

And now…

“So… Australia? How?” Hope leaned against the countertop as the Keurig heated up.

John had always gently teased her about her coffee addiction; playfully asking wasn’t it against her Mormon faith to take stimulants? She had always loftily reminded him that she and Mormonism had a passing acquaintance. No one in her family had been strict about their faith, except when it came to the importance of family.

“I really can’t believe it myself. Do you remember my old boyo from Oxford, Enoch Drebber?”
“Enoch Drebber?” Hope laughed then turned to pop in a Starbucks Anniversary blend K-Cup into the machine. As she pressed the lid down, she said, “You mean Dribbles, Mr. Can’t-Hold-His-Liquor? Of course I do, he was a riot. I loved him, how is he doing?”

“Well, he’s Dr. Drebber now, not so keen on the Dribbles moniker anymore. Anyway, he was at a renewable energy conference in London recently, ran into some of our old colleagues from the UK Energy Research Centre, they had a bit of a chin-wag and Drebber asked about us, where we were and whatnot. Arthur Charpentier, remember him?” When Hope nodded, John continued, “He told them about your work at REDstack BV, on the Blue Energy project. Apparently, Australia has its own version of REDstack BV, called SiB, Capital S, small I, Capital B, stands for Study in Blue.” He took a deep breath and triumphantly announced, “Dribbles created it, SiB. He wants us to work with him, on his Reverse Electro Dialysis project.”

Coffee forgotten, even though the aroma mingled with the cookies baking in the oven, Hope stared at her husband, slack-jawed, wide-jawed, “For real?”

“For real,” John put the egg beater down on the kitchen island and went to take Hope’s hands into his, “For real and real and real. I’m not being funny, love. This is our chance, to do what we’ve always wanted, to get rid of the world’s dependence on petroleum. To create a clean energy source without damaging the environment,” he squeezed her hands in excitement, “To create a better world for the next generation, for our daughter.”

But Hope’s mind veered towards practicalities. “But, what about Lucy, are we allowed to just take her and move her to a new country?”

“Of course we are. We’re legally her parents now. It would be no different if we had conceived Lucy and you had given birth and then we decided to move to Australia.” Seeing her doubt, he hastily added, “I’ll check with an attorney, naturally but Lucy is ours. If we choose to take her to Australia with us, we can.”

“What about her asthma? How will w-”

“Universal health care,” John promptly interrupted. He had never made it a secret how much he hated the American health care system.

Lucy relaxed but only a little, “Well, that’s good but still, what about money? John, we have no savings. Your 403b at the college is a joke. Every penny we had went towards finalizing Lucy’s adoption. And what little assets Mom had when she passed away went towards the final bills to her doctors and the nursing homes and… we have nothing. We don’t have the money to move to Australia, even if we sell the house and who knows how long that would take.”

“SiB will pay for our moving costs, as well as the first month’s rent on a flat, and not a shonky flat either. Nothing posh or dear mind you, but reasonable.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course. When Dribbl-errr, Enoch rang me, I researched the company. It’s the real deal. He sent over the job offer, it has all the details, about moving costs and the flat, it even came with recommendations about what neighborhoods to choose, cost of living, schools…”

“Speaking of cost of living,” Hope slid her hands out his and crossed her arms. “What is he offering? I don’t regret moving home to take care of Mom, but we’re broke, honey. I’m literally trying to decide if I should pay the electric bill or the water bill. We can’t move to be poor again.”
“One-hundred fifty thou, American dollars,” John immediately said, then added, “Each. Together you and I will be making three-hundred thousand a year, or whatever that is converted into Australian money. Plus raises and bonuses.”

Hope’s mouth fell open again. Never in their entire lives together had they made that much money. “I… don’t know what to say…”

“There is one catch…” John suddenly looked nervous, like cat-caught-the-canary nervous.

“I knew it,” Hope scowled.

“This project we’ll be on, it is top secret, no, not what you’re thinking,” John cautioned her when she rolled her eyes. “Not the usual bullshit of scientists from other labs trying to steal our research. What SiB works on… it’s… it’s revolutionary. Like…” he inhaled slowly. “I’m honestly not trying to scare you but…” he lowered his voice, “Revolutionary as in people may actually want to kill us if we succeed.”

Hope paled. “Why would they want to kill us?”

“Think about it, all the wars, all the politics, all the rubbish, all because of oil. What do you think would happen to all those bastards who got rich off of the wars and the politics and the oil would do if we create a sustainable energy source that eradicates the need for their product?”

Hope reached up and twisted her necklace, a gold locket that had belonged to her mother. Her eyes filled with tears, “Lucy was already an orphan once, I can’t…”

“I know, I thought about that too, God, I thought about that too,” John gently held Hope by her forearms. “But like you said, love, we’re skint. Not to mention if funding gets cut at the community college, I may get sacked. We’re looking at the possibility of pursuing our dreams, of making the world a better place and being able to afford to give our baby the life she deserves. An education and health care that we don’t have to worry about being able to afford it.”

“Looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives,” Hope added bitterly.

“It’s not as if they don’t have protection set in place for us,” John argued. “We’d have to tell friends and family we’re moving to New Zealand instead of Australia and we’d actually fly to Fiji before taking a private jet to Australia. We’d be working under pseudonyms at SiB…”

“Ugh, this is too cloak-and-dagger for me,” Hope pushed him away.

“Just… think about it,” John pleaded.

The timer pinged. Hope sighed then sighed again when she realized her coffee had gone cold.

“Alright,” she put on her oven mitts. “I’ll think about it.”

John smiled, “Rwy’n dy garu  di.”

Hope tilted her head to the side and smiled back. “I love you too,” she stood on her tiptoes and gave him a peck on the lips. Then she gave him a proper kiss. “And I will think about it. I promise. I’m just… scared. I don’t want anything to happen to you or Lucy.”

Meanwhile, across the street, in a nondescript van, a weary and jet-lagged Anthea listened in, huge headphones over her dainty ears.
She pulled out her new Blackberry and typed out an encrypted message to Dr. Enoch Drebber, who fucking owed her after the mess he had gotten in when he first tried to start-up SiB:

Increase offer to $250k annual each  
Pay for their visas, initial and renewal fees  
Get them a secure flat on SiB campus  
Don’t whinge, you can afford it  
I know what you’re not claiming on your taxes

She put her mobile down and rubbed her tired eyes.

The Ferriers had to be in Australia no later than the end of July.

Not just because she wouldn’t have a job anymore if they weren’t.

But because there had been recent chatter that Division Master J. W. Windle of the The Scowrers of Gilmerton, Lodge 341 was contemplating put out a million-dollar bounty on Marissa Anne Watson in hopes of pushing her murderous mother out of retirement.

And Anthea couldn’t confirm if that bounty was payable dead or alive.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Whatever-you-choose-to-celebrate-that-makes-you-happy!

Here's an extra chapter, just because :^)

And I'll also be travelling so I won't get a chance to post again until probably the end of the week.

Hope Santa is good to everyone! XOXO
Chapter Summary

**Quiet Move**

A move that does not attack or capture an enemy piece.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Fifty-four: Quiet Move

23 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Westminster, London
Thursday morning
1:16 AM

John snored lightly, out like a light.

Sherlock had learned that when John fell into that deep, dreaming sleep, the good sleep, the kind that recharges, he turned into an immovable stone.

That was perfectly fine… at the moment. Sherlock had also learned he liked it when John fell asleep on his shoulder. It gave him a chance to run his nimble fingers through John’s silvery hair without John giggling, pleased but also a tiny bit self-conscious… which was also adorable.

I am a man who now uses the word **adorable** and without sarcastic intent. Sherlock now slid his hand down John’s neck and spine, then back up again. He enjoyed the firmness of John’s musculature and also marveled over the weather-roughened skin, still tough even though John hadn’t stepped foot in Afghanistan in over six years now.

He didn’t care that he, a man who prided himself on reason, logic and intellect, now used the word **adorable** freely. He also didn’t care that he, a man who had enjoyed his solitude, now shared a bed with another man whom he found adorable.

He didn’t care that John was as heavy as a ton of cement bricks when he was sound asleep. Sherlock was just glad that John was sound asleep. The light, buzzing snores were chamber music compared to the screaming night terrors John used to try to hide from Sherlock when he had first moved in with him.

But… eventually, he would need to use the loo.

The sweltering summer days of June had crashed into London like a tsunami wave and threatened to flood July with more beastly heat. The central air conditioning unit that the late but not lamented Mr. Hudson (used to muggy Florida summers) had insisted on installing had crapped out again. Sherlock enjoyed fiddling around with it, as he did with most puzzles. Sometimes he even succeeded making it work again. Today he didn’t. But that didn’t bother him since John had slyly suggested that less clothing would make the heat more bearable.
Later, Sherlock had thought they had generated more heat as they tumbled around his bed…but sweaty and sated, he didn’t care.

So, sleep-bottoms and pants were completely abandoned and the blankets and top-sheets were kicked to the floor. John tried valiantly to stay awake so they could talk a bit afterwards. But the summer heat and the afterglow were too much, and his eyelids started drooping and soon, he was out like the aforementioned light.

And Sherlock got to play with John’s hair and touch his fascinating gunshot scar to his heart’s content. John lay on his belly with one arm draped across Sherlock’s chest. Like a blind man reading Braille, he dragged his fingers across the scar tissue, trying to glean as much information as he could from the bumps and ridges.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had felt this happy.

Usually his skies were grey with the occasional silver lining. Now his skies were clear and sunny. But storm clouds threatened on the horizon…

Not just a storm cloud… a hurricane… called Mary.

*Mary, Mary, Mary... quite contrary...*

He stopped playing with John’s hair to run his hand over his own tired face.

He was glad John was sleeping well. John needed to sleep well. He probably didn’t sleep much at the terrace house he shared with Mary. Probably slept with one eye open.

Sherlock, however, had barely been sleeping since John showed up last Friday, soaking wet, dithering on the stairs leading up to 221B whether to stay or go. Granted, part of the reason why he hadn’t been sleeping was because John had been keeping him awake in new and exciting ways. John’s shyness about sleeping with a man lessened night by night.

But the other reason why he wasn’t sleeping was the Mary Conundrum.

Sherlock never paid much mind to politics. However, one of Winston Churchill’s many quotes had always stuck in his mind…

*Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma...*

*How fitting... not exactly accurate... Mary technically is an American through her mother and Ukrainian through her father... but... the quote fits her.*

*Her given name does not fit her at all... Anzhela... Angel.*

*Her parents should have called her Viveca.... Conqueror, for she is no angel and she is hardly sitting at home, wringing her hands and weeping about her loss...*

*No... she has invested too much in being Mrs. Watson... she is preparing for battle.*

He pressed his cheek against John’s hair.

*I don’t know what to do...*

Last April, when he had been faking the stomach ulcer, Mycroft had accused him of not wanting John to see him when he was at his weakest. *You hate it when John sees you as less than the Great Consulting Detective, were his exact words.*
But that wasn’t exactly true. John had seen Sherlock at his absolute weakest, his absolute worst. And Sherlock had seen John hit rock bottom. He had caught John when the doctor erroneously told him that his baby had died. Had held him as he sobbed into his shoulder the night he learned that his sister Harry had been murdered. Had kissed him and loved him with no judgment when he burst into his hospital room after John had accidentally overdosed.

No, what Sherlock hated, was John seeing Sherlock frightened.

And what frightened Sherlock, what had always frightened him, was uncertainty.

And he was so uncertain, so, so afraid. His joy over John returning to him was tainted with the abject fear that John would go back to her, that Mary would force him to go back to her.

Because John would go back to her, if he believed that Mary would hurt Sherlock or would find Maisie and keep her from John, he would return to her. To protect him, always, John would do anything to protect him.

He felt an itchy, uncomfortable ache in his chest. Not heartburn (they had ordered Thai take-away for dinner and Sherlock liked khao kha mu, but it didn’t always like him...)

Not heartache either… not yet anyway.

No, the itch that needed to be scratched was that he wanted… no… needed to talk to someone.

Lestrade would murder him if he would ring him to discuss “boy trouble.” It was after one in the morning after all. Molly might be up, especially if Henry was being fussy. Or Bart’s might be shorthanded and need Molly to work the nightshift … but now that he knew he hadn’t fooled Mycroft after all regarding Henry’s paternity, it might be best not to contact her. Not until he had conceived a plan on how to handle this new problem.

Maybe I’ll just tell Mother, he thought childishly. Tell her to make Mickey leave me alone.

He snorted. Here he was, a grown man of forty, actually contemplating tattle-telling on his big brother to Mummy…

But while he didn’t wish to discuss his private life with that particular Violet Holmes, there was another Violet Holmes he could confide in…

He furrowed his brow, That might be Not Good. Rude, to discuss with my wife my concerns with my… boyfriend…? Partner? Love of my life… ugh, titles. Always with the titles.

He picked up his mobile and checked the time, then did some mental arithmetic.

It would only be about quarter-past eight in the evening in Cuba.

John sighed and shifted, starting to roll over. Sherlock took advantage. As John stirred and turned over and off his shoulder, Sherlock slid his arm out from under John’s head. John mumbled something under his breath then resumed his peaceful snoring.

Sherlock swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. He tapped out one word on his mobile and hit Send:

Consummated

No initials. Had to play it safe, even though he kept his mobile on strict lockdown when it came to
privacy, even borrowed Irene’s trick of having dye flood and destroy his mobile if the wrong pass code was entered too many times.

She was clever, The Woman.

He got up and walked around the bed to his chest of drawers. He opened the second drawer and selected a pair of cotton boxers that were a bit baggier than he cared for, but they were also 100% cotton and breathable. It was too hot to swan around in sheets and while definitely not modest, he didn’t want to skulk around in the flat starkers, mostly because his favorite chair was vinyl and the plastic tended to stick to bare skin when it got hot.

He used the loo then quietly padded to the kitchen for a glass of water. Gladstone had lifted his great big furry head when Sherlock passed the sofa, but plopped it back down again when he realized it was just The Tall One.

Sherlock had finished his glass of water and was about to drink a second one when his mobile vibrated. He put the glass down and picked the mobile back up. He smirked when he read her reply:

About goddamn time.
Call on burner.

Sherlock put his personal mobile down on the kitchen counter and took the glass of water into the lounge. Condensation was already building up on the glass. Beads of water slid down his hand as Sherlock walked to the piano, untouched since Violet had left.

Well… mostly untouched.

Sherlock put the sweaty glass on the windowsill then crouched in front of the piano bench, flipped the lid open and removed loose pages of sheet music one by one (Violet’s doing, to his annoyance. She didn’t like turning pages when she was learning a new piece of music…)

He clutched the pages of Pachelbel’s insipid *Canon in D*, nearly crumpling them.

*She’ll never play piano again…*

Remembered how she sat at the piano at Molly and Greg’s wedding, waiting for his violin cue.

*The music, nobody really knows where that came from so that’s completely mine…*

Sherlock threw the sheet music angrily aside.

*I’ll find a way for her to keep her music…*

Carefully he ran his thumbnail along the edges inside the piano bench then removed the false bottom. The dim light from the streetlamps reflected off the plastic of the prepaid mobiles, neatly lined up in rows, batteries all charged and ready to go.

He selected an LG Revere he had purchased in the duty-free shop in the Boston Logan International Airport when he and Lisbeth had first flown to America. Only after he had put the false bottom back in the piano bench, put the sheet music neatly away and drank the second glass of water, did he sit down and dial her number from memory.

She picked up on the first ring.

“Oh shut up,” he grumbled sourly, reaching over to open the window. Unfortunately, that did no good as there was not even the tiniest of breezes in London tonight. “How are you feeling?”

“Not bad, considering,” Violet pressed her own sweaty glass of water to her forehead. Like a cat, she stretched out on the plastic chaise lounge chair on the huge wrap-around porch of Doña Nalda’s wedding cake house. Shortly after Irene had moved in, two identical chairs had magically manifested themselves. Irene often dragged Violet out to the porch presumably to people-watch and pass judgment on their hair styles and garments. Violet had a sinking feeling Irene just wanted to keep an eye on her.

Tonight, Irene claimed she had an upset stomach and opted to take a cup of tea and a stack of unbuttered toast to her room instead. Violet had been too engrossed in her work to notice her disappearance until an hour after Irene had gone.

But Violet was like Sherlock when it came to work, The Work. So deep into her research, she had lost all track of time until Doña Nalda stalked into the kitchen and started scolding her in Spanish that she had been on the computer for over five hours and she needed to take a break. Eat food, drink a beer, go outside and rest her eyes.

Then she slammed Violet’s laptop shut and pointed to the door, tapping her foot. Violet meekly slunk out and upstairs to change into a clean pair of shorts and T-shirt as she had slopped *guisado de pollo* down her top and shorts but had loathed to leave her work for even the ten minutes she would have needed to change.

By then however, Violet knew she was at a good stopping point and had backed up all her work, so she wasn’t worried she lost anything when Doña Nalda shut her computer. After showering and changing into fresh clothes, she decided to reward herself. So, she raided Irene’s stash of *turrón de maní* and munched on them while she made herself more of that good Cuban coffee she had become addicted to. Knowing the caffeine would keep her awake for at least another three hours, she moseyed out to the big porch to people-watch until the humidity and mosquitoes made the outdoors unbearable.

If Sherlock hadn’t called her, she would have called him.

“I think the riluzole is finally kicking in,” Violet put her glass of water down and reached for the tiny cup of coffee with her left hand. Over that hand and wrist was a flexible black brace. It was similar to John’s soft brace after his broken hand and wrist had healed enough to no longer need a cast or a hard splint, but it was a bit more bendable than John’s old brace. “And the docs finally switched me from baclofen to tizanidine.”

“Any side effects?”

“A little tired, but nothing like the drowsiness and anxiety I had with the other pills. I could barely keep my eyes open when I was on that baclofen shit,” Violet idly watched a group of kids, mostly boys but a couple of girls had tagged along, start a pick-up game of soccer in the street in front of Doña Nalda’s house by the flickering lights of the old-fashioned street lamps.

“And it’s helping with the muscle spasms?”

“Yeah, I’m not having the twitching and the pins-and-needles sensations as bad as I was before. Physical therapy is going about as well as expected,” Violet sipped her coffee, awkwardly gripping the tiny cup with her finger and thumb. “I took your advice about the wrist braces. They help keep my hands steady and I still have decent mobility in my fingers, so… that’s good.”
“And the anxiety?”

Violet put the tiny cup back on the tray next to her and was absurdly pleased she didn’t drop it. “Significantly diminished, I mean, I’m still slightly concerned about Moriarty’s people finding me and Mycroft going back on his word to clear my name once and for all and that I’m still legally dead as far as the United States is concerned, but other than that, I’m golden.”

Sherlock snorted. She had delivered that little speech in her usual dry-as-dust voice… … but his sharp ears caught the slightest slurring on the sibilant consonants.

“But enough about me,” Violet’s voice became wicked and teasing. “Tell me allll the details.”

“A gentleman does not kiss and tell,” Sherlock said primly.

“If you’re a gentleman then I am a dainty little lady, the very flower of femininity,” Violet grinned as a scrappy little girl, no more than seven at most, delivered a kick that nearly knocked a bigger boy off his feet when the ball hit him in the gut. “What’s wrong, Sherlock? You didn’t just call me to tell me that you and John finally got together.”

“Mary.” Sherlock said simply, as he pulled the drapes away from the window to watch nocturnal London below him.

“Mary,” Violet repeated acidly. “Let me guess. John doesn’t want her in prison or dead.”

“No. He does not.”

“He’s better than both of us.”

“Concurred.”

“OK, I get the not-dead part… John has seen a lot of violence, and while he’s not going to shy away from committing violence to protect loved ones, he doesn’t want to see anyone else getting hurt or killed, including his piece of shit wife. They have a past, they’ve both lost children. They were in love once. She was there when you weren’t.”

Stung, Sherlock studied his toes. As always, her profiles were succinct and on point.

But I’m back now, he almost said. I’m home, I’m here and I’m not leaving…

He was glad he held his tongue because Violet then said, “But I don’t get that no-prison part, because the bitch shot you, and you are the love of his life.”

Sherlock’s tiny heart swelled. “He may be wavering on the prison part. He all but threw himself at Mycroft, offering to sell Mary out in order to get Marissa back.”

Violet slapped a mosquito on her forearm. It buzzed away unharmed. “Mycroft didn’t jump on that?”

“Didn’t even blink.”

“That’s weird,” Violet mused, watching the tiny girl successfully kick the beat-up and worn soccer ball over the goal line the kids’ had drawn onto the pavement with chalk. “But he’s only wavering; he’s not fully committed to the idea.”

Wellllll… I may have made a miscalculation.”
“How?”

“How?” he let the drapes slip from his fingers and flutter away.

“What foster daughter? You never mentioned a foster daughter.”

“We were a tad occupied, my dear Violet.”

“Start talking Stick.”

“Stop calling me that, I was undercover,” Sherlock ground his teeth. Then he explained how Susan showed up on his doorstep ill and abandoned, and how he had asked Mary to care for the girl while he was in America and John in Europe.

“You. Moron.”

“I thought you would be pleased that I considered the welfare of another human being?”

“That’s not why I called you a moron.”

“I know,” Sherlock smelled the oils from Gladstone’s fur before the dog padded over to him and plopped down by his feet. Reaching down, scratching Gladstone’s pointed ears, he sighed, “I thought the girl would serve as a good distraction while John and I were away.”

“A distraction… Are you… You can’t… you dipshit!” Violet snapped, sitting up now. Then she gave the kids a big smile and a wave because they had all stopped their game to stare at her. When the kids resumed their game, Violet hissed, “You can’t just plop a kid in Mary’s lap like she’s a stray kitten! Of course, Mary got attached and vice-versa, if the kid’s mother is terminal.”

Violet studied her arm brace and tried to clench a fist. Despite her brave words to Sherlock, it was growing harder and harder each day to do so, despite the new medications.

“How was I supposed to know Mary would give a damn?” Sherlock’s voice had the edge of a whine in it. “I thought she would only mind the girl until blood relations were located.”

She let her hand drop, “You forgot to factor in the possibility of the kid being an orphan.” Watching the kids, noticing the various degrees of shabbiness of their clothes, she added. “You also forgot to factor in sentiment and emotion.”

“I am aware of that now.” Sherlock felt Gladstone thump his furry head against his bare calf. He reached down to give the Alsatian’s ears another good scratch. “When the idea was first broached to Mary, she was very against it. Thought we were trying to give her a replacement child in order to forget Marissa. She only agreed to take Susan until a suitable relative who was capable to take proper care of a teenager was located. But the girl’s biological father is out of the picture, the mother is seriously ill and her pseudo-stepfather is a serial killer.”

“So… I’m just going to pretend I didn’t hear the last part,” Violet slapped at another mosquito. “Why can’t Susan just live with you and John?”

“Who is going to mind her while John and I are on a case? I know she’s not a little child, but she’s also only fourteen. I remember what I was capable of when I was fourteen and I wasn’t even using
“Good point, I was a shit when I was fourteen too and I did do drugs back then, just pot but still…” she groaned. Then she added, “So on top of that little complication, we need to figure out who’s going to watch Maisie when we bring her home? We can’t lean on Mrs. Hudson all the time. She’s a treasure, but she’s getting up there in years. Plus, she’ll want to spoil the girls, be grandma, not a mother.”

“If,” Sherlock glumly corrected her, “If we bring Marissa home.”

“When,” Violet smugly corrected him.

Sherlock’s ears perked up. “What?”

“We agreed not to lie to each other because there is no point,” Violet sobered. “I’m not nearly as anxious as I was when they switched me to the tizanidine. But I do have bad days,” she admitted. “Not so much with anxiety… but…”


“Thought The Woman was keeping you up to date,” Violet lightly challenged him.

“She is. Tell me anyway.”

“Some days are just blah. I’m not mad or sad, or anything really. Just numb, kind of there, like furniture, but other days…” she trailed off. She watched the kids play, running around, laughing and shouting, completely taking their young and healthy bodies completely for granted. “Some days, I can’t even get out of bed,” she admitted in a whisper as tears stung her eyes. “Not because of the ALS, but because… I just don’t want to… like, what’s the point? Today sucks, tomorrow is going to suck, so why not just… stay still.”

Sherlock closed his eyes, realizing that it really hadn’t been good to call Violet after all about his concerns regarding John and the latest turn in their relationship. “John would say I’m being a dick right now, discussing my petty concerns while you’re the one who requires assistance and support. I am still not very good at perceiving emotional cues, especially on the phone.”

“John’s the love of your life and is married to an assassin. That’s not a petty concern, darling.”

“Well, phrased like that, I suppose you have a valid point,” Sherlock mused, opening his eyes. “But you and I were once… um… well,” he flailed his free hand around. “I have been advised it’s considered rude to discuss a current relationship with a former romantic partner.”

“I was the one who ended things. I faked my death to end things.”

“You always were a bit dramatic.”

“But you never belonged to me,” she added. “Not really. I was just… borrowing you until John was ready.”


“We’re all books, we all have our stories,” Violet watched the kids start to scatter towards their respective homes as their mothers called for them. “And you and John have an epic love story that’s going transcend time. People a hundred years from now will still be talking about Holmes and Watson. Me and you, we’re barely a short story. We’re a poem, a haiku.”
“Short stories are still important stories,” Sherlock said gruffly. “And your story is not over. You still have chapters to go. Think about that when you can’t get out of bed.”

“I don’t have as many bad days as I did when you first dropped the ALS bombshell on me,” Violet rushed to reassure him. “And I don’t have many blah days. Some days are good. Some days are very good.”

“Oh?”

“When I get back inside, which is soon because the mosquitoes are not just trying to eat me, they are trying to carry me away, I am going to email you and Lisbeth video surveillance shot on January 12 of this year, at Salt Lake City International Airport.”

“Oh?”

“At 8:15, an as-of-yet-unidentified woman handed off a female toddler to one Anthea Bellamy.”

Sherlock sat straight up. “Are you absolutely certain?”

“I told you, I had a very good day today.”


“Please,” Violet snorted, “The Moriarty Engine makes Tor look like a beta version of Dogpile.com.”

“Moriarty Engine?”

“I re-branded it,” Violet announced loftily. “It’s not really a Code, is it? It’s more accurate to call it an Engine since it’s really a super search engine with no traceable history left behind.”

Plus Moriarty Engine sounds more ominous, Sherlock felt a stirring of disquiet within him.

Meanwhile, Violet had asked him, “How much longer am I going to have to drown in my own sweat here in Cuba?”

“Mycroft confirmed that everything is on track. Violet Hunter will be resurrected as of the thirtieth of June and our Cuban marriage will be recognized that same day. He admitted that he’s having an issue with the permanent residency paperwork, mostly due to typical government bureaucracy but an extended visitor’s visa is being prepared for the interim. We hope to get you on the first flight to England no sooner than July 2.”

“Then we will figure out how to retrieve Maisie and get rid of Mary without disrespecting John’s wishes that she remains alive and out of jail.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course,” Violet still sounded regal, more like the queenly Miss Smith and less like the pragmatic Agent Hunter. “We three could take over the world if we really wanted to.”

“Ugh,” Sherlock pulled a face. “Dull. Listening to those peasants whine about food and medicine when there are crimes to investigate.”

“Good to see that your priorities are in order.”

“Send me that video.”
“Give John a big wet smooch for me.”

“Stop,” Sherlock’s frown deepened.

“Me encantas,” Violet still sounded flippant, as if she could see Sherlock’s grimace.

“Sí, lo sé,” Sherlock scratched a niggling itch on his lower back as he stood up. “Me encantas también. I always thought it was mildly interesting how Spanish actually used language to define the various degrees of love. But linguistics was never truly my milieu.”

“John and I had a conversation about that once, actually,” Violet ran her hand down her throat, remembering. She had been trying to convince him to leave Mary. He was trying to convince her to stay with Sherlock. “Sometimes…” she exhaled, clearly changing her mind on how she was going to proceed. “There’s something I want to say, need to say, before it’s all too late. I should have said it a long time ago, but I was too afraid. It was too hard to let you know… but I didn’t want to wreck it all, what we had.”

“Wreck it all? What on earth are you talking about?”

“What we had,” Violet said softly. “That it was good, it was beautiful, actually. And I was doing my damnedest to sabotage it the whole time. But I still would have ended it. Even if I wasn’t in hiding, even if I wasn’t sick,” she confessed. “I don’t regret ending it. I’m glad you and John got your shit together, finally. But… truth be told… I wish it would have been me, not him, that ended up by your side. I wish I could have been strong enough to stay…”

“Violet…”

“I wish I was brave enough to love you.”

She hung up before she could say anything more.

She didn’t want to explain that her “spidey-sense” had started tingling. A ghost has walked over my grave… Things are going too well…

She no longer wanted the unsaid things to be unsaid.

Meanwhile, Sherlock hit the End button in utter bemusement just as John wandered into the lounge, yawning and rubbing his eyes. “Sh’lock, whaddyadoingup?”

“Mm? Oh, just…” he held up the mobile, waving it a bit, “Checking on Violet. Time difference and all that, wanted to catch her while she was awake.”

“Oh,” John woke up a bit more, scratching his thigh. He had also donned boxers, but that was definitely because he was far more modest than Sherlock. “How is she?”

“She’s having, ahhh,” Sherlock stalled, then committed a minor sin of omission. “She is having a good day,” Sherlock patted Gladstone on the head then quietly commanded him in German to go to the kitchen. Switching back to English, he added, “A very good day, which means we’re going to have a good day as well.”

“I… don’t understand.”

Sherlock crossed the room to John. He put his hands on John’s shoulders. Running his thumbs along
John’s collarbones, he gave him the good news, “Violet found video surveillance video taken on January 12 of this year, at Salt Lake City International Airport of an unidentified woman handing off a female toddler to one Anthea Bellamy, time stamp at 8:15.”

John’s jaw dropped open. Taking a step back from Sherlock, he covered his open mouth with his hand.

Then he surged forward and enveloped Sherlock in a bone-crushing embrace.

“Oh my God,” his voice cracked. Over and over, he murmured, “Oh my God, oh my God…”

Sherlock placed on large hand on the back of John’s neck as his other arm snaked around John’s body, gripping his upper arm. Pressing his face against John’s hair, he huffed into his ear, “As I have said before and will more than likely say again, ‘when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth’?”

“And the truth is, she’s in America,” John whispered.

“Or at least she was six months ago,” Sherlock hated to be the wet blanket, but someone had to keep their head about this recent development.

By the dim light of the street lamps and moon combined, Sherlock could see John’s radiant smile. Or perhaps it was his smile that lit up the room enough for Sherlock to see his face.

“We’re going to find her,” John said confidently, his eyes locked on Sherlock’s.

Sherlock decided to allow himself to feel a tiny bit of joy.

He could be logical and reasonable after the sun rose.

After that tiny hesitation, he smiled, “We’re going to find her.”

John cupped Sherlock’s face in his calloused hands and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him.

Eventually John started tugging Sherlock’s pants downwards and Sherlock obliged him by returning the favor.

They never made it back to the bedroom that night.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY 2018!!!! :^)

Sherlock's infamous "when you have eliminated the impossible..." is from ACD canon's "Sign of Four..."

“… and it was so pretty out there, I’ve never been to the country, not the proper countryside anyway. Not like that, I mean, I’ve been to parks and stuff, but they were mostly play-parks when I was a little kid and we never went to the fancy parks because who wants to deal with all those daft tourists. Anyway, yesterday, before we drove back to London, Anna’s granddad said I was good enough to ride by myself without a lead rope and asked if I wanted a go before we left. And, I did it! I really did it, rode a horse all on my own, even made the old girl trot a bit, but I got a little frightened and had to slow down. Of course, I wasn’t on a proper trail or a fast horse. I was on this old mare named Dolly, but she was so lovely. Anna said they’ve had her forever, back when Anna’s dad was in secondary school. She’s ginormous and fat! But so sweet, never bucked or ran or did anything crazy and didn’t mind that I was stupid about riding horses. Oh, Mary it was so much fun and Anna’s grandparents said I could come back anytime I wanted to, is that OK? If Anna asks me again, can I go?”

“What dear?” Mary said absently, eyes on the motorway, mind on Baker Street.

“Er…” Susan faltered, “Can I go back and visit Anna’s grandparents, if Anna invites me? Her grandparents said it was OK.”

“Did they?” Mary sounded distant.

“Mary, are you OK?” Susan’s voice wavered.

Mary turned her head long enough to give Susan an indulgent smile. “Of course, I am. Little scattered-brained at the mo’, didn’t have my coffee. And it’s just been a tiny bit lonely at the house, with you gone on your adventures and John off on a case with Sherlock.”

She told the lie with ease.

“But how kind of Anna’s grandparents to invite you back,” Mary turned her eyes back on the road. “You should write them a thank-you note.”

“Oh Mary, that’s so old-fashioned,” Susan scoffed, hugging her hold-all to her.
“Yes, and grandparents like old-fashioned things like thank-you notes.”

“Can I just text them?”

“I think they’d prefer an old-fashioned hand-written letter,” Mary smiled when Susan groaned as if Mary had suggested Susan eat thumb-tacks.

After Mary had parked her old car inside the garage, Susan bolted out of the car, swinging her hold-all like an excited little girl, Dorothy skipping down the yellow brick road. Mary rolled her eyes in affectionate exasperation as she strapped Susan’s bulging rucksack onto her back then holstered a moderately heavy laundry basket out of the boot. Apparently, Anna’s grandmother had a green thumb and had loaded Anna’s parents down with goodies for the trip home. Anna’s mother had given Mary the excess: fresh broad beans, perfect little pea pods and bright red strawberries, accenting the air with its sweet fragrance.

“Anna’s gran is all about organic,” Anna’s mother had explained, shoving the basket into Mary’s hands. “And we could all murder a pizza right about now.”

Awkwardly, Mary made it into the house, shutting the door with her hip. “How about pea soup with minced pork pies and strawberry tarts?” she called out as she let the rucksack slide of her back one strap at a time, “For supper tonight?”

Susan was sitting on the floor, hugging and petting Sweetie, “Sounds fab, Mary.”

“Great, then you can help me roll the pastry dough.”

“Aw.”

“No, it can be fun. I’ll show you.” Mary crooked her head towards the kitchen.

Susan uncrossed her legs and rose with that coltish grace only teenagers had. “Think Sweetie needs a pee first.”

“Oh, you’re probably right and I need a bit of brekkie first. Did you eat?” Mary put the laundry basket on the kitchen table.

“Oh yeah, I’m stuffed. Anna’s dad made this big to-do about going to McDonald’s and getting loads of McMuffins and McGriddles for us all before you came,” Susan made a comically quizzical face and Mary smothered her own laughter. “Said he doesn’t like his mum’s cooking, but I thought it was fine. Loads of salads though, no meat, said they’re trying a vegan lifestyle, which, I mean, whatev’. Her grandparents are really chill. They went to like Woodstock when they were kids and they know about me and Anna being… well,” she twisted the hem of her pretty lavender tank top and bit her lip, “Me and Anna.”

During Susan’s speech, Mary had grabbed two bowls out of the cupboards and started shelling the peas from the pods. When Susan finished talking, calmly she asked, “And?”

“And they’re totes OK with it,” Susan tried to sound tough but Mary heard the unasked question: Are you OK with me dating a girl?

Mary noticed Susan kept many of her questions unasked. It would take time for the girl to trust herself to voice them.

Mary knew how she felt. She kept a lot of questions unasked as well…
“Just be safe, don’t do anything you don’t want to and if you have any questions, ask me or John,” she said lightly, hiding her smile at the look of profound relief in Susan’s young face.

“Well, it’s not like Anna or I can get preggers,” Susan added cheekily.

“SUSIE,” Mary mock-scolded her as Anna filched a strawberry. “Go let the dog out before his poor little bladder explodes, please.”

“Thought you were going to eat first?” Susan asked as Sweetie began to whine, pacing in front of the back door.

“Going to take care of this little chore first, then I’ll grab a cuppa and a biscuit.”

“Breakfast of champions there, Mary.”

“The dog, Susan?”

“Sweetie, c’mon, lovie,” she crooned to the disfigured bulldog. As she opened the backdoor to the pathetically small garden, she looked down and said, “Hey, there’s a huge parcel here.”

Sweetie sniffed the box, whimpered and ran away in the other direction.

“Oi! You stupid dog!” Susan called out as she knelt down by the box. “Scared of everything, that one,” she mumbled as she undid the twine.

“Hmm,” Mary examined the pea pods. “What was that dear? Didn’t quite hear you.”

“Someone left a parcel on the back step.” Susan opened the cardboard box. “Huh. Weird. It’s like, some sort of… I dunno, a cool box, I guess?”

Mary’s heart stopped as Susan lifted the cool box out of the box and set it on the floor.

Whirling around, she dropped the peas back in the basket. “Susan, do not open that.”

But Mary did not get her command out on time. Susan flipped the lip of the cool box off.

Then she dropped the cool box and let loose an ear-piercing scream.

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25 June 2016
221B Baker Street
Westminster, London
Thursday morning
10:47 AM

“You know,” John sat on the toilet as he towel-dried his hair. “We are going to have to leave the flat eventually.”

“Mmmph,” Sherlock tilted his chin up and expertly scraped off the last of the thick creamy shaving foam off his face. “We’ve taken the dog out. That is all the interaction with society that I can currently tolerate.”

“I’m serious,” John threw the towel over his bare shoulders and grinned at Sherlock.

“So am I,” Sherlock grinned as he turned on the taps.
As Sherlock splashed cool water on his face, John persisted, “The honeymoon needs to end eventually. Should probably go check in at the Yard, or go through the emails again, see if there’s an interesting case lurking in there.”

“We have enough on our plate. We have Violet’s case, Marissa’s case and the Scowerers.”

“Ah yes, the lovely Scowerers,” John rolled his eyes. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you slipping out of bed to go read that ruddy file some more.”

“It’s fascinating, the Scowerers…”

“More fascinating than my bits and pieces?”

“Well…”

“Oi! Really?” John snapped before he saw Sherlock’s sly grin. “Git.”

“Let’s go to Bart’s,” Sherlock reached for the hand towel. “Been a bit since we’ve seen Molly.”

“Really?”

“Yes… should probably inform her that Mycroft has deduced our little secret.”

“Ah,” John stood up, holding the towel wrapped around his naked waist. “Do you want to speak to Molly alone?”

“Moral support would be appreciated,” Sherlock ran the towel up his throat then over his sharp cheek bones. “I’m lost without my blogger you know.”

“Great, well, get your skates on then. She works mostly days now, ever since the baby. If we hurry, we can catch her during her lunch break.

Upon hearing Sherlock’s grunt of approval, John exited the bathroom and strode into the master bedroom. Out of habit, he picked up his mobile. He rolled his eyes mightily when he saw a missed call from Mary.

He walked around the bed to the other little nightstand on the other side. Picked up Sherlock’s phone and thumbed in the pass code that Sherlock offhandedly gave him two nights ago.

His silvery brow flew up when he saw that there were missed calls from Mary as well as a text:

Please have John call me
It’s an emergency – MMW

“Sherlock,” John called as he sank down onto the neatly made bed. “Sherlock come here.”

Wearing his third best dressing gown, Sherlock sailed into the bedroom. The crimson silk of the dressing gown swirled around him like a cape. With an arched eyebrow, he asked, “Mary?”

“Yeah… I think it might be an actual emergency,” he held up the mobile so Sherlock could see the text message. “But it’s Mary, so who really knows.”

Sherlock plucked the mobile from out of John’s fingers. Hit Mary’s contact information and hit Dial.
“Hello Mary, what seems to be the trou…” he trailed off. Soon he was pacing. When John opened his mouth to ask a question, Sherlock silenced him with a raised finger. “We’ll be there in forty-five minutes… maybe an hour, depending on traffic. Yes, we’ll both be there. Do not touch anything else. Do not answer the door or phone for anyone other than us. Keep Susan out of the kitchen.” He rang off then said quietly to John, “Get dressed.”

John attempted a brave smile, “Honeymoon’s over then?”

Observing his distress, Sherlock put his hands in his dressing gown pockets and sat next to John. “I don’t think Mary masterminded this, although she will use it to her advantage… but she did not plan this. She did not want this.”

“What do you say that?”

“Because Marie Devine was her best friend, her only real friend,” Sherlock patted John on the knee then kissed his cheek, “Get dressed.”

Then, with a bitter smile, Sherlock added, “And put your wedding ring back on.”

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25 June 2016
John and Mary Watson’s residence
Saturday morning
11:57 AM

“Mary?” John called as he opened the front door.

Mary sat on the sofa, her arm over Susan’s shoulders. She held her not so much as to comfort her but to keep her still. Two cups still full of tea sat on the coffee table.

The minute John and Sherlock were inside, Susan bolted from the sofa and flung herself into John’s arms. “Hey, Susie, what…” he cupped Susan’s face. Her cheeks felt clammy to the touch and her pupils were pinned with terror. Baffled, he looked over Susan’s bright blonde hair and into Mary’s pale, drawn face. “What happened?”

Susan jerked her face out of John’s hands then buried her face into his chest, clutching the lapels of his black motorcycle jacket. Sobbing inconsolably, she babbled, “Head… there’s a head, a fucking head…”

“Language,” Mary said faintly, getting to her feet. She wobbled and plopped back down, sinking into the sofa cushions. She squeezed her knees with her hands and took a heaving breath, as if willing herself not to vomit.

“John, why don’t you take Susan upstairs,” Sherlock suggested mildly, as everyone was discussing the weather. “You’re better at questioning young people than I am.”

“Right,” John mumbled, remembering Sherlock’s last disastrous interviewing of Susan. In a gentler voice, he patted Susan’s back and crooned, “Come on sweetheart, let’s go to your room and you can tell me all about it, ‘K?”

“You’re going to stay right?” Susan lifted her head up, her pretty sea glass eyes wild and frightened. “You’re not going anywhere tonight, are you? Mary said you’ve been working a case with Sherlock and was staying at 221B but you can come home now, right? Please?”
“Of course he is,” Sherlock assured her smoothly, as if the last week hadn’t even happened. “John Watson would never abandon you if he felt you were in danger.”

_You know me too fucking well, Sherlock_, John stifled a sigh. Even though Sherlock’s words stung, they were true. John would not abandon Susan… but neither would Mary. And Mary would never let him take Susan to Baker Street, no matter how much safer that block of flats was than this cardboard cut-out terrace house.

So he put a comforting arm around Susan’s shaking shoulders and led her upstairs.

Sherlock watched them leave, detached as usual. Once they were up the stairs and out of sight, Sherlock locked his omniscient eyes onto Mary’s deceptively beguiling blue irises.

“This is not the time to lie to me, Mary,” he threatened coolly. “I need all the pertinent details.”

Mary nodded then covered her face with a shaking hand.

Sherlock, with dwindling patience, watched Mary weep. Just as he opened his mouth to inform her he needed to look at the evidence today, Mary gulped and whispered, “This is all my fault. Of course I’ll tell you the truth, Sherlock.” She lifted her head, her eyes red and watery, red splotches blooming on her cheeks. “I want to know who did this.” She wiped her eyes again then discreetly under her nose as she had no tissue to dry her eyes and wipe her nose. “Where do I even start?”

“From the beginning, obviously,” Sherlock’s lips thinned. He had never known Mary to lose her head. He spoke slowly to her as if she was one of Lestrade’s mentally deficient underlings. “What was the first thing you did when you woke up today?”

“Err… OK… well….”

After a few false starts, Mary carefully told him about her morning. What time she woke up, showered, brushed her teeth, dressed, let the dog out and when she left to get Susan and when they returned. How she and Susan had bantered in the kitchen before she told Susan to let Sweetie out again for a tinkle.

“… I told her not to open it, but I wasn’t fast enough. She opened the lid, screamed bloody murder. I looked into the cool box, saw what it was. Then I chivvied Susie out of the kitchen and rang John.” Bitterly she added, “Then you when he didn’t pick up.”

She slowly stood again, this time staying upright. “This way,” she beckoned him with her hand and led him into the kitchen.

Sherlock dug the blue latex gloves he had stuffed into his suit jacket pocket before bolting out of 221B. “You didn’t touch anything?”

As Sherlock pulled the gloves on, Mary shot him an irritated look. “Not the cool box, no. I know better than that. But there was an envelope addressed to me still at the bottom of the parcel. Peters must have put the letter in first, then the cool box, then boxed it all up nice and tidy.”

“We don’t know it’s Holy Peters who did this,” Sherlock cautioned as he bowed over the cool box once his gloves were on.

“Of course we do!” Mary snapped.

“Well, then case closed and I bid you good day,” Sherlock sniped back as he straightened up.
“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Mary squeezed her eyes tightly shut and crossed her arms against her stomach. Reaching up to rub her temple, she asked, “But logically, who else would do such a horrible thing?”

Sherlock took out his miniature magnifying glass and opened it. Crouching down, he peered into the cool box, the lid still off, still laying exactly where it landed after Susan had flipped it off.

Inside the cool box was a very large glass jar, lying on its side. Cotton wool was stuffed in the spaces between the jar and the cool box so the jar wouldn’t move during transport.

Inside the jar was yellowing formaldehyde and a head.

Sherlock painstakingly examined every inch of the cool box. It was frustratingly ordinary, red, with a white lid, like what one would bring to a picnic or a beach party… however the logo was interesting.

“Igloo…” Sherlock murmured, “This was purchased in America…but that doesn’t help us as it could have been purchased from one of the millions of the giant box stores there.”

He closed his magnifying glass with a dainty click and pocketed it. He then took out his mobile and started taking pictures. “Although… it was confirmed he was in Missouri… hmmm…”

“What?”


Watching him work, Mary ran her fingers through her platinum curls. She wanted to scream but she also knew better than to interrupt him while he was working.

With his nose a millimeter away from the glass jar, Sherlock peered at the head inside. “All I see is hair,” Sherlock straightened and pointed to the mousy strands floating in the yellow fluid, obscuring her face. “How did you deduce it was your friend, Marie Devine?”

“The pictures.”

“Pictures, what pictures?”

“In the envelope at the bottom of the cardboard box, under the cool box, I just told you that.”

“You opened the envelope,” Sherlock sounded resigned, as he often was at people’s impracticality and foolhardiness.

“It was addressed to me, Sherlock.” Mary pointed at the kitchen table. “Not Mary Watson.”

Sherlock lithely bounced to his feet. Stepping over the cool box (or cooler as the Americans would call it…) he snatched up the plain white envelope and turned it over. Someone had printed “ANYA” in big block letters on the front. “Your childhood nickname,” Sherlock arched an eyebrow, “Yes?”

“Yes,” Mary had her hand to her throat now.

“Anyone other than me know that?”

“John, of course. And Marie, which means Peters knew. They used to be married.”

“I am aware,” Sherlock opened the envelope again, noting that it was an envelope meant for a greeting card, not a letter. “I also recall that their separation was amicable as long as she didn’t betray La Ligue des Roux.” When Mary gave him a puzzled look, he explained, “She told me, after she had killed Jim Moriarty.”
Mary looked like she was about to cry again. “She killed Jim for me, for what he did to me,” she gripped her belly as she painfully recalled she should have a two-month-old baby boy now, instead of nightmares and scar tissue.

Sherlock felt a twinge of pity for her, but he hid it behind his usual disdainful façade. He needed to focus on now, not on what happened and what might have been.

He carefully reached in and pulled out a stack of Polaroid photographs.

The first picture was of Marie Devine’s body, clearly minutes after death had occurred.

The second picture was of her nude body supine on the floor, an intricate butterfly tattooed on her lower back.

Sherlock screwed his eyes shut, remembering his first and last conversation with the mousy little assassin:

*Is the tattoo on your lower back a blue butterfly?*

And Marie had reached around herself and rucked up her black jumper, showing off a delicate butterfly with sapphire and periwinkle wings...

And Mary had a matching tattoo as well.

Sherlock flipped through the series of photographs rapidly. It was a morbid flipbook of the Russian assassin’s dismemberment, ending with her head inside of a jar.

“You shouldn’t have opened this,” Sherlock scolded her. “This is evidence.”

“I can’t give that to the Met,” Mary hissed. “It has my real name on the front.”

“It might have fingerprints, hair, DNA…”

“He’s too good to leave a trace, Peters,” Mary whimpered, leaning against the refrigerator.

“Mary… we have to call this in.”

“I don’t want the Met to handle this. I want you to take the case.”

“When it comes to decapitation, I need all the resources the Met can provide.”

“John said you had a severed head in the ice box once.”

“That was different, that was an experiment,” Sherlock rolled his eyes.

“Then you should be able to gather any evidence you require at Baker Street!”

“Contrary to popular belief, I do not have a full laboratory at my disposal at 221B,” Sherlock felt his temper unraveling like rotting rope. “I must make do with what I have in my kitchen and I will require more tools than a plastic colander, meat thermometer, turkey baster and a seven-year-old Beko Frost-Free refrigerator.”

“Go to Barts.”

“And how will I explain to Dr. Lestrade how I came to possess a severed head? If you think Molly wouldn’t tell Greg, you have taken complete leave of your senses, madam.”
“You can’t show them those pictures,” Mary hissed. “They’ll start asking questions, questions I can’t answer.” She closed her eyes again. “Last autumn, after the Sussex Vampire case and before you and John went to Paris to find that stupid Letter, you and Violet went to Boscombe Valley for three days to investigate the murder of Charles McCarthy without John, remember?”

“Yes,” Sherlock gritted his teeth. It had been highly annoying not having John present for that case, although Violet had proved once again she was a capable investigator.

It had also been their first outing a couple… that bit did not go as well as their investigative teamwork had. Sherlock had ended up sleeping on the sofa most nights.

They had even contemplated ending things before they really began… but then, like idiots, they had patched things up.

_I wish I was brave enough to love you…_

_Never mind that now, focus… listen to what story Mistress Mary is spinning now…_

“… we went to help Greg and Molly get the nursery ready in their new flat and also to try to smooth things over with Greg because you two were going through that rough patch. Or at least, John was hoping to smooth things over with Greg… anyway, I spilt paint all over my shirt and I went to change into a clean top before going home, well,” Mary flushed. “Molly walked in on me while I was changing in the bath and saw it,” Mary reached around herself and pressed her hand against the small of her back, “She even said it was cute. Later, she made a smart-arse comment to get a tattoo as well and when Greg laughed her off, she told him I had one of a blue butterfly.”

Sherlock exhaled noisily through his nose. “Very well,” he felt his cheek muscle twitch. “I will keep yet another one of your secrets.” He stuffed the envelope in his jacket pocket. “Call the Met. Request not just Lestrade but also MacDonald and Macpherson. Let Lestrade know you want Molly to handle the autopsy, I insisted.”

“Wait, aren’t you going to stay?”

“No,” Sherlock turned away from her, “I have everything I need. I must go and think.”

“Sherlock,” Mary’s voice sliced through the air like a broadsword cutting off a man’s head. “John stays here tonight.”

“Of course,” Sherlock purred as he turned away from her, “He should be at his loving wife’s side, shouldn’t he?”

Hiding his face, he stormed out of the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Monday everybody! :^)
Chess Blindness

Chapter Summary

Chess Blindness

The failure of a player to see a good move or danger that should normally be considered obvious.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-six: Chess Blindness

25 June 2016
Outside John and Mary Watson’s residence
Saturday afternoon
12:34 AM

Sherlock was a block away from John and Mary’s house, heading towards the Harrow-on-the-Hill station when he heard John calling after him.

Sherlock didn’t stop, but he did slow down until John caught up with him. “Sherlock, what the hell is goin-”

“Walk with me,” Sherlock brusquely interrupted. “Act normal.”

“Jesus Christ, what is happening?” John demanded as he tried to re-arrange his distressed face into a more causal expression. “Why did you leave? Thought you were going to call for a ca-”

“Less talking, more walking, more thinking,” Sherlock droned. John lapsed into a moody silence that lasted until twenty minutes later when they arrived at the depressingly mundane Tube station, a disappointingly modern red brick building.

Sherlock strode into the north entrance, John tailing him as usual. He took a hard right and stalked into the Gents. John halted, rolled his eyes heavenward and followed. As usual.

Sherlock waited for him outside a handicapped stall. He pulled the door open and pointed.

John groaned as the City boys in their posh suits and shined shoes and the day labourers in their dungarees and dusty work boots snickered.

“People do little else,” Sherlock pointed again emphatically to the inside of the stall as one handsome City boy actually stared at them, vainly trying to conceal his lust and envy.

“I really hate you sometimes,” John grumbled as he entered the large stall.

“Yes, but without me not only would your life be unspeakably dull but you wouldn’t be able to get things off the top shelves.”
“Piss off.”

“Not the best choice of verbiage, considering our location,” Sherlock swung the door shut and locked it. Lowering his voice, he explained, “Holy Peters sent Mary the severed head of Marie Devine as a warning, not to her, as she presumptuously believes, but to you.”

“Me? Why?”

“That he is not done with you yet. He still has a score to settle with you.”

“Well, pardon me for inconveniencing him by deciding to live,” John huffed. “He thinks if he hurts Mary, he’ll hurt me.”

“Yes.”

John leaned against the metal divider of the stall, fingers massaging forehead. “Fuck, Sherlock. I want to divorce her, not get her decapitated. And if she dies, then you die because of that ruddy double-hit she still has set up.” He lowered his hand, his god-damned traitorous trembling left hand. “This means he’s in London, doesn’t it?”

“I am afraid so.”

“Should we tell Violet to wait then? To stay wherever she is until we…?”

But Sherlock was already emphatically shaking his head. “Wheels are already in motion. Mycroft is ramming her permanent residency down the immigration department’s throat. She could be back in England as soon as the first of July.”

“Jesus,” John shook his head, “Sherlock, the guy is a bloody maniac. We’ve got to capture him, plan a trap, something. I can’t spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder for him.”

“Agreed,” Sherlock tented his fingers as he leaned on the other stall wall. “But I need to determine the appropriate bait…”

“You are not putting yourself out there as bait,” John scowled at him.

“No, of course not, that would be stupid,” Sherlock agreed, making John blink in astonishment. Sherlock continued, muttering more to himself than talking to John, “Far too obvious, plus it threatens to expose the latest turn our unconventional friendship has taken, since Peters targeted your wife and not me…”

“OK, well, so not you as bait and not Mary… definitely not Susan or Maisie…” John felt his stomach drop like a broken elevator in freefall. “Not Violet.”

Sherlock shrugged, apparently not ruling it out.

“Not. Violet.”

“It may be the only viable option. Peters has a score to settle with her as well.”

“Jesus Christ, Sherlock. She’s ill. She’s… she’s…” John spluttered.

“Still in possession of her wits and capable of making up her own mind,” Sherlock countered. “I wouldn’t put her out there without her consent and without protection.

“Like the Copper Beaches?” John challenged him. “She was being poisoned under our own noses.
I’m an expert in treating poisonings and you’re a chemist and we both missed it.”

“Well, I’m open to other viable suggestions,” Sherlock said in a voice that clearly indicated that he was not.

“Fuck,” John thudded the back of his head against the stall wall. Then he repeated the motion and the swearing: “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“Oi!” a voice on the other side of the stall wall yelped, “D’ya mind? Trying to see a man ‘bout a dog in some peace, yeah?”

“Sorry,” Sherlock chirped brightly. Then sorrowfully, he studied John’s face. “You need to stay with Mary for the time being. At least until Violet is back at Baker Street.”

“I know,” John tried not to sound miserable. “I mean… if it was just Mary, I wouldn’t stay. It’s not as if she wouldn’t be able to handle herself, it’s just… Susan.”

“She is a nice girl,” Sherlock agreed, “Not very bright, but pleasant.”

“Sherlock,” John sighed. “You think Stephen Hawking is not very bright.”

“Well, his IQ is only 160 so…”

John smiled at Sherlock fondly. “If I stay with Mary, Peters should assume I’m still in love with Mary. Hopefully he’ll target me and Mary, not you and not Susan or Maisie. Or Violet,” When Sherlock opened his mouth to argue, John stuck his finger in his long face. “No. I don’t care that Violet has all her wits. She can’t outrun Peters. She can’t use a gun to shoot him. She can’t kick-box or whatever the hell martial arts she used to do anymore. I want her clear of this.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes mightily. “I’ll keep her clear IF she agrees to stay clear. Sadly, the ALS has not eroded her stubbornness one iota.” He glared at John, “Don’t treat her like she’s limited or infantile when she comes home. She might not be able to run, but she can still outfox you. Her greatest strength was never her body, but her mind. Her ability to emotionally manipulate people into doing her bidding or revealing their darkest secrets far surpasses what she was capable of physically. That is why I am not ruling her out from asking her to assist us in incapacitating Peters.”

There was a banging on the stall door, “OI! You two poofs done? I got to murder a shite.”

“You take me to the most romantic places,” John crooned.

“I’m all about the fairytale, John Watson,” Sherlock hummed as he abruptly opened the stall door, slamming the complaining man on the other side of it in the face. “Oh, apologies,” Sherlock angelically apologized as blood streamed down the complaint’s squashed nose. “Do you mind if we finish our little chat? He’ll patch you up, he’s a doctor.”

As Sherlock slammed the door shut again, both he and John succumbed to juvenile sniggers, “We can’t giggle here, it’s the bogs.”

“Nothing wrong with a bit of toilet humour from time to time,” Sherlock chuckled. Sobering up, he added, “Be very careful around Mary.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Do everything you need to do to keep her happy. This unfortunate episode regarding Marie’s head could frighten her into running off. She could pick up the thread of her old life again. Then we’ll
both be looking our shoulders for the rest of our lives.”

“As far as she’s concerned, we had a spat that went too far.”

“No… don’t immediately reconcile, she’ll become suspicious. But, don’t let the cold front linger too long,” Sherlock recommended. Then he looked down at the dirty tile floor, suddenly interested in a sweets wrapper by his shoe. “I won’t be upset if you… if it’s necessary…” he toed the foil wrapper away from his expensive Italian shoes, “If marital relations need to take place in order to placate her.”

“What? Oh fuck, no. I’m not going to sleep with her again,” John screwed his face up in disgust.

“John,” Sherlock lifted his eyes up to meet his. “Promise me. You’ll do anything to keep her happy. Your life may depend on it.”

“God, I wish I never fucking met her!” John exploded. “Fine, I promise. I’ll keep her happy so we all stay safe. But I’m not going to…” he trailed off, shaking his head, “Just… no.”

Sherlock gave John a wistful, sad smile and reached out to touch John’s face. “You will,” he predicted. “I won’t take it personally.” He squared his shoulders. “I have work to do.”

With that, he threw the door open again and marched out without a kiss or goodbye.

But the bleeding complaining man still stood through, “Uh, so, he daid you’d a dodtor?” he whimpered as blood still gushed down out his nostrils and over his lips.

“Yep,” John shrugged off his coat. Looping it over his forearm, he awkwardly began rolling up his shirtsleeves. “Lucky me, I’m a doctor.”

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25 June 2016
Hammersmith, London
Saturday afternoon
4:45 PM

“Right,” Sally smoothed down the silvery stripe of packing tape over the top of the cardboard box labeled “Dishes.” “That’ll be the last of it, then.”

She looked around her meager bedsit. Neat stacks of cardboard boxes lined the walls.

Not that she had a lot to bring back to Cardiff, mind you. Still, she tired easily after her ordeal. She’d be forced to take the rest of sabbatical before returning to work.

She just didn’t fancy carrying all those boxes downstairs to the moving van she had rented for her trip back. Not her trip home because Cardiff wasn’t a home, it was just a place where she lived and kept her things.

She knew she was better off than Whitey. He was damn lucky he hadn’t been sacked once Sherlock tattled to Lestrade and DI Montgomery how Whitey stole all those case files from New Scotland Yard. Whitey’s superiors asked him to take early retirement.

DI Montgomery took the case files back to the Yard. What Lestrade did with her notes and her maps and her newspaper clippings and computer print-outs, she had no idea. They had disappeared while she was still in hospital recuperating.
But all her work was for nothing, apparently. Violet Smith hadn’t disappeared because of foul play. She had gone to earth because Moriarty’s people were still hunting her. After the attack on John Watson, last January, apparently it wasn’t safe for The Freak’s fiancée to stay in London. No, Holmes had masterminded her disappearance. Of course he did.

And somehow, somewhere between January and now, he married her.

Or, so that’s what Lestrade told her during one of his many hospitals visits.

Un-fucking-believable.

But then, Lestrade did believe everything the Freak told him.

Sally reached for her water bottle and drank greedily. Ever since her stint in The Box, she had found herself obsessed about keeping water readily at hand.

“I hope you didn’t pack the kettle,” a rolling baritone drawled behind her and she jumped, nearly spilling her water.

Sherlock Fucking Holmes, in jeans and grey T-shirt and slate-grey trainers, leaned against her doorway. She hadn’t even heard him open the door.

“How’d you get in?” she demanded, feeling at odds in black yoga bottoms and a grubby London 2012 Summer Olympics T-shirt. He, even dressed casually, looked like a film star.

“Old skill set,” he grinned easily at her. “May I come in?”

“Like you’d go away if I told you no,” Sally turned her back to him, setting her water bottle down with a shaking hand. Trying to get her bearings, she demanded as she glared at him over her shoulder, “What do you want?”

“To talk.”

“What?”

“To answer your questions, you seemed to go to a lot of trouble to solve a mystery, which I can respect.” He sauntered inside, “Especially since you nearly got killed for your trouble.”

He did not tell her he was checking up on her because Holy Peters was still in town.

Sally turned fully around, her arms crossed against her chest, her head tilted in disbelief. Arching an eyebrow, she slowly asked, “You’re really going to answer me truthfully?”

“As truthfully as I can,” Sherlock sank down onto her sofa like an entitled king. “If I cannot answer, it’s because I’m protecting someone else.”

“Yeah,” Sally snorted, “Yourself.”

“Wrong.”

His eyes were as unforgiving as ever, chilly as two ice chips.

Sally never understood why people on televisions and gossip rags said his eyes looked green or even gold. They always looked the same to her, frosty-white with just a hint of blue. Glacial.

“Alright,” she turned to open a plastic storage container. “This might require something stronger than
“She took out two plastic tumblers meant for beach parties and a glass bottle of Johnnie Walker Black. Holding up the bottle, she informed him, “No ice.”

“I’ll survive.”

She poured them both two fingers and brought the cups and the bottle over.

She sat down directly across from him, staring him down as if she was still a cop and she was about to interrogate him. He looked faintly amused.

“Whenver you’re ready, Miss Donovan,” Sherlock sniffed the contents of his bright green cup, made a moue of distaste and took a hesitant sip.

Sally took a fortifying sip and shivered as she felt the whisky pleasantly burn its way down to her stomach. “Did you kill Charles Augustus Magnussen?”

“You’re still asking the wrong questions,” Sherlock shook his head, like a disappointed teacher.

Sally pursed her lips, studying him. Heart racing, she leaned forward and asked in a voice barely louder than a whisper, “Why did you kill Charles Augustus Magnussen?”

“It was a mistake,” Sherlock confessed easily. “I meant to intimidate him. I don’t have perfect vision. I have 20/20 vision, yes, but I have a hyperopic astigmatism, which means my vision blurs or distorts to some degree at close range. I was standing too close to Magnussen. I thought I was pointing the gun to the left of his head and I was going to nick him, at most injure his ear. I had to be close though because a wide shot or shooting the gun in the air wouldn’t have frightened him. But, I gravely miscalculated.”

“No shit,” Sally snorted. “Most people would say that was an intended kill shot and your story about having astigmatism is bollocks.”

“I’m not most people,” he quietly assured her.

“No,” Sally agreed before taking another drink. “That you’re not.” After another swallow, making her belly pleasantly glow from the large bolt of whisky, she added, “You were showing off a bit too, I think.”

Sherlock inhaled. “Possibly.”

“Mmm. Backfired didn’t it?”

“Pun intended?”

“Maybe,” Sally didn’t crack a smile. “Why did you want to intimidate him, Magnussen?”

“He threatened the life of Mary Watson, John’s wife, who was pregnant at the time.”

“Why did he want Mary dead?”

“He was blackmailing her.”

“How?”

“Wrong question.”

“Don’t care. I want to know.”
“Her past life, which I am not at liberty to share and also has no importance to you.”

“Oh of course,” Sally snorted with an eye roll.

Sherlock never seemed to blink. That trait was actually the reason why Sally called him The Freak in the first place. He fixed those arctic eyes on her, wide-open and all-seeing. “You’re still asking the wrong questions, Miss Donovan. Stop letting your emotion drive you and think. Don’t worry about what you want to know, but what you need to know.”

Sally considered his request. He wanted to protect Mrs. Watson’s privacy apparently. So if the how didn’t matter then…

“Why was he blackmailing her?”

“Based on his knowledge of her past, he had requested Mrs. Watson to perform a task she found odious in nature, so she declined. When she refused, he raped her.”

His bald statement echoed off the walls of the nearly empty bedsit.

Sally let this sink in before speaking again. She wanted to be sure to ask the right question. She studied the contents of her bright pink cup, turning it in her hands as if she were a potter and the cup clay she was spinning into a vase. Finally, she lifted her head, “When did it happen?”

“The night of John Watson’s stag party. We were out. She was alone.”

“Was she already pregnant at the time of the attack?”

“Yes, but she didn’t know she was expecting until her wedding night.”

“She didn’t know who the father was, then, did she?”

“No.”

Sally leaned back in her precarious seat, putting the pieces together. “You were shot in Magnussen’s office, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Judging by your refusal to discuss her history, Mrs. Watson has a dark past then, right?”

“Yes.”

“Did John know what Magnussen did to her?”

“Not until well after the fact. He found out last December. Mary had confided in Violet.”

“Your Violet?” Sally eyed the gold band on Sherlock’s left ring finger.

“My Violet, yes. Mrs. Holmes.”

“Mazel tov.”

“You’re not Jewish.”

“Being sarcastic.”

“You need to stop.”
Sally stopped being sarcastic. “Did you know about Magnussen assaulting Mrs. Watson?”

“I deduced it. And stop sugar-coating it. It was rape, not an attack or assault.”

“Did you tell John about the rape?”

“No. As I started to explain before we both got distracted by sarcasm, Mary confided in Violet. She begged her not to tell anyone, including me. Violet had tried to convince Mary to confide in us or at the very least John, but alas, she had no success. But after the real Jim Moriarty stabbed her in the belly, forcing her to miscarry, she finally admitted what had happened to her.”

Sally tapped the side of her glass with her fingernail, trying to remember. “That was her second pregnancy, yeah? When Moriarty stabbed her?”

“Yes.”

“And the first pregnancy… Did Mary think that baby was Magnussen’s and not John’s?”

“She was afraid there was a chance that Magnussen was the father and not John, yes.”

“Is that why she shot you in Magnussen’s office?”

Sherlock’s Cupid-bow lips quirked up in a cold half-smile. “Good deductive leap. Well done you.”

“Jesus,” Sally bolted from her seat. “You know, the police actually exist for a purpose, and not just to make you look good when you make one of your clever deductions. Magnussen was a serial molester and rapist. He made his PA Janine Hawkins do disgusting things.”

“I’m aware,” Sherlock said faintly, averting his eyes now.

“Why… this is what I can’t wrap my head around, Holmes,” Sally waved her hand around her head. “Why didn’t she go to the police? Why didn’t she tell John what had happened?”

“She was afraid Magnussen would either hurt or kill John. It was a valid concern, Sally. Magnussen was a dangerous man. He had coerced Lord Smallwood into suicide.”

“Lord Smallwood was a perv who got off on little girls,” Sally snorted.

“At the time of the affair, Lord Smallwood was in his earlier thirties and the Little Girl was seventeen, nearly eighteen,” Sherlock acidly corrected her. “Magnussen had procured all the love letters His Lordship had posted to The Little Girl. But Magnussen made sure the press got only the most licentious and salacious letters. Yet another case of the media getting the facts totally wrong,” he waspishly added.

“What? You want an apology? I was doing my job. All the facts pointed to you staging the abduction of the ambassador’s kids so you could look brilliant when you found them.”

“The facts were manipulated in order to distract you from the truth that I did not abduct those children,” Sherlock set the cup down on top of a box on the coffee table. He never really cared for whisky. That was always John’s poison of choice. If he had to drink, he’d rather have a fine wine or a neat gin and tonic with a twist of lime. Sneering, he added, “And you wonder why Mary didn’t go to the police.”

“We could have helped her,” Sally stubbornly persisted. “Mary and Janine and God knows how many other victims that might be out there. DNA results would have nailed him to the wall.”
“There was no DNA. Magnussen forced Mary to shower afterwards, to wash all the evidence away.” Sherlock shook his head at Sally’s naivety. “Magnussen was a multi-millionaire who made his fortune controlling the media. Mary Watson is an A&E nurse married to an invalided Army surgeon who earns a living assisting an oddball consulting detective. Who do you think would win that court case, honestly? Magnussen wouldn’t see the inside of a cell. He wouldn’t have even made it to the court room.”

“You don’t sound sorry he’s dead.”

“I’m not. I didn’t mean to kill him, but I’m not sorry he’s dead. He was the Napoleon of Blackmail. He preyed on people who were different, who were private, and who were eccentric.”

“He preyed on people like you.”

Sherlock found himself reaching for his bright green plastic glass again. “Yes.”

“The Smallwood case, it was personal, wasn’t it?”

“Very much so, but not for the reasons you believe.”

He decided he was not going to tell Sally he took the Lady Smallwood’s case because he knew Magnussen was blackmailing Mycroft.

Fortunately, Sally did not seem interested pursuing that line of questioning. “Why? Why are you telling me this?”

“Three reasons, the first I had already told you, you deserved to know what happened. All that hard work deserves some sort of pay-off. I admit, I do appreciate your tenacity regarding your attempt to solve Magnussen’s death and Violet’s disappearance.”

“And she’s safe, Violet?”

“For the moment, but I have concerns. The man who tried to kill you also tried to kill Violet.”

“Because she’s your wife?”

“Because she’s Violet.”

“That… makes no sense.”

“It will, eventually. But let’s not get sidetracked again. The second reason why I am telling you all this is because…” Sherlock inhaled deeply then closed his eyes as he exhaled. “I owe you an apology.”

Sally’s mouth dropped open. “Shut up. What?”

Sherlock opened his eyes, smiling a little at her shocked appearance. “I never considered what it felt like to be in your shoes when I butted into your cases.” He ran his eyes up and down her slender frame, from the top of her curly black hair down to her crimson painted toe nails. “The deck was stacked against you from the beginning, from your skin colour to your gender to your socio-economic status. I never took the time to appreciate the challenges to you had to endure, the racism, the sexism to get out of the East End council-houses and into the Met. Then here I come gate-crashing your cases, the epitome of white-privilege and old family money. The rush of being right outweighed your professional reputation as well as your feelings.”
“Thanks for the man-splaining,” Sally said dryly.

Sherlock gave her a sheepish grin. “I was an arse and I regret it. Please accept my apology.”

“But… you’re still going to be an arse, aren’t you?”

“Only when you won’t listen to me as I’m trying to guide you in the correct direction.”

Sally drained her drink and set the empty cup on a tower of boxes. “I don’t know, Sherlock.” She ran her hands down her face. “A simple mea culpa really isn’t enough, is it? There’s so much shit between us, between the crap at the Met… and Phillip,” her voice cracked.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock stood up. “Violet honestly tried to get you both out of the warehouse in time. She never meant for Anderson to get hurt…” he trailed off.

He trailed off because he knew John left Anderson on purpose, his rage at Anderson for endangering Sherlock blinding his good sense as well as his duty to the Hippocratic Oath.

“No one was supposed to die, Sally,” Sherlock lamely finished.

“Yeah, well, he did and I’m alone,” Sally bitterly muttered as she ran her hand over one of the cardboard boxes. “So… maybe you should go now, yeah?”

“That’s the third reason why I’m here,” Sherlock crossed over to her. When he was an arm’s length away from her, he said, “You’re a good cop, Sally. You’re just a shit homicide detective.”

“Oh wow, thanks Sherlock. That fixes everything between us,” she spat at him.

“Quit the private detective work and leave that to the professionals,” he grinned. Seriously he added, “Go back to being a police officer. Just… not in Homicide.” He attempted a gentler smile. “Your compassion for the victims and your dedication to seek justice rather than resolution would be better served working domestic violence cases or sex crimes.”

“Yeah well…”

Sherlock played his ace, “If there had someone as devoted and empathetic as you who would have taken interest in my predicament when I was a child, then my abuser wouldn’t still be walking free today.”

Sally inhaled sharply then looked away, first at the window, then at the floor. “Oh…”

“Go protect the living, Sergeant Donovan. Leave the dead to me.”

Sally gave him a crooked smile. “I’ll think about it.”

“Are we quits then, you and me?”

“Mmm…” Sally looked around her bedsit. “Help me load this crap into my moving van then you and I will be good.”

“Hence the causal gear,” Sherlock pulled slightly at his T-shirt. “Where do we begin?”

They would never be best friends. Probably wouldn’t even send each other Christmas cards. But a truce was still a truce and sometimes, that was enough.
25 June 2016  
John and Mary Watson’s residence  
Saturday night  
9:50 PM

“John, are you coming to bed?”

“Want to watch the news,” John grunted, swirling the dregs of his drink around.

Mary stood between him and the telly. Clad her pink dressing gown and red and hot pink plaid pyjamas, she asked archly, “Are you going to sleep down here then? After the news?”

“Yeah, I’m not ready to cosy up to you again,” John sniped then closed his eyes. Easy does it, Watson… “Sorry, that was shitty. It’s… Mary, we had a massive row. Even for us. We can’t pretend it didn’t happen. Things were said that maybe shouldn’t have been said, that I was practically living at 221B again and not just sleeping over because I was knackered after a big case. That last fight, that… that was bad, Mary.”

Mary’s face softened. “I know.”

“We can’t sweep it under the rug because… well, of this morning.”

Mary pressed her hand to her mouth, fighting tears. “I know,” she whispered.

_I’m so tired of wondering if she’s being real or if she’s acting_, John wearily thought. “Sit down,” he took his feet off the poof.

She sank down, her hands clasped in her lap. “You don’t understand John. Without Marie, I wouldn’t be me, I wouldn’t be _Mary_. She was the first real friend I ever had, not just a comrade or a colleague, but a real friend. Like you were for Sherlock, you softened him, made him human instead of a machine. Marie did that for me, made me believe I deserved to be loved and love in return. To have a normal life and not just carry on doing the dirty work for the CIA or KGB or whoever needed something _cleaned up_,” she barked a bitter laugh.

Suddenly, Dupin’s words echoed in John’s ears…

_If you must stay married for the sake of the child and to protect your amour, Madame Mary does not need to be your enemy. She can be your friend…_

“I am sorry about Marie,” he told her sincerely, taking her hand. “No one deserves that. We are going to figure out where Holy Peters is and hold him accountable for this crime,” he promised her as Sweetie paddled up to them and flopped his hand into Mary’s lap.

“He’s dangerous.”

“So was Magnussen. So was Moriarty. He’s just a man, a fucking sick man who deserves to be put down like a mad dog, but he’s still a man. Not a god or Marvel villain, OK?”

Mary nodded but her face was still pale and drawn. “God, I want to believe you.”

“I want to believe me too.”

Mary gave him a tender smile. “Susan’s finally asleep. I made her take those sleep tablets.”
“That’s just for tonight and tomorrow. If she’s still having trouble sleeping, we’ll have to find her a shrink or something. Maybe we should find a therapist for her anyway, with all she’s had to deal with regarding her mother and her piece of shit sort-of-step-father.”

“That’s a good idea,” Mary squeezed his hand and stood up. “Want me to replenish that?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, if you don’t mind,” John held up the glass tumbler. “Something about the news always makes me want to drink.”

She took the glass, made a motion with her other hand to smooth his hair, but she stopped herself. Ducking her head down, she scurried towards the kitchen.

John propped his chin on his fist as the opening credits to the ten o’clock news scrolled across the television screen.

Mary returned a few moments later with a fresh drink. She did not block the television this time.

“John… errr… do you mind if I… study down here for a bit, while you watch the news?”

“Study?” John accepted the drink from her.

Mary gave him a small smile and picked up the toxicology book she had been reading off and on since Sherlock returned from America and he from Germany. “While we were on a break, when you were with Dupin, I mean,” she added hastily, her cheeks reddening when she realized she needed to clarify which time they had been on a break. “I had been thinking about the future and I decided…” she took a breath and hugged the thick textbook to her chest. “I want to go back to school. I want to be a nurse practitioner.”

“Really? Mary, that’s… that’s great.”

“I found an online course that isn’t too dear and Bart’s might reimburse part or all of my tuition, which would be a great help if I qualify. It would be more challenging work but there would definitely be a pay increase and… well, I think I’d be good at it.”

“I think so too,” John said softly.

“So, I’ve been swotting up a bit,” she hugged the book again. “Trying to see how much I’ve forgotten before I enroll. And…” her eyes sought his. “I don’t want to be alone tonight, John. Not after this morning. Even if it means me sitting by myself on the sofa while you watch the news, I don’t want to be alone.”

“It’s OK,” John relented. When Mary looked at him dubiously, he told her, “We have got to hash things out between us, Mary. No therapists, no shouting matches. No me running off on a case with Sherlock because I don’t to deal with our problems and you not lying to me. Just you and me talking and being honest with each other.”

“I know,” Mary immediately replied, like John knew she would. He also predicted what she was about to say next: “Just… not tonight. Please.”

“No,” John turned his attention back to the television as two talking heads argued about the aftermath of the Brexit vote. “Not tonight.” He took a sip and grimaced. “Why is this salty?”

“Sorry, John,” Mary apologized as she sank down onto the sofa. “You must have drunk the last of the Famous Grouse. Had to crack open the cheap shit Ted and Stella brought to the curry buffet we had to celebrate your medical license being reinstated. Is it that bad?”
That party seemed like a million years ago. “Ted would drink piss on fire if he knew it would get him lit,” John sighed as he took another sip. “It’s fine, really. Not top shelf, but it’s tolerable.”

As he slowly drank, he felt his eyelids drooping down, feeling heavier and heavier.

The horror of the severed head and the despair of being back in this suffocating terrace house with its matching furniture and neatly painted walls boxing him in finally crashed down on him. He drank, wanting to get drunk, wanting to pass out…

Wanted to forget he was here, with her. Not home at Baker Street with him…

He drained his glass, hoping for oblivion.

Twenty minutes later, he got his wish. His head lolled onto his shoulder, he slipped into sweet unconsciousness as the BBC anchorman natterered on about the rotten state the world was in.

***

25 June 2016
John and Mary Watson’s residence
Sunday night
5:50 AM

John didn’t open his eyes as so much as he peeled them open. He winced as he lifted his head then let it rest against the chair again.

His eyes felt like someone had thrown sand into them. His head pounded and he thought he heard an indistinguishable buzzing from somewhere…. It was as if someone had replaced his brain with a very noisy beehive. His tongue felt thick and dry. He felt desperate for water.

But he very much did not want to move either. Not only did his head throb, but the muscles of his neck and shoulders were now a knotted, tight mess, after an uncomfortable night sleeping in the armchair. His lower back burned. His legs also felt stiff, propped up on the poof.

John scooted himself up, rubbing his left shoulder, which of course, decided to pulse with a repetitive dull ache.

He thought about breakfast and his gut heaved a little.

I am properly hungover, he dismally thought. Blearily he looked down at the glass on the coffee table near him. How much did I drink last night? Two? Three? I thought it was two, but it must have been more. I wouldn’t be this hungover if it was only two.

John tossed off the afghan quilt Mary must have tossed over him when he passed out. He wobbled to his feet and rubbed his face. “Get off the sofa, Sweetie,” he mumbled at the dog.

Sweetie slid off the sofa as if his bones had turned into melted butter. Ever since Gladstone had spent time at the Watsons, he had taught Sweetie his bad habits, such as sleeping on the furniture. Still, it pained John to scold the poor old battered former-bait-dog.

And it scared John to scold the former police dog with homicidal tendencies.

Shit… did I let the dog out to piss last night? I can’t remember…

He didn’t remember much of last night. Watched a bit of the news, sparred with Mary a bit and
then… he scrubbed at his sandy eyes again, dismayed at the blank space in his memory.

“Right,” he mumbled, picking up the glass. “We know what’s at the bottom of the bottle, so let’s not
go down that road again,” he ordered himself thickly.

He prescribed himself a cup of peppermint tea, dry toast and aspirin and a long nap on the sofa.

*And no more drinks before bed… strictly tea… you almost lost everything the last time you used
booze and pills as a crutch, including your life, so tea it is…*

“C’mon Sweetie,” he beckoned the dog as he shuffled towards the kitchen. “I promise there will be
no severed heads in the garden this morning… or at least… there better fucking not be.”

Sweetie licked his hand in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

So... I think I'm procrasti-posting because we're getting so close to the end, only five
chapters left! :^0

Thank you again for reading and commenting! XOXO
Zeitnot

Chapter Summary

Zeitnot

Having very little time on the clock to complete the remaining moves of a timed game.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-seven: Zeitnot

4 July 2016
221B Baker Street
Monday morning
4:50 AM

He floated between memories and dreams… the silvery remembrances threading together patches of a golden dream… when he had believed everything was going to be alright… back when a wintry frost decorated the windows with icy swirls instead of the warm condensation sliding down in big drops as the rising sun warmed the black concrete of the London streets…

… groggily aware of a chill, he looked over his bare shoulder to see who had not only stolen the duvet but the afghan quilt Mrs. Hudson had knitted for him as well…

She had, of course.

Her back was towards him, her chestnut curls tumbled over her freckled shoulder like an ignescent waterfall. The duvet and quilt had slipped down from her shoulder and sleepily, her long fingers hunted for the covers trying to pull them back up.

Chuckling, he rolled over, spooning her, pulling the blankets over them both as daylight continued to fill the room.

Ughhh, make the sun go away, she whined, burrowing her head in the pillow.

It’s nearly quarter past eight, judging by the shadows caused by the rising sun. You have a big day ahead he squeezed his arms around her waist. He ran his thumb over her ribs. You’re meeting John in a few hours to pick up supplies for my birthday party on Saturday night…

She rolled over, facing him. Her dear face, freckled as a plover’s egg, scrunched up in mock severity as she poked him in the middle of the chest. Promise me you won’t act like an ass at the party, the smile tugging her lips belied her stern voice as she traced the divots separating his pectoral muscles.

He sighed dramatically as he ran his hand over her hair. Her hair fascinated him endlessly. Something as over-processed as her dyed hair should feel as soft as copper wiring. Instead, it was a lush as a fox’s fluffy pelt, but not as bright orange. More like the ochre of a setting sun.

I am not one for making promises I am not entirely sure I can keep, he started to say, but she
playfully tweaked one of his nipples and he yelped like a puppy.

Sherlock Holmes, all Mrs. Hudson wants is to throw you a damn birthday party. After everything she’s been through, from being kidnapped by that nut job Toller to snapping a rib when the clinic exploded last month, she still wants to give you a party. Don’t wreck this for her.

She invited my mother, he couldn’t help whining. How can I be expected to be pleasant around her? You’ve met the woman now. You know how overbearing she can be.

She does put the mother into smother, she rolled her eyes as she reached up with her pinkie and gently swept underneath his eye, wiping away an eyelash.

Make a wish, she paused before blowing it off the pad of her pinkie.

Ridiculous superstition. Eyelashes have no effect on the outcome of the future.

Fun-hater, she blew the eyelash away. Please be nice on Saturday night. For Mrs. Hudson’s sake, she pleaded. This is actually giving her something to do. Otherwise, she’s just been smoking herself stupid ever since she left the hospital.

Thinking her words were hyperbolic, he snorted. She scowled. I’m not kidding. It’s one thing to smoke a bowl to take the edge off of a bad day. It’s another thing to blaze it up to the point where you can’t spell your own last name. If she’s still in pain from her broken rib, we need to take her back to the doctor. Or at least ask John to take a look at her.

Alright.

And if she still doesn’t cut back after that, we may have to think about shipping her off to rehab. I’m serious, it’s getting bad. I get high just walking past her front door.

Alright, alright, I’ll have a word with her about her herbal soothers. Happy?

Yes, she then dipped her head down to kiss the previously tweaked nipple. He shivered in pleasurable anticipation. Lifting her head back up, she added with a sweet smile, Don’t worry so much. Your dad will keep your mom distracted like he always does, like he did at Christmas.

Her hand slid up and down his arm, paying particular attention to his bicep then gliding her hand down again to find his hand. Twining her fingers with his, she brought his hand up to her mouth and lightly grazed her lips against his knuckles. Angelo’s is catering, all your favorites.

He felt his iron will decaying, no… rusting then crumbling.

He didn’t care. How lovely not to care.

How lovely to care.

Will there be canapé’s?

Yes, and bruschetta and ravioli and cannoli, she rattled off the menu with a passable Italian accent. She reverted back to her Middle American twang. Like I said, all your favorites.

Hm, well…

She brushed her lips against his. It won’t be a huge crowd, I promise. John and Mary, assuming she’s out of the hospital by then. Alex MacDonald and her wife… Bea, I think is her name? Anyway, those two and Greg and Molly. Macpherson and whatever slut he’s hooking with this time.
Oh and Henry Knight’s in town and Bill Wiggins. And your mom and dad. That’s it.

It would be nice to see Henry again, he grudgingly conceded. See how he’s doing.

John said he sounded good. Much better than the basket case he was when you first met him.

It was one of my favorite cases, he hummed as he carded his fingers through her hair. Then his massive black brows beetled together. What about Mycroft?

Now why would we ruin a perfectly good party by inviting your brother? She batted her eyes and smiled angelically. Especially when we all know he wouldn’t leave any cake for the rest of us.

He burst out laughing. No one else had ever mocked Mycroft and his glutinous obsession with sweets and pudding before.

Tilting her head up with his fingertips, he smiled down mischievously at her impish face, And what time are you meeting John this morning?

Snuggling up to him, her naked hips flush to his, she purred, Deduce it.

His grin became wicked as he cupped her face in his hands, studying her. Crow’s feet bracketed her smiling hazel eyes. In the early morning light, they looked more dark gold than bright green, like old honey discovered in a forgotten beehive.

Well, he brushed her curls off her forehead. It takes you exactly an hour and ten minutes to properly straighten your hair. He pulled a curl out then let it go to watch it spring back into a coil. You like to wash your hair prior to straightening. Easier to blow-dry it first after a proper shampooing then apply the straight-iron. He gently pressed her shoulder until she lay on her back. He propped himself up on his elbow, chin in hand. Running his fingers back and forth over her collar bone, he observed, and you’re not exactly rushing out of bed.

You’re distracting me, she complained sweetly.

You’re not fighting back, he hummed as she loosely looped her hands around his neck. Hmmm… he kissed her collarbone now, that little dip between the bones and under her throat. Miss Violet Hunter rarely does what she does not want to do.

Agent, she corrected him breathily, rolling her head back.

Agent, he drawled before running the tip of his tongue up the tendons of her neck, his large hand descending between her breasts, skimming her belly then over her hip, over her thigh, slowly… enjoying the sensation of her bareness against his palm.

That’s more like it…

Still, you’re going out in public, he huffed in her ear before nibbling it. So you will need to put on your full face, foundation, powder, blush, eyes, lipstick. The whole nine yards…

He kissed her behind her ear and started working his way down her throat, then back up. Buried his face in her luxurious chestnut hair and inhaled You also smell like last night’s sex, so you’ll need a shower.

God, your voice… she moaned, I think I could come if you just read the phone book.

Oh… his fingertips danced lightly over her pubic bone. Where is the fun in that? His hand slipped
down further, encouraging her to yield herself to him. When her legs spread for him, he discovered she hadn’t been joking about how ready she was for him. Slippery, smooth and hot, he moved his fingers languidly up and down the most intimate parts of her and she moaned again as he drew lazy circles around her sex but frustrating her by not going inside her.

John is a ridiculously early riser and enjoys his food. He was starting to pant now, wanting to put more than just his finger inside her. He could smell her desire, the salt and musk of want and need, as primal and unpredictable as the sea. If you were meeting him for breakfast, you would have left already… he leaned over her, his lips millimeters from hers. You also want me so badly you’re nearly bursting from arousal so you’re not going anywhere, not yet...

Oooh, arrogant, she smirked at him with an arched eyebrow as her hands moved up and down his arms and shoulders again.

Fifteen minutes to let the dog out, twenty minutes for a shower, forty-five for your make-up, fifteen for a quick bite to eat added to the thirteen minutes of sex…

That’s all?

That’s average for a normal man and that time-frame… he finally touched her properly now instead of just teasing her. As he lightly tapping his finger up and down as if he was sending a text message and her entire body shuddered as her nails dug into his shoulder and back, he finished his thought: Doesn’t include foreplay.

Oh my God, fuck me already, she groaned.

Such unladylike language, my dear, he laughed, withdrawing his hand.

She arched against him again and nipped at his lower lip, I’m no lady, Mr. Holmes.

You’re meeting John at quarter to eleven, he growled as he rolled on top of her and fulfilled her demand, slipping inside her, a satisfied groan slipping out of him. They started moving together like an easy duet, the piano carrying the melody while the violin provided the harmony.

Before the endorphins turned his brain into a blank slate, he noted that this morning, she was perfectly content to lie below him and let him do all the work. Normally she preferred to be on top. Before he could ruminate further, she rolled in her hips in a way that blotted out his mind completely and his body became enslaved to pursuing pleasure.

When they were both a shivery, sweaty mess thirteen minutes and forty seconds later, he rumbled Tell me I’m right...

I don’t dare, her voice was huskier than normal, pitching down to a lower register he only heard from her post-coitus. It made him think of tigers growling as they paced back and forth behind the bars of their cage. I’m afraid that will only turn you on again and John is supposed to meet me at Mrs. H’s at quarter to eleven… depending on traffic.

I was right, he put his hands behind his head, noting his own curls were damp with sweat.

She sat up, wrapping the afghan around her like a shawl, You were right, my lord and master.

Sarcasm does not become you.

You love my sarcasm… she kissed him lightly on the lips. Do something useful today. Order a new coffee table.
Ughhh… Sherlock pulled the top sheet over his head. Remind me to murder Mrs. Hudson so she doesn’t blab to everyone what she walked in on yesterday.

She slid off the bed, taking the quilt with her, wrapped around her slender, freckled and scarred body. She tweaked the top sheet off from his head. Don’t forget to kill Mrs. Hudson, but do it after the party. Everyone already RSVP’ed and Angelo won’t return our deposit for the food…

She ducked into his tiny, private bathroom and he let his eyes close…

His eyes opened when he remembered what she had said only a few weeks ago…

I wish I was brave enough to love you.

Sherlock ran his hand down his face. His bedroom was warm, but not stifling hot as it was a few weeks ago. The heat wave had broken and London flourished under the basking glow of a forgiving summer sun and healed by the cool breezes off the rivers and sea.

Still, he only slept with the top sheet. The duvet had been neatly folded last night and placed on the floor by the foot of the bed. Currently it provided a dog bed for Gladstone, who was still snoring, dreaming about chasing rabbits and biting criminals.

Sherlock clumsily reached for his mobile so he could check the time, not really wanting to deduce the hour, even though his weary body informed his mighty brain that it was Early. The sun was barely a sliver of yellowish light on the horizon. The only light in the room was from the slowly dimming streetlamps and only a precious little of that light entered his room.

The drapes were drawn.

John was home.

Still reaching for his mobile, Sherlock’s fingers gazed over John’s Army Browning.

He jerked his hand away as if the weapon had burned him.

Sherlock gave up groping for his mobile and sat up. He looked over his shoulder and smiled affectionately at the other snorer in the room.

Lestrade had texted both Sherlock and John in utter desperation two days ago. An oddly unimpressive jeweled coronet that had been loaned to The British Museum from the Louvre had been twisted and defaced. Someone had taken the antique and dainty crown and twisted it into a figure-eight.

To add insult to injury, three jewels had been removed from the crown. The docent, a very panicky man called Alexander Holder, told Lestrade that the diamonds and emeralds had been untouched. The missing gems, semi-precious stones called “beryls” had been the ones removed from the ruined coronet. As the diamonds and emeralds were far more valuable, this made no sense. However, the Louvre was up in arms about the ruined crown, threatening to make bad international relations between the EU and the UK even worse.

Sherlock had scoffed, deeming the case a “Negative-Three”, but John had pleaded with him to take the case.

Sherlock grudgingly agreed, recognizing that John needed to get out of the house and away from her.
But what should have been an open-and-shut case turned into forty-eight hours of car chases, computer hacking, fleeing down darkened alleys and (to John’s abject horror) leaping from rooftop to rooftop. Granted, the roofs were on two storey houses in Chelsea but still…

Sherlock finally deduced that the Beryl Coronet was a very clever replication of the original, which was still tucked away in a crate on a shelf inside one of the many storage vaults of the Louvre (a quick phone call to Dupin confirmed that fact.)

The purpose of the fake crown was to actually smuggle sensitive financial information out of France. The information had been stolen from Crédit Agricole and downloaded into tiny memory cards that were then concealed within the “beryl” stones. The thief was supposed to switch out the beryl stones with actual stones so no one would be the wiser when the crown was shipped back to France.

But the villain, an idiot called George Burnwell, had mucked it all up when he actually broke the damned crown instead of popping the stones out.

But last night, at ten o’clock sharp, Burnwell was arrested along with his fiancée. His fiancée, as it turned out, was the one who had masterminded the entire plot.

It did not go unnoticed by either Sherlock or John that the villainess’ name had been Mary.

Neither man commented on it though. After two days of no sleep and no food or drink other than coffee thick as sludge, half-melted chocolate bars and disappointing cheese sandwiches on spongy white bread, neither man cared about that coincidence.

Both were so exhausted, they only had energy to take the duvet off the bed, strip to their pants and collapse after murmured “G’nights…” to each other.

Pushing the top sheet off of him, he swung his long legs over the edge of the bed as he sat up. His body still ached with exhaustion but his mind had come completely online. The Mind once more overrode the transport. There had so much to do, so much to plan, to think about…

Tonight, Violet was coming home.

Elbows on knees, head in hands, Sherlock began mentally reciting the plan over again…

... British Airways Flight 1122 left Miami International on time last night at 6:55 on the dot. If all goes well, she will land in Madrid at nine o’clock their time this morning for her lay-over… nine hour lay-over, can’t be helped, there were no direct flights available and timing is everything…

She must be at Gatwick by eight o’clock tonight… if there is a long delay, we’ll have to move to plan B, which will only add to the difficulty… if only we could have gotten a direct flight…

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock lifted his head up and let his hands drop between his knees and thighs. Turning his head as the bed sheets behind him rustled, he whispered, “Did I wake you?”

“S’alright, I’m usually awake early anyway. Old habit,” John sat up with a yawn. Scooting closer to Sherlock, he put his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder, as if to pull him into a hug. Instead, his thumb ran up and down the base of his neck. “You are hard as a rock and I don’t mean that in a fun way,” John slid his hand up and down Sherlock’s neck, stopping in the crook of his neck and left shoulder. Sherlock grunted in relief, his head lolling forward as John worked gently yet firmly on a stress knot. “You OK?”
“Mmm,” Sherlock winced when the knot loosened then finally worked itself out under John’s ministrations. A frisson of tension crackled then dissipated, rays of relief spreading through his left trapezius. As John located and started massaging a second stress knot, Sherlock murmured, “Getting a bit anxious about tonight, I suppose.”

John didn’t reply or stop massaging until he sorted out the second stress knot. When another sigh of relief slipped from Sherlock’s lips, he asked, “Are you sure that you don’t want me to come with you?”

“I’m sure,” Sherlock quickly answered, craning his head to look at John, or rather, look at John’s outline. The room was still grey, more night than morning. “John, you need to stay at your terrace house tonight. Once Violet and I have safely returned to Baker Street, you need to…”

“Submit the wedding announcement to The Telegraph, The Guardian and The Daily News,” John repeated by rote. “Then tomorrow afternoon, after the email queries about your marriage pile up, I post on the blog about Violet Smith Holmes’ triumphant return to London and about the private wedding reception we’re going to hold in your honor in the Secret Garden at the Royal Park Hotel, pictures to follow. In lieu of flowers and gifts, please send donations to Barts Charity. Cards and well-wishes can be posted to 221B Baker Street, blah blah blah, so on and so forth.”

“He won’t be able to resist it, Peters,” Sherlock reminded John. “A public kill in a very public venue, taking out me, you, Violet and Mary all at the same time? I can’t wait to see his face when he realizes all of our wedding guests will be a mixture of police, MI-5, MI-6 and Interpol agents. Maybe even an FBI agent or two.”

“I still think I should come with you,” John protested. “What if Peters follows you to Gatwick?”

“What if Peters shows up at your front door and Susan and her podgy little girlfriend are home alone while you’re with me and Mary is at work? Imagine what he would do to young girls.”

“That’s not fair,” John grumbled. “And don’t call Anna podgy. She’s sweet.”

“She’s fat,” Sherlock countered. “I’m not being mean, I’m being descriptive. I’m also not interested in being fair. I’m interested in keeping Susan and her corpulent inamorata safe.”

“OK, first of all, ‘corpulent inamorata’ is definitely mean, not to mention rude,” John scolded. “Second of all, I still feel like you’re putting me off, that you’re not being honest with me.”

“John, we’ve been over this,” Sherlock huffed. “Security at Gatwick is ridiculous. I’m not in any danger. Violet’s passed the dangerous bit, getting out of America unmolested. She’ll be landing in Madrid in a few hours, then she’ll be here and then we can finish Peters and the Professor once and for all then fully focus on retrieving your daughter from those morons who are caring for her in Salt Lake City.”

“Just because they live in Salt Lake City doesn’t mean they are Mormon. Don’t assume.”

“What? No. I didn’t say Mormons, I said morons.”

“Oh right, sorry,” John shook his head. “You were mumbling.”

“I don’t mumble,” Sherlock grumbled to himself.

“Yeah you do,” John grinned. “When you’re overtired, your poncy public school enunciation goes to shit.” Then he sighed, “I dunno, Sherlock. I’m not OK with this plan, I’m sorry. I really think we should text Violet to stay put and we’ll go to Madrid to fetch her. We can fly or drive… hang on,
Mycroft owes you. Can’t he arrange a private jet for us?”

“Because the last time she got on a private jet arranged by Mycroft ended so well?”

“Oh… right. That.”

“Not to mention the private jet we took to France and we nearly got shot down? As much as I enjoyed your face in my nether regions, that was not exactly a dream flight either.”

“Alright, alright, fine, no private jets. But I still say we should have flown to fetch her. Not have her travel alone to us.”

“I told you, Dupin will be with Violet in Madrid. She will be fine. She will also be, as the kids today say, ‘fangirling’ over him.”

“But he’s not flying to London with her. She’s traveling alone…”

“John, your quarrelsome objections are not reducing my anxiety in the slightest.”

“Sorry, sorry,” John rested his forehead against Sherlock’s temple for a moment then planted a kiss there. “You’re not the only one anxious, mate. This day has been a long time coming. I just don’t want anything to go wrong.”

“Nor I,” Sherlock reached around himself to pat John on the side of his thigh. “I understand your concerns, John. I really do. This isn’t me showing off how clever I am by creating a very convoluted plan or getting my kicks off of executing a precarious scheme. I am terribly concerned Something Will Go Wrong but I have gone over and over and over it in my mind and well… John,” he shook his head. “There’s no other way. There really isn’t.”

“OK,” John gracefully gave up. “I trust you.” When Sherlock didn’t respond, John gave him a little shake. “Hey now, c’mon, what is it that you always say to me? ‘Everything will be alright.’ And it will. I know it.”

“As always your faith in me, while undeserved, is always appreciated.”

John kissed his shoulder as he ran his hand down Sherlock’s back. As John’s palm skimmed down his ruined back then back up again, he could feel the still unanswered question radiating from John’s very flesh.

Oh my God, your back. Jesus…

He took a deep breath as he massaged his left wrist.

He felt like he was back on the rooftop of Bart’s, standing on the edge…

Let go…

He opened his mouth… and nothing came out.

John’s hand on his back… the hiss of the whip… the rattling of chains… the threat of the pipe…

That pipe could have broken his back, shattered his vulnerable vertebrae…

You have no idea the trouble it took to find you… There’s an underground terrorist network active in London and a massive attack is imminent. Sorry, but the holiday is over, brother dear…
Once again, Mycroft had watched him suffer and had done nothing to stop it. He even risked the possibility of his little brother being paralyzed all in the name of the Greater Good... save thousands of faceless, nameless people at the expense of his little brother.

*Dear God, what would he do to my child if he ever got his hands on him? He had no problem sacrificing me or our elder brother... what plans would he have for a Holmes offspring? Family indeed... he'll find a way to remove Henry from Molly and Greg...*

“Serbia was unplanned. It was folly,” he blurted out. “I meant to make my triumphant return to London after my trip to Stockholm. But before I was about to leave, I had received a tip. Sebastian Moran, Jim Moriarty’s Number Two had been spotted in outside of Belgrade. Turns out, it was a trap that I couldn’t resist.”

“By Moriarty’s people?”

“By Mycroft,” he spat. “I slipped his leash several months after The Fall.”

*John doesn’t need to know I was in hospital for months after the Fall, he doesn’t need to know that I literally fell off the building, that I actually broke my pelvis and my left wrist... Sherlock tried to soothe his troubled conscience after committing that little sin of omission.*

He rubbed his left wrist again, as if trying to rub the black stain of guilt away.

Once again, he felt like he was back on the roof, up on a high pedestal, John looking up to him as his great coat fluttered behind him like wings... broken, useless wings...

*Let go...*

“I didn’t want MI-6 dogging me at every turn. I had given up my life to eliminate Moriarty and his Cult of the Consulting Criminal. I was bound and determined to end things on my terms, not follow MI-6 protocol and regulations... I am painfully aware now that was a very stupid and arrogant mistake.”

“I didn’t say anything,” John’s voice was low and loving.

“No,” Sherlock said after a pained pause. “I suppose you didn’t. Mycroft planted the tip, to lure me back to England, well back to MI-6 really. He had planned on scooping me up when I arrived in Serbia but he hadn’t planned on me actually finding a Moriarty terror cell in Belgrade. He also didn’t plan on me being accosted by uncooperative Serbian soldiers, corrupted by Moriarty’s cult.” Using his thumbnail to dig under his pinkie nail for no reason other than he suddenly felt quite fidgety, he started to mumble “I was trapped in an unfamiliar forest, surrounded at gun point. I was brought to an interrogation center, where they started to ask me... questions... about who I was and why I was there.” He snorted silently with derisive laughter. “Mycroft learnt of my predicament. He disguised himself a soldier and infiltrated the center. Sat in a chair and watched them beat me to a pulp. Only when I deduced out loud that the wife of my torturer was having an affair and he stalked out in high dudgeon, then my brother announced his presence, only to let me know that he needed my help to uncover the terror cell that was planning on blowing up the Underground.”

“Jesus,” John hissed like an angry cat. “Was he so anxious to get you back to work that he didn’t even have time to get you proper medical care? If you were in hospital, these would have healed better,” he ran his hand down Sherlock’s back again.

“Errr... actually, he spared no expense in my treatment. Private doctors, not NHS. That’s how I deduced he actually felt guilty about how he had handled my “rescue.” But... ah... well, the wounds
burst open again because…”
“Because…?”
“Because when I returned to London, I didn’t go home and rest. I went out, looking for you.”
The room grew gravid with silence. Finally John cleared his throat, “Did you find me?”
“Yes,” Sherlock’s normally sonorous voice became tiny.
He was glad the room was still somewhat dark. He was glad he faced the wall and not John. He did not want to see John’s face scrunched up in anguish. He did not want John to see the hurt in his own face.
“Oh my God,” John’s voice trembled when he finally strung all the events together in the horrible chain it was, “The fucking Landmark Hotel. Sherlock, I am so, so sor-”
“Don’t,” Sherlock snapped as John started to put his arms around him. But when John started to withdraw, Sherlock reached up and clasped his forearm, to let him know it wasn’t the embrace he was objecting. “Don’t apologize.”
“But…”
“It’s not as if I announced my return to you in an entirely appropriate manner,” Sherlock cut him off. “Sentiment got the better of me. Nerves got the better of me. I didn’t want you to be upset when you saw me. I thought it would be better if I made you laugh first. I’m really not infallible you know. I keep telling you heroes don’t exist.”
“But…”
“We both made a mess of things. Just… don’t apologize.”
John lowered his head, his forehead now resting on Sherlock’s shoulder. Sherlock reached up and patted John’s hair as John whispered, “But I am sorry, so sorry, about so much.”
“Shhh… it’s over and done with. I don’t want to dwell on it anymore, nor do I want you to.”
“Dupin’s right,” John swallowed hard. “I do take you for granted.”
“John,” Sherlock shifted so John had to move. He took John’s face in his hands, even though it was still not light enough to see the blue of John’s eyes. “I want you to take me for granted.”
“That’s not how it works, Sherlock,” John’s voice wobbled as his Adam’s apple bobbed.
“I don’t really know how this works,” Sherlock admitted, running his thumb over John’s cheek.
“Tell you a secret mate… no one really does. We’re all just winging it in the end.”
“Illogical. And messy.”
“It is… but sometimes the messy bits are the best parts.”
“If you say so,” Sherlock sighed.
Then Sherlock drew John closer for a kiss. Before their lips met, John pulled back just enough to smooth Sherlock’s fringe from his brow. “You really are amazing. You know that, don’t you?”
“If you say so,” Sherlock smiled.

Soon they were tangled up in each other, Sherlock sprawled out on his back, propped up slightly by the pillows, John on top of him, kissing him as if it was an ordinary lazy Sunday morning and not possibly the most important Monday of their lives.

Sherlock reached for the hem of John’s vest and started pulling up on it. John sat up on his heels and pulled the vest off. Sherlock found himself sorry the lights weren’t on so he could enjoy the show. Then John was on all fours, kissing Sherlock behind his ear. “I want to try something,” he asked, half-shy, half-authoritative, “If that’s OK with you; if it’s not, don’t just put up with it, because, well… because it’s me.”

Sherlock smiled as his hands glided up and down John’s arms, “As long as you’re OK with it. Stop if you’re not.”

He found John’s attempts at boldness endearing.

John returned to kissing that incredibly responsive spot behind his ear (how the deuce did he deduce that? He thought as his toes curled.) John then proceeded to kiss downward, agonizingly slow, humming here and there when Sherlock reacted a certain way, with a groan or a sigh or a mumbled declaration of approval and enjoyment.

Upon reaching Sherlock’s navel, John sat up again. Sherlock could feel John staring at him as he hooked the waistband of his boxers with his thumbs. Sherlock lifted his bony hips, deducing what John wanted to attempt.

“You need to eat more. You nearly poked my eye out with your knobby hip bone.”

“And you say my pillow talk is terrible,” Sherlock pouted as John planted a kiss on the offending hip bone before tugging his shorts down even further.

Sherlock’s heart began racing even faster than before as John slowly, teasingly drew his pants off him. Half of him worried he should stop it, that John would hate being on the giving end… but the other half was wildly curious how it would be, not to mention more than a little excited. His legs fell open of their own volition.

Dear God, I am actually… salivating … at the idea of John’s mouth on me…

“Stop if you hate it,” Sherlock rolled his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes as John started kissing down his inner thigh.

“Tell me to stop if you hate it,” John rumbled back before his lips resumed his journey.

Meanwhile, John’s hand slid back up Sherlock’s side. When John’s fingers grazed a particular sensitive spot on his ribs, Sherlock whimpered a helpless giggle.

“Ticklish, good to know,” John sounded devilish. He ran his thumb over the ticklish spot again, chuckling as Sherlock squirmed while bleating out another helpless giggle.

“If you ever tickle me, I’ll end you, I swear to G-” Sherlock swallowed his protest when John started taking him bit by bit into his mouth.

He reached over and grasped the edge of the bed in a death grip as his brain started to grey out again, intellect washed away by waves and waves of pleasure.
Before his brain went to full black, he did think, *How did he learn that? Was it all from me?*

Then John added his hand to his mouth and Sherlock’s mind blanked out.

The warmth that now coursed through his veins as well the heat that made his skin sing reminded him of being high, a really fucking good high. A heroin high…. Well, not quite a heroin high, nowhere close, actually. But it was a distant reminder of a heroin high… *so, still pretty damn good,* he decided as he continued to grip the bedclothes and writhe under John’s mouth.

The delicious golden haze then started to pool specifically in his groin. Blips of consciousness spiked in his mind… *getting close… John…. Should… warn him…*

“John…” he wanted to open his eyes and he didn’t. Part of him wanted to see that silvery head bobbing up and down on him, but the other part was afraid he’d explode if he did witness something that erotic. Talk about *messy…*

“I’m… close…” he finally gasped out, throwing his arm over his eyes.

Instead of pulling off, John seemed to have redoubled his efforts. Soon (too soon…), he arched his back and with a shout, felt that golden haze transform into white-hot lightning, surging through his entire body, burning through all the cold spots in his heart, maybe even his soul, if such a thing as souls exist, of course.

Then, with all the built up heat, all that pent up tension released, Sherlock felt his body grow limp and heavy with sleepy release. Under drowsy, hooded eyes, he finally dared to look up at John in the brightening morning light… who was making a moue of disgust.

As John ambled off the bed, hand to mouth, Sherlock felt irritation threatening to ruin his post-coital bliss. “I tried to warn you,” he groused.

John picked up the bin and spat into it. “I know,” his voice was light and easy. “I wanted to try it, see if I liked it or not. I don’t.”

“No shame in that,” Sherlock felt the irritation slink away like a disgraced dog, “Got breath mints in my night stand drawer.”

“Oh I can go brush my teeth.”

“Really?” Sherlock finally leaned over and turned on the lamp. Smirking as he studied John from mussed hair to bare toes then back up, stopping at his silly red pants, he asked, “You’d rather take care of your teeth rather than…?” languidly he waved his hand towards John’s crotch.

“Thought you’d be worn out?”

“Not quite yet,” Sherlock turned the lamp off again then kicked the rumpled sheets away as John padded back towards the bed.

“Well,” Suddenly John’s voice, breathtakingly tender and gentle was in his ear, “If you insist.”

Sherlock leaned in for a kiss, then another, then another. As his tongue lazily explored John’s mouth, his hand danced down John’s lightly haired chest and soft belly then tantalizingly over the front of his pants. John moaned as Sherlock moved his hand back up over the rock-hard erection then slipped his fingers under the waistband of his pants.

John was so close himself that it only took three strong steady strokes before he cried out, gasped
then lowered his eyelids as he melted into the pillows.

Sherlock leaned over him and opened his nightstand drawer with his clean hand. He pulled out cleansing wet wipes he had the foresight to purchase the day after his and John’s relationship had changed. Flopping back to his side of the bed, he cleaned off his hand as John shimmied out of his shorts. “Here, let me,” Sherlock gently ordered him as John started to use his underwear to wipe himself off.

Soon, they were cleaned up enough to relax fully in each other’s arms, Sherlock’s head on John’s good shoulder. “Go to sleep,” John kissed the crown of his black curly head. “God knows you don’t get enough of it and tonight is going to be a big night.”

“I can’t… there is a dog staring at us.”

“What?” John rolled his head over and saw Gladstone was indeed staring at him. “You’ve been in here the whole time. Filthy little voyeur, aren’t you?”

“He probably needs his morning constitutional.”

Sherlock started to get up, but John stopped him. “I’ll take him out. Sleep. I’ll be back.”

Sherlock knew the polite thing to do would be to protest. Instead, with a drowsy smile, he shamelessly watched John pull on his jeans sans pants, then rummage through Sherlock’s chest of drawers for a T-shirt.

John can borrow my clothes… he sleepily decided before drifting off.

He was sound asleep when John returned.

Smiling as well, John pulled the top sheet back over him. Then he shucked off the borrowed clothes again and crawled back into bed.

They slept until noon. Then they shared a shower. Afterwards, they went down to Mrs. Hudson’s to tidy up since she was supposed to finally come home from her “retreat” on Saturday.

“Honestly who enjoys rehab?” Sherlock grouched as he carefully watered Mrs. Hudson’s orchids. “I didn’t enjoy rehab.”

“She’s probably lonely, Sherlock,” John wound the cord of the Hoover up, having just finished the rugs a good going-over.

“Well, she’ll have company now, with Violet staying in Mrs. Hudson’s spare room.”

“Yeah… that will be good… for them both,” John pushed the Hoover back in the cupboard where Mrs. Hudson kept her cleaning supplies.

After those tedious chores, John and Sherlock had lunch at Speedy’s. Or rather, John had lunch. Sherlock watched John eat, his fingers steepled.

“Eat.”

“Working.”

“Eat,” John pushed his soup towards him. “It’s chicken noodle. It’s good. It won’t upset your stomach.” When Sherlock grudgingly took the soup from him, John ordered tea for them both.
They spent the afternoon in 221B. John wrote the fake wedding announcement and the blog post regarding Sherlock and Violet’s “wedding reception.” Sherlock paced, hands behind his back, black brows furrowed, obscuring his eyes.

“Play something?” John finally asked him. “It will keep your mind occupied.”

But Sherlock shook his head, flopping down in his chair then drawing his knees to his chest. He hunted for the remote and switched the telly on, “Insipid talent show or ridiculous talk show?”

“Insipid talent show,” John immediately said as he put his laptop down. They found an X-Factor marathon, made enjoyable by Sherlock mocking all the contestants, eviscerating them with a sneer or a wicked deduction so cruel it had to be true.

Eventually the shadows began to lengthen as the sun moved towards the west. “Do you want to order take-away?” John asked, hoping he’d say yes.

“No,” Sherlock had turned the television off. “You should go home now.”

“I can stay for a bit longer.”

“John, Mary leaves for work in an hour. You should be home before she leaves.”

“I can’t wait to stay here permanently. I sleep better here than there, that’s for certain,” John reluctantly got to his feet.

“Have you not been sleeping?” Sherlock asked sharply, his long face growing longer with concern, “Nightmares?”

“No… not that. Just… it doesn’t feel like proper sleep. I’m sleeping on the sofa, to stay away from her. I stay downstairs and pretend to fall asleep on the sofa. But I feel like shit in the morning, like I really didn’t sleep… like I just closed my eyes for five minutes.”

“John…”

“I told you,” John raised his voice. “I’m not going to sleep with her, Sherlock.” He gave himself a little shake and softened his voice. “Call me, the minute she gets off the plane.”

“I will. And… I changed my mind. We’ll come to your house, not here. That won’t be expected.”

Relief swelled in John’s chest. “Good.” He reluctantly got to his feet. “I better go pack my things.” He crossed over to Sherlock’s chair and bent over him, “Call me, not a text. I want to hear her voice.”

“OK,” Sherlock ran his finger over John’s cheek then down his jaw. “See you tonight.”

“See you,” John lowered his head until his lips met Sherlock’s. “You need a shave,” he added cheekily as he ran his hand down Sherlock’s stubbly face.

Damning the expense, John hailed a cab, his rucksack over his good shoulder, his gun tucked into his waistband, covered by a red and black plaid shirt Mary had bought him and his old black motorcycle jacket. He watched Baker Street disappear behind him and turned around only when the cabbie turned the corner and Speedy’s awning wasn’t visible any more.

As the cabbie turned onto his street, John decided he would order pizza for Susan and Anna. He’d let them watch a DVD in the lounge then banish them to Susan’s room for the rest of the night. They
could giggle and carry on upstairs. He wanted the downstairs to himself.

He paid the cabbie, gave him a reasonable tip and bade him a good evening. He waved to one of his neighbors, who gave him a wave back while keeping a cautious eye on her daughter as the adventurous kid pedaled her bright pink tricycle in circles in the driveway.

He smiled at the little girl. Thought about his little girl, all the way in Salt Lake City, of all places, then put his key in the lock and turned it.

John let himself in. Shutting the door behind him, he let the rucksack slide off his shoulder. “Susie?” he called out. “Mary? Anyone home?”

Then he noticed Mary’s good tea service on the coffee table. Steam wafted up from the spout of the teapot, the good china one, with the picture of the windmills and the little Dutch girl and boy painted on the sides, wearing traditional Dutch garb, down to the wooden shoes.

There were three cups neatly placed in three saucers. Milk and sugar in their respective receptacles were also set out, along with lemon wedges in a crystal bowl. Scones and cucumber sandwiches were neatly laid out on matching platters. The scones were the stale orange-cranberry ones Mary was supposed to throw out and the cucumber sarnies were posh, no finger sandwiches made from mayo and white bread. Perfect round cucumber slices were placed in the dead center of the cream cheese coated square of rye, sprinkled with fresh herbs.

All John could smell was the sharp sting of lemon and the earthy scent of dill.

His stomach began to churn. *Something’s wrong…* flittered through his head.

“Mary?”

Holy Peters stepped out of the kitchen, his arm still in a sling, his face white as a corpse’s. But his lips were stretched out wide in a gruesome, anticipating smile.

John didn’t hesitate.

He reached for his gun, aimed and pulled the trigger in one smooth practiced move.

**Chapter End Notes**

So sorry about being lax again about answering comments in a timely manner! I'm actually up waaaaaaaaaaay past my bedtime as I have to be at work early tomorrow (Boo.) But I do read and appreciate every one of them as well as all the kudos/bookmarks/rec's. Plus, I'm sad to report that the class I'm taking this semester is kicking my ass and need to devote a smidge more time that I thought to that class. *sad face*

Sherlock's memories about Mycroft's snide remarks about "holiday is over" is from TLV.

Also, OK so I finally entered the 21st Century and now have a newer version of Office... and it formatting is messing with me, as you may have noticed here and there. I also can't figure out the "New and Improved" Review tab, so I feel like I'm missing a lot of my beta'er's comments and corrections. So if anyone notices any glaring errors, please
let me know!

Have a wonderful week!
Trap

Chapter Summary

Trap

A move that may tempt the opponent to play a losing move.

(Insert your Admiral Ackbar jokes here....)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-Eight: Trap

4 July 2016
John and Mary Watson’s residence
Monday evening
5:45 PM

Holy Peters blinked in confusion. As he tilted his head to study John, a streak of crimson, viscous blood oozed down from the hole in his forehead then crawled down the side of his nose and over his lips.

John’s heart pounded, remembering what Peters had said to him outside the Medical Library of Royal Free Hospital before abducting him last January…

*Harry begged. Not for her life, but for you. ‘Please don’t hurt Johnny,’”* Peters had mimicked a little girl’s voice.

John had smiled… *Not only will I kill you, but I’ll kill you slow.*

*So much for slow…* John glared at the body, his ears still ringing from the shot. Then he grimaced at the spatter of blood and brain on the framed picture of their wedding portrait hanging on the wall, just the two of them in their bridal finery. Frozen for all time, the image of him in that ridiculous grey morning suit, with tails no less, and she draped in that exquisite vintage lace gown.

He had thought she had looked so pretty that day, so fresh and pure, like an Easter lily.

He watched a gob of bloody brain slide down the glass, over Mary’s smiling face and plop onto the floor. Then he looked at the back of Peters’ head again, looked at the shattered skull, the gory starburst.

The sad thing of it was… he had seen worse.

Even with Peters’ brain visible, John did not lower his guard. “Mary? Susan?” he called out again, his back against the door. “Mary? Susan?”
Someone had to have heard that shot, someone is going to call the police…

John wasn’t sure if that was good or bad.

Adrenaline flooded his veins like ice water. Yet his hands did not shake, his arms did not waver. Keeping his eyes wide open, he put his back to the front door now, scouring the room for possible blind spots. He called out again, louder this time, “Mary? Susan?”

He whipped his head around when he heard footsteps in the kitchen. He took a step forward, then another. His damaged wrist and fingers began to protest a bit from holding the gun, but the pain only made John feel more alert, more alive.

“Show yourself,” he commanded.

Mary stood in the doorway, wearing her dark blue nursing scrubs and hot pink trainers with the purple laces. She held her hands in front of her, as if in prayer.

Then John noticed they were bound together with an USB cord.

“Mary, what the hell?” John lowered his gun just a tiny bit.

Then a hand gently rested on her narrow shoulder. She jumped and closed her eyes, in dread or disgust. Maybe both, John couldn’t tell.

“Go on, Mrs. Watson,” rumbled a gentle, familiar, hateful voice.

John jerked his gun back up, pointing it right at Professor Moriarty’s face as he guided Mary into the lounge, towards the sofa.

“Mr. Kincaid,” John snarled, eying the old man up and down, hating everything about him, from his silvery leonine head of hair, to his somber grey Westwood suit to his shined wingtips.

The Professor gave John an apologetic smile. “I do apologize for that bit of subterfuge.”

“Yeah, I bet you’re really sorry.” When he saw that he had no weapons, John commanded, “Let her go and sit on the couch and keep your hands where I can see them at all times.”

“You would shoot an unarmed man?” the Professor spread his arms out wide. Then he looked down at Peters’ body. “Well, I suppose you would, wouldn’t you?”

Fearing John would do something he would regret, Mary blurted out, “He’s having Susan watched. One of his assassins is with her and Anna.”

“He’s lying,” John’s lips turned up into that scary, murderous smile of his that he produced only when he was dangerously angry.

“Please,” he gestured towards the luncheon spread out on the coffee table. “I made tea.”

“I’m not hungry,” John pointed the gun at the thin strip of flesh between the Professor’s silvery eyebrows.

The Professor’s smile somehow changed from apologetic to mean with only the slightest twitch of muscle. “Dr. Watson, I bought the police force of your humble little borough. Even though 999 is probably getting overloaded from all the calls about the gunshot that was heard only moments ago, no one is coming. Please,” he gestured towards John’s armchair, as if this was his house and John was a welcomed guest.
“John, just do as he says,” Mary fixed her eyes on John. They were not tear-filled or wide with fright. They were dull, resigned.

That frightened John more than anything else. He finally lowered his gun but did not let it go. He did not sit down either, but rather stood by his armchair. Felt bile rising as he watched the Professor escort Mary to the sofa, even helping her sit down. “Now, I’ll be ‘mother’ but before I pass out the refreshments,” he pulled out his mobile. “You probably want proof to what Mrs. Watson said? That Susan is being watched?”

When John refused to answer, the Professor sighed as he dialed a number then held the mobile to his ear. “It’s me,” he said curtly, dropping the genial old man routine. “Proof of life required.” He waited then held the mobile out to John with a whispered, “Act normal.”

“What?” John cocked his head.

“Take the phone,” Mary ordered him when a tinny “hello?” emitted from the tiny speakers.

John’s gut plummeted to the very soles of his feet as he thought, Oh God, it is Susan…

He took the mobile, “Susie?”

“Hey John,” she sounded positively chipper. “What’s up?”

“Nothing, just… wanting to see if you’re having fun,” John fought the urge to vomit.

“Oh yeah, this is the best. Like, really, this is fantastic. Just aces! I already told Mary thanks but thank you, thank you, thank you John! I mean, just getting tickets would have been cool enough but a private tour of the Harry Potter studios! I mean… wow!”

“Well, I knew you liked the books so…” John felt the floor weaving below him. “And hey, I’m not sure if Mary told you, but if you want to spend the night at Anna’s that’s fine with me.”

“Oh… OK,” Susan sounded very confused. “I mean, that’s awesome, I’d rather go to Anna’s but… did something change? Mary said I had to come straight home afterwards?”

John looked at Mary, who dipped her head down and closed her eyes. Then he looked up and saw the Professor’s nasty smile and realized he had forced her to tell Susan to come home. “Yeah,” he tried to sound robust. “Plans changed. Mary’s working and I’ve got a case with Sherlock. So rather than sit by yourself here or hang out at Baker Street, stay with Anna, if that’s OK with her mum.”

“Cool! Yeah, cheers John!” There was some indistinct chatter then Susan said, “Mr. Beecher wants to talk to you.”

“Go ahead girls, I’ll catch up,” a cheery voice called out. Then the cheery voice turned sinister once the girls were out of earshot, “Dr. Watson, my name is Ward Beecher. I have a loaded nine-millimeter on my person. If the Professor is harmed in any way while he is in your home, the girl dies. And trust me, doctor, not only will no one miss a grubby little orphan like her, no one will find her body, not even your good pal, Holmes. Understand?”

“Crystal,” John croaked out.

The call disconnected. The Professor held out his hand. John numbly handed the mobile over. The Professor held out his other hand. John looked at him stupidly until he cottoned on. He removed the clip, then the bullet from the chamber. Then he tossed the clip and bullet away and handed the empty gun to the Professor.
As the Professor turned away, John sank down into his chair.

“You mistake me, Dr. Watson,” the Professor put the empty Army Browning on the coffee table, next to the remote. As he started pouring tea, he continued, “This is a friendly visit. An opportunity really, for you, for your entire family,” he looked up, once again the doting grandpa. “Do you take sugar in your tea?”

“No,” John muttered but he didn’t elaborate on how he liked his tea, how he liked a splash of milk and a couple of biscuits.

He wasn’t thirsty. He wasn’t hungry. He was sick.

So, he took the dainty cup with the intricate tulips from the Professor but he did not drink. He watched as the Professor helped Mary hold onto her cup with her bound hands. “Careful, dearie, don’t drop it,” he cheerfully chided her. Then he added lemon to his tea, plucked a tiny cucumber sandwich from the platter and began noshing as he sat down close to Mary. With his tiny sandwich, he gestured towards the food, “Come on, there’s plenty for all of us.”

“What do you want?” John asked woodenly.

The Professor swallowed then neatly wiped crumbs off his lips with a serviette. “Ah, there he is, the captain, the soldier. One of the many reasons why I admire you so much is your ability to cut through the codswallop.”

“You admire me so much, yet you tried to have me killed.”

Mary clutched the tea cup so tight, her knuckles turned white.

“Ah, yes. No hard feelings but that was business. Needed to put your colleague Mr. Holmes in his place, but look at you,” the Professor took a sip of tea. “You surprised us all again by surviving. I was glad for it. Also, I must find a way to thank you for tidying up a little problem I’ve been having,” he looked over his shoulder at Peters’ body. “So full of promise, but he got sloppy in the end. Started letting sentiment cloud his good judgment, his vendetta against Agent Hunter, you see,” he explained. “That was personal. She was the only woman to have defeated him. Silly, really, to be so misogynistic, but some men just won’t get with the times.” Politely, he added, “Would twenty-thousand pounds do for compensation?”

“I’m not an assassin.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I wouldn’t ask you to be a hired gun. I was thinking about the cost of replacing the carpet plus a little bit additional to buy new furniture. But I do want to hire you, both of you.”

“What?” John spluttered, nearly dropping his tea.

Meanwhile Mary whipped her head around so fast, her platinum curls spun around her head. “You tried to kidnap our daughter,” she hissed. “You killed his best mate from the Army, Sholto. You killed my sister-in-law, you nearly killed my husband. You’re threatening to kill our foster daughter. Why the hell do you think we’d want anything to do with you and your filthy cult?”

For a split second, John remembered why he fell in love with her.

The Professor actually looked hurt. “It’s not a cult,” he informed her with a wounded voice. “It’s a business. It’s always been a business, with a very assertive recruitment method.”

“Except your employees don’t get sacked, they get their heads cut off,” John snapped.
John and Mary met each other’s eyes and had a silent conversation: Working together is the only way out of this mess. We are still a team. We have to be… for our girls.

The Professor now seemed amused. Remembering how mercurial Jim Moriarty was, John wondered if he should be worried…

Sorry boys, I’m soooooooo changeable…

“Again, Holy Peters was… problematic.” The Professor started to reach for another cucumber sandwich then changed his mind. “Alright, brass tacks. My business is dwindling, close to shuttering altogether. I also made a sentimental mistake. I thought my grandsons could run the business. I was wrong and my error cost me both of my grandsons and I’m about to lose my business. The merger between La Ligue des Roux and Charles Augustus Magnussen would have stabilized the damage caused by Richard and his ridiculous obsession with Sherlock Holmes but when Magnussen died, the merger died with him.”

When he finally realized that Mary wasn’t drinking her tea, he plucked the cup out of her hands. “I freely admit that it was Richard’s fixation with Holmes was the beginning of the end, but Holmes’s constant interference escalated it. It was difficult, those two years, fighting a ghost, chasing a shadow. We could never get confirmation whether or not he was alive. We kept tabs on you, Dr. Watson. We thought if he was still alive, he would have sought you out. But he never did… did he?”

John stared at a bit of fluff on the carpet.

“Mmmm, I bet that hurt, didn’t it?”

“It wasn’t fun,” John continued to stare at that bit of fluff.

“Jim warned him, warned Holmes to stay out of our way, but he refused. Seeing that he has an ongoing feud with the elder Holmes sibling, we toyed with the idea of perhaps giving Sherlock a lucrative job offer, both him and the American federal agent he was shielding.”

John’s gut twitched again. This was the second time he had brought up Violet.

“I decided against it. Holmes, while brilliant beyond measure and a worthy opponent, is too volatile, too unpredictable. He claims to love logic above all else, then he murders Magnussen in a fit of passion. He told the professional concubine Adler that love was on the losing end and yet he winds up in the arms of a mousy, insignificant mortician. Oh, don’t try and protest,” the Professor waved away any protest John might have made. “He bought cocaine from a dealer who is under our protection, we have CCTV footage of him arriving at her flat in the dead of night and making the Walk of Shame later that following morning. Also, Holmes isn’t the only one who employs street urchins to gather information. One of my people had a chat with Miss Hooper’s former next-door neighbor and the old biddy complained of a thumping noise against her wall late one cold January night last year and then again that morning. I would deduce that would be Miss Hooper’s headboard hitting the wall.” His eyes flashed malevolently. “And I wonder what the results would be if a paternity test was conducted on little Henry Lestrade.”

“Greg Lestrade is Henry’s father,” Mary shook her head at the Professor, as if he was a very stupid little boy. “I didn’t think a man like you took stock in gossip.”

“I take stock in everything, Mrs. Watson. Especially when it involves Dr. Lestrade, she is far more devious than she gets credit for,” the Professor smiled thinly. “Jim underestimated her. Holmes did not, but he does take her for granted. Or, at least did until that fateful winter night.”
“What Sherlock does in his private life is none of my concern, or yours,” John snapped.

“Wrong. It has everything to do with my life. There is no private life, public life,” the Professor silkily corrected John. “My life is my work. Sound familiar?” he arched an eyebrow at a bewildered John. “It should. Sherlock grew up hearing that from the cradle. It was his mother’s mantra and then it became mine. The difference was she merely said those words, I lived them. But that’s a story for another time, how Violet Holmes made the wrong choice.” He adjusted his tortoise-shelled glasses. “Fortunately for us, a different Violet Holmes made the right choice.”

“What?” Mary sounded utterly confused, as she should.

John went to his default defense: “I don’t understand.”

“Yes, your friend really doesn’t like to share information, does he?” the Professor pushed his glasses up his nose again. “Here is my modest proposal: a tax-free, lifetime annual income of fifty thousand pounds each if you both work for me. That’s a hundred thousand quid a year until you die, not bad and far more than what you’re both earning.”

“I’m capable of simple math,” John snarled.

“You will not be asked to do anything distasteful. You will not be forced to do anything against your conscience. Now, if you wanted to climb the corporate ladder, if Mrs. Watson wishes to pick up her guns and her knives and her bombs again, or you would be comfortable treating some of our colleagues who were injured in the line of duty outside of regular surgery hours, then of course compensation would be re-negotiated, along with some additional perks, a nice cottage in the South of France for the holidays, perhaps.”

“I’m retired,” Mary glared daggers at the Professor.

“Yes, and wouldn’t it be a shame if your… retirement was discovered by the wrong people. I can prevent that from happening.” While the threat sank in, the Professor turned to John. “What do you say? Winters in Nice?”

“I don’t speak French and I didn’t have a very good experience the last time I was in France.”

“Fine, Italy then, or Greece,” again the Professor waved away John’s protest. “But if you two want a nice, comfortable life, pursuing your medical careers during the day, raising a family, taking long weekend trips to the country, to lead a quiet, happy life, all I need you two to do is run interference when Mycroft seeks you out to help him investigate.”

“Investigate what?” Mary flexed her fingers, wincing as she did so. John noted, not with just a little concern, that her fingertips appeared purplish, almost blue. Meanwhile, she held her mouth tightly when she didn’t speak, her lips nearly white from the pain from her tight bounds.

Her face was also slightly green and little wonder. The coppery scent of fresh blood hung heavy in the air. The stench of blood mixed in the air with the aroma of fresh cut lemons and the yeasty smell of scones close to getting moldy and the odor of warm cucumbers, watercress, dill and melting cream cheese all seeping onto rye bread made John want to be sick too.

“What a lovely new television you have, Dr. Watson. A Smart TV, is it not?” he turned it on. When I was a boy, there were three channels. Now, you can stream any television show you want. You can even surf on the Internet with your televisions,” he scrolled through the menu until he found what he was looking for, “Amazing, it really is, all this technology.”

The ubiquitous YouTube logo popped open. The Professor painstakingly typed in C-U-B-A in the
search bar. “Here we go,” he turned up the volume, as if they were all friends about to watch a really good film together.

The “film” started jarringly, with a shot of a neat but very sparse lounge. The room didn’t seem to be English. The wall was blindingly white, as if someone had used a cheap whitewash to paint them with. Hanging on the wall was some sort of surrealist painting, all splashy colors, bright reds, fiery oranges and electric blues. Also hanging on the wall was an enormous crucifix with a decidedly un-Anglicized Jesus suffering on the cross. No blue eyes, blond hair on this Jesus, this Christ was almost as black as night and the expression on his face seemed to be more accurate to his circumstance rather than the dignified agony the white Jesuses express.

Sitting on a bench between the cross and the painting was a portly woman in a long denim skirt and faded pink T-shirt. Her hair was neatly plaited and rolled into a bun. Her massive shoulders shook as she sobbed desolately, fat tears rolling down her chubby bronze cheeks.

Before either John or Mary could ask What the Hell is This, the camera panned over to an opening door. A woman with messy curly hair, wearing a blue sundress stood in the doorway.

John’s breath caught in his throat when the camera zoomed in on her face.

On her freckled, scarred face.

Violet.

Chapter End Notes

The name of the Professor's assassin Ward Beecher was inspired by Henry Ward Beecher, who was an actual Real Life person that was mentioned in the ACD canon of Cardboard Box. Apparently Watson admired Beecher in canon... I don't think John is very fond of the Beecher working for the Professor in this alternative universe.

Thanks always for reading :^)

Chapter Fifty-nine: Absolute Pin

30 June 2016
El paladar de la Doña Nalda
Havana, Cuba
Thursday morning
4:16 PM

“Señora Holmes!” Doña Nalda cried out as Violet stood in the doorway. Her hand stilled on the knob as she stared incredulously at Professor Moriarty, who was placidly sipping coffee from a tiny cup. He looked ridiculous, wearing a Panama style straw hat, a Hawaiian shirt, khakis shorts, black socks pulled up to his knees and Birkenstock sandals.

Or, he would have looked ridiculous if he hadn’t been surrounded by three very large, heavily muscled men with bronzed skin and military buzz cuts wearing some sort of soldiers’ uniforms, but which country, Violet wasn’t sure. She knew for a damn fact they weren’t wearing American uniforms. They also didn’t look like Cuban uniforms either. More worrisome, however was that all three of men had biceps larger than Violet’s head and they all brazenly wore their side arms.

“Está bien, todo está bien,” Violet murmured to Doña Nalda, her tongue scraping her dry mouth. A few moments ago, she had been sweaty from her walk. Now she felt a chill run up and down her spine as her skin erupted in gooseflesh.

Caught, I’m caught…

“May I help you?” Violet asked politely, shutting the door behind her.

She hoped she could walk without limping. Now was not the time to show weakness.

“Do you know who I am?”

Violet furrowed her brow, noting a faint Irish accent.

Then her heart started jack-hammering in her chest.

“I believe so, but please correct me if I’m wrong.”
The old lion smiled at her. “They said you were clever.”

“They say a lot of things,” Violet clasped her hands together, willed them not to spasm. Or worse, lock up and become immobile. Her body often rioted against her when she needed it to cooperate.

In fact, her left foot had gone maddeningly numb. The awful pins-and-needles sensation ran up and down her leg, as if a thousand mosquitoes had bitten her.

“They said you murdered Senator Woodhouse.”

“I did not. I was not in New York when he died.”

“Where were you?”

“Washington DC.”

“Were you in Chicago recently?”

“No,” Violet kept her lie simple.

“Where have you been, Agent Hunter?”

“Here and there,” Violet dared to walk slowly to the sofa. She felt the Professor’s eye on her as she dragged her left foot, trudging to the sofa. Sinking down, she placed her hands in her lap like a lady. As if she was Miss Smith again. “How did you find me?”

“Apparently pulling a gun then throwing a knife at a high-ranking officer of a gangster motorcycle club is not the best way to make an introduction,” the Professor demurred.

Violet decided to go fishing, “How much did you pay Vibart to sell me out?”

“Ah, so you were in Chicago.”

“Not recently,” Violet politely corrected him.

“You caused quite a kerfluffle, young lady,” Professor Moriarty scolded her, looking at her over his spectacles. “All that money stolen from all of my business associates; weren’t you taught not to take things that aren’t yours?

“I thought Jack Woodley stole all that money,” Violet willed herself to remain cool and unruffled.

There was no Sherlock to save the day with a brilliant deduction. No John with guns blazing. No Mary as a dubious ally. No Mycroft to produce a deus ex machina.

She was completely on her own.

“Jack isn’t that brilliant,” the Professor pointed out.

“You’re giving me credit for brains I don’t have,” Violet scowled.

The Professor studied her, “But you are clever.”

He drank his coffee. Doña Nalda continued to weep. Violet resolutely held her tongue.

She was not going to fall for one of the oldest interrogation tricks in the book: to be the one to break the silence.
Finally, the Professor smiled, “You’re wondering why the good lady continues to weep. Well, her youngest daughter has been arrested. Cubans don’t enjoy the freedom of speech that Americans do, and supposedly she was overheard saying something quite unsavory regarding the current regime.”

“Mirana good girl,” Doña Nalda gibbered in her broken English. She understood it well enough, but still had difficulty speaking it, especially while crying her eyes out. “Mira, por favor, por favor,” she snuffled, desperately needing to blow her nose, but refusing to do so in front of people.

“Yes, I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding. Unfortunately, what the authorities thought she had said, well, it wasn’t taken very kindly and she has been taken in, just for questioning, to assuage the concerns of the local politicians that she is in fact, loyal to her country. Hopefully, she won’t require very much persuasion to pledge her loyalty.”

Doña Nalda wailed and buried her round face in her hands.

“In exchange for her assistance, Doña Nalda will receive the money required to bribe the gaolers to release little Mirana.”

“Lo siento, señora,” Doña Nalda whimpered to Violet.

Violet closed her eyes and said faintly, “It’s OK.”

She thought about the youthful white dress she had worn to her wedding. Wondered if it had belonged to the unfortunate Mirana who was currently God-knows-where…

She opened her eyes and glared at the Professor, desperately trying to glean as much information from his clothes, his body language as she could. She tried to find a weakness, a nick in the armor…

“OK, the doña has helped you. You know everything now. Let her kid out.”

“Clever, marrying into the Holmes family, wealthy, aristocratic and powerful, not to mention famous,” the Professor nodded as if Violet hadn’t spoken. “Marrying for position has always been more practical than marrying for love. You just made one tiny mistake,” he held up his pointer finger then pointed it at her. “You married into the wrong family.”

“What do you want from me?” Violet cut to the chase. “You don’t give a shit about the money.”

“Americans, so blunt,” the Professor smirked. “You’re right, of course. I don’t care about the money. It wasn’t mine to begin with. Burn it in a bonfire for all I care.” He took his eyeglasses off and then his silly hat. “Explain the Moriarty Code to me, please.”

“It’s not real,” Violet lied again, carefully making sure she sounded partially weary, partially angry. “Your grandson didn’t create and use some master computer code to pull off the Crime of the Century. He paid people to open the doors to the bank, the prison and the Tower. Somehow it became an urban legend, a fairy tale for convicts, something to dream about as they do time. An all-powerful key to unlock any door, it’s the ultimate fantasy for a prisoner.”

“Funny you should mention prisoner, but we’ll get to that in a bit.” The Professor folded his hands on the table. “You’re right, let’s get to business. As you have just learned, the Holmes Family cannot protect you. Your husband can’t protect you. Your brother-in-law won’t protect you. He will not come through with reversing the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s opinion of you. They still think you’re a criminal. I can change that. I still have contacts in Washington. I can make this nightmare,” he made an elegant wave of his hand. “Disappear.”

“How?”
“I want two things,” he informed her coldly. “I want the Moriarty Code and I want Sherlock Holmes dead.”

Violet blinked. “How am I supposed to produce something that doesn’t exist?”

“I knew my grandsons. I raised them when their worthless father ran off and their mother was too despondent to do her duty as a parent. I raised them. I know them like I know myself and if Richard said he created a… what did you call it? A master key, well, then he did.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I know you loved your grandsons. But Richard Brook was mentally ill, he had a severe case of obsessive-compulsion disorder coupled with a narcissistic tendenc-”

“DON’T INSULT RICHIE LIKE THAT!” the old lion roared as he bolted from his seat, knocking the little table over. The tiny coffee cup shattered. Doña Nalda stopped weeping and pressed her back against the whitewashed wall, crossing herself.

Violet sank back into the sofa cushions. “It’s not an insult,” she whispered. “He needed help and he didn’t get it in time. It wasn’t his fault,”

“Richard was not ill,” the old lion snarled, smoothing his gaudy shirt down as if it were one of his fancy suits. “He was lost.”

“Yes,” Violet rapidly agreed with him. “He was, he really was, if he could… have been found, our stories would have been much different.”

“Yes, they would. He would have told me about the Moriarty Code and ensured Sherlock Holmes’ death.”

Mind reeling, Violet gambled. “You could kill Mary Watson. She put a double-hit out. If anyone murders her, a hit automatically goes out on Sherlock.”

The Professor’s face crumpled in confusion. “You don’t care for Mrs. Watson, do you?”

“She’s a lying bitch.”

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4 July 2016
John and Mary Watson’s residence
Monday evening
6:25 PM

Well, fuck you too, Mary thought as she watched the YouTube video, grinding her teeth. Guess the alliance is over.

She felt a pat on her shoulder, then another one, as if to say There, there.

She glared at the Professor, who had a simpering, pitying smile on his face. Rage boiled within her as she tried to scoot away from him.

She wished her attempt to stab him in the throat when he’d entered her kitchen had succeeded, but Peters had burst in through her back door and overpowered her.

“Don’t take it personally,” the Professor kindly told her.

Sensing John’s worried eyes on her, Mary lowered her hands to her lap. Her fingers felt completely
numb now, cold and useless, throbbing with pain.

She wanted to elbow the Professor when he patted her on the shoulder again.

“Don’t fret, Mrs. Watson. You’ll like this next part…”

***

30 June 2016

El paladar de la Doña Nalda
Havana, Cuba
Thursday morning
4:29 PM

“… as tempting as that is, I’m afraid I require you to ensure your husband’s demise.”

“Why me?” Violet crossed her arms and then her legs. She felt shaky. The awful pins-and-needles sensation ran up and down her left arm and left leg. She would need to take her medication soon.

“Because Sherlock Holmes trusts you, you are the perfect bait. John Watson won’t do it. I could dangle his infant daughter over London Bridge by her chubby little leg, threatening to drop her and he still wouldn’t do it. Sherlock doesn’t trust Mrs. Watson and for good reason. The Lestrades, well, they have their own secrets to protect, don’t they? They’ll be eliminated eventually, if they keep meddling, but the death of Sherlock Holmes might be enough of a deterrent for them to stop their inference, not to mention I think it’s safe to assume that the red-haired cuckoo in the Lestrade nest will receive quite the inheritance from the Holmes trust.”

“You know what they say about when you assume,” Violet said sweetly. “Besides, there is just one flaw in your brilliant plan.” She rolled her eyes, as she did when she was annoyed, “OK, there is a Moriarty Code, but he didn’t tell me. He told Sherlock. Sherlock Holmes is the only man who knows what the Moriarty Code is and how it works. And you want me to kill him.”

“Well, get the code first then kill him, obviously,” the Professor flustered.

Violet made her move. She dug her hand into the sofa cushions, pulled out her gun and pointed it at the Professor. Irene had stuffed it in the couch during the day for easy access if necessary.

And it was definitely necessary now.

The “soldiers” all drew their weapons and pointed them at her.

Then Violet calmly pointed the gun at her temple. “I’m dying,” she told him placidly.

“You will if you don’t cooperate,” The Professor was equally tranquil.

“I have ALS,” Violet watched that information sinking in. When the Professor finally betrayed himself by a soft exhale, she thumbed the safety off. “That’s why I’ve been hiding here, to get treatment. That’s why I was limping when I came in. I lost feeling in my foot. Trust me. Death is a mercy. When I die, you get nothing.”

Her heart no longer jack-hammered, it whirred like a racecar speeding down the Indy 500. *I don’t want to die… I don’t want to die… I’m not ready, not like this… please…*

She swallowed hard, willing her right hand to stay steady. *I’m not ready to go yet…*
But that evil, lying voice was back… *but this way would be so much easier. You’d go a hero…*

She rested her finger on the trigger. The trigger was light, spring-loaded. It wouldn’t take much pressure to end everything…

The Professor gestured to his ‘soldiers’ to lower their guns. “I see that we are going to need additional incentive.” He pointed to a valise on one of the little café tables still standing, “My tablet, please. You know who to call, use Facetime.”

The “soldier” on the left sauntered over and plucked an iPad out of the case. He hit some apps, waited, tapping his army booted foot like an impatient debutante. Then he handed the tablet over to the Professor.

The Professor spoke to the screen. “Hello. There is someone who wants to speak to you.”

He walked over to Violet as she quickly pointed the gun at him instead of her own head.

She felt shaky with relief.

She felt sick with regret.

He held up his iPad to her.

Violet’s jaw dropped open and she lowered her weapon. “Oh my God…” she shook her head then covered her mouth with her shaking hand as her eyes filled with tears.

The man’s greyish curls were receding and his beard was scraggly, like a hillbilly, but she would know that face *anywhere*.

“Violet?” Michael Hunter croaked from his prison cell. “Sis, is that you?” His emaciated, freckled face erupted into a huge smile. “I knew it, I fucking knew it. You’re *alive*.” Then he began to cry, whispering over and over, “I knew it, I knew it… I was right, I was right.”

Violet lowered her hand, “Is this a trick? Tell me something about me only you would know.”

“You burned down Grandma’s chicken coop when you were thirteen because you were smoking in there,” Michael blurted out, wiping the tears off his bony face with the back of his hand. “We lied and said that an ember from the burn barrel must have floated over and caught the roof on fire. The yard smelled like roasted chicken for a month.”

Violet began to cry in earnest, reaching for the iPad. “Michael, what happened? Where are you? They told me you were dead, they sai-”

But the Professor snatched the iPad away, ending the call. “I ransomed him from the terrorists who had captured him. I knew who his father was, who your father was. I knew your father’s role in the H.O.U.N.D project and I knew he was prematurely terminated when it was rumored that he was going to expose the project. I knew that a Pulitzer Prize nominated journalist as well as the brother of an FBI agent would be… valuable.”

“Let him go,” Violet’s voice was broken.

*She* was broken.

Still holding the tablet, the Professor put his hands behind his back. “You know what you need to do in order for that to happen.”
Her shoulders folded into herself, her hand covered her face. A choking sob slipped out as she doubled over.

Then, in a shuddering voice, she sat up and agreed, “OK. I’ll do it.”

“Good girl,” the Professor purred.

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4 July 2016
John and Mary Watson’s residence
Monday evening
6:50 PM

The screen went blank.

“You bastard,” John gripped the arms of his chair.

But Mary’s mind had skipped over outrage, “Why are you telling us this?”

“Because this is your wake-up call,” the Professor poured himself another cup of tea, “Your last opportunity to join the winning side.”

“The winn- oh, fuck you.” John dug his nails into the arm chair now. Susan’s safety was the only thing keeping John from flying across the room, grabbing the Professor’s head and giving it a good twist until his neck snapped. “You’re losing. You said so. You’re treading water.”

“But we haven’t gone under yet,” the Professor dunked another lemon wedge into his cup. “Think about it. All the misery your family has endured. It has been caused by either Sherlock Holmes or his odious brother, Mycroft.”

“Funny, I don’t remember Sherlock kidnapping my daughter,” John stood up now. “Or Mycroft killing Sholto or shooting Harry in the head.”

“All Sherlock had to do was stay out of our way. He could have still kept going with his funny little,” the Professor sniggered, “Consulting detective business. But he should have stayed away from our business. We could have developed a system so he would know to leave it alone. As for Mycroft… well… all he cares about is power and more power. But, pride always goes before a fall. He acts like he cares so little for his brother; perhaps that’s what it is, an act, to pull the wool over our eyes, to make his enemies believe that hurting Sherlock won’t hurt him so it’s not worth our time.”

His eyes gleamed like a hungry cat’s. “It’s time to test that theory.”

“And you’re trusting Violet Hunter to do the job? She’ll screw you over yet,” Mary predicted; her pretty blue eyes stormy. “Wait and see. She won’t honor her end of the deal.”

“If she wants her brother alive, she will.” the Professor checked his watch. “Her flight is on time, scheduled to land at Gatwick at eight o’clock on the dot. If everything goes according to plan, Sherlock Holmes will be dead before midnight, I’m afraid.”

John and Mary exchanged another glance, more like a panicked look. They exchanged another silent conversation: Find Michael Hunter.

“I think you’re full of it,” Mary sneered. “Violet Hunter is dead. She died in a plane crash.”

“She faked her death. Seems like everyone in this group has faked their death at least once, eh
Anya?” the Professor batted his eyelashes at her.

Mary was undeterred. “How do we know you’re not lying, trying to trick me and John? How do we know that was really Violet Hunter in the video? For all we know, you dressed up a clever actress to look like her and sound like her.”

*It’s been done before,* John thought.

“And,” Mary continued to scoff. “Even if that was her, she needs proof before she acts. She would never agree to this scheme unless she knew Michael was alive.”

“You know the lady very well,” the Professor patted her shoulder again and Mary visibly cringed.

By now, John had cottoned on to Mary’s line of thinking. “Where is Michael Hunter? Assuming he’s actually alive, that is.”

“Sitting comfortably in a van, across the street from Baker Street,” the Professor sipped his tea, “Waiting for his sister to come home.”

Except they’re not going to Baker Street, John remembered with a jolt. *They’re coming here.*

“What happens when they arrive at Baker Street?” Mary demanded.

“They go upstairs, Violet does as she’s told. Once the job is done, we come upstairs to clean up the mess. I’m sad to report, we’re going to make it look like a drug overdose,” the Professor shook his head, as if he was really regretful. “It was the only plausible exit that wouldn’t get the police too involved, however Mycroft will suspect. That is where I need you two,” he put his hand on Mary’s shoulder again, only this time he started running his hand up and down the curve of her neck, as if he was her lover. “To run interference, tell Mycroft you suspected he had started using again, but had never had any success when you confronted him.”

Mary scooted away from the Professor, then rolled to her side and pushed herself off the sofa. John helped her stand up. He put his arm around her shoulder. Maybe he didn’t want to be married to her, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to let this pig touch her anymore.

“We’re not going to do that,” Mary pressed herself into John. Together, they presented a united front. “We’re not going to help you.”

The Professor put down his tea and clapped his hands. “Bravo, that is what I like to see, teamwork. Oh yes, you two would do very well underneath me instead of drowning in Holmes’ wake. But, you’re not convinced yet, let me give you a final bit of incentive.”

Susan… John felt his knees turn to jelly, *He’s going to threaten Susie again.*

“I am the only one who has the ability and capability to find Marissa Watson.”

“Why did you take her in the first place?” John finally asked the question that had been plaguing him from the day he learned she hadn’t died but had been kidnapped.

“Same reason why I rescued Michael Hunter from being decapitated,” he waved his hand around dramatically. “I’m… a collector. I knew Marissa Watson would be… valuable.”

“Where is she then?” John demanded.

“America,” the Professor said promptly. “Salt Lake City to be precise, a closed adoption,
unfortunately, but with the Moriarty Code, I can crack that wide open. Nothing would give me more pleasure than to return your little girl to your loving arms.” When neither John nor Mary budged, the Professor wheedled, “How many times has Sherlock promised to find her and has failed to do so? How many hollow reasons has Mycroft given you why he can’t exercise the power to bring a British citizen who was illegally adopted by an American family back to her home country and reunite her with her natural parents, hmm? Sherlock only cares about his image and getting his next fix, be it drugs or the thrill of the chase. Mycroft only cares about keeping the power he has and obtaining even more; for him it’s all about control. I care about you. I care about everyone involved in my business. Happy workers are productive workers. And I need practical busy bees in my hive. Think about it, won’t you?”

John and Mary stared stonily at him. John could feel Mary shaking but he wasn’t sure if she trembled out of fear or rage.

“Get out of my house,” John whispered.

The Professor sighed, hiking up his trousers a bit before standing. He groaned a little as his back popped. “I’m not as young as I used to be.” He straightened fully. “I only kept Susan hostage in order to assure my safety. Once I am away, Susan and her little friend will no longer be in harm’s way. Oh, and I’ll send over one of my personal cleaners to handle, well…” he waved his hands towards the bloody wall and Peters’ corpse. “No matter what you decide, if you decide to join the winning team or if you decide to sink with the Titanic,” he signed mightily as he straightened his tie. “The only flaw you really have, John Watson, is your ridiculous loyalty.”

“Some say it’s my best trait,” John wanted to rip this man’s head off.

“Some might argue otherwise. Oh, that reminds me, speaking of your ridiculous loyalty, your mobile please,” he held out his hand. When John refused to move, the Professor testily commanded, “Come, come, I can’t risk you warning Sherlock with a call or text. Mary already surrendered her mobile.”

Resentfully John pulled his mobile out of his coat pocket and slapped it into the Professor’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you,” the Professor pocketed it inside his suit jacket. “Well, I’m off. Actions speak louder than words. If you two are sensible and wish for a long, easy life with both your daughters, do nothing. Stay home. Watch a DVD, cuddle on the sofa. If you want a short, difficult life while losing both little girls in the process, well… you have an hour to get to Gatwick.”

John ground his teeth as the Professor reached for the doorknob. “Oh, one last thing, your dog is shut up in the garage. We didn’t hurt her, or rather, I wouldn’t allow Peters to hurt her. I’m not a monster.”

The Professor let himself out.

“John…” Mary’s knees buckled.

John caught her by her elbows and guided her towards the armchair. “Breathe,” he ordered her as he fumbled with the knots. “Fuck it, I’ll buy a new cord,” he ran to the kitchen for a knife.

As he knelt in front of her, sawing through the cord with a wickedly sharp steak knife, Mary whispered, “He threatened to expose me.”

“We won’t let that happen,” John vowed. When the cord was cut through and Mary was free, John
rubbed her hands to help with circulation. “Mary, the things Violet said in that video…”

“No, she was trying to save herself. I would have done the same thing,” Mary winced as John continued to massage her purplish hands. “Of course, I would never align myself with the Moriarty Family. His bastard grandson stabbed me, cost us both our little boy, our Alex.”

John gulped, remembering the brutal miscarriage and how stupidly he had dealt with his grief. “Right, we need to warn Sherlock, rescue Violet’s brother and retrieve Susan. How’n the hell are we going to do that with no mobiles and with less than an hour from Violet’s plane landing?”

*I knew we should have gone and gotten her in Madrid, I knew it, I knew it…*

“Do you still have that burner phone Sherlock gave you when you went to Germany with Dupin?” Mary burst out.

“I do, but what good does that do us? I didn’t save any phone numbers on it. The number on the Science of Deduction website and my blog go to an answering service. I don’t have anyone’s number memorized.”

“I do,” Mary said simply. “Call Greg Lestrade, tell him to send the nearest panda car here to bring you to Gatwick. Tell him to meet him at the airport. Tell him it is life or death. Tell him to set up a perimeter around Baker Street at once so the van can’t leave the area if they get spooked and try to scarper. Then keep calling and texting Sherlock until he bloody answers. Hopefully you and Greg can stop him and Violet from going anywhere.”

“You’re brilliant,” the words popped out before John could help himself. “But what are you going to do? You’re not going to stay here?”

“No,” Mary looked pained. “I’m going to the Harry Potter exhibit to get the girls.”

“Can’t you ring Anna’s parents?”

“Yes, but we live closer to the exhibit.” Mary massaged her fingers and wrists, her hands a concerning shade of pink now that blood flowed easily through them again. “Plus, if there is trouble, I don’t really see a pair of married suburbanites handling it well, do you?”

John looked down at Peters’ body again. “I guess Professor Moriarty will know our answer when he sees that we’re gone, won’t he?”

“Guess he will,” Mary breathed, resting her head on John’s shoulder. “Thank you,” she added. “I’m glad he’s dead, Peters. After what he did to you, to me, to us all…”

Involuntarily John’s arms wound around Mary. “Take the gun. I can’t bring it with me. Not to the airport. And be careful.”

“You too,” Mary kissed his cheek. “I love you.”

The words cut him. But there was no time to deal with guilt.

He lightly kissed her lips and lied, “Love you too.”
One... chapter... left...
Chapter Summary

Chapter Sixty: Discovered Attack

An attack made by a queen, rook or bishop when another piece or pawn moves out of its way

OR

The deep breath before plunge...

Chapter Notes

**TRIGGER WARNING** for gore and violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Sixty: Discovered Attack

4 July 2016
Gatwick Airport
South Terminal
Horley, Gatwick
8:15 PM

Sherlock Holmes turned the collar of his great coat up and adjusted his scarf. There was always a bit of a draft in the airport, he thought.

Irritably, he looked up the Arrivals/Departure boards…

*British Airways Flight 1122 from Madrid – Delayed*

“Dammit,” he muttered, starting to pace, wishing he could smoke.

Fifteen minutes he could tolerate. Thirty was pushing their luck. If her flight was delayed more than an hour, they’d have to go to Plan B and that was even riskier than the current plan.

He felt his mobile vibrate in his coat pocket. He reached in again and read the message from Lestrade. With a scowl, he thumbed a hasty reply. Then he silenced it.

No distractions. Not right now.

***

4 July 2016
Gatwick Airport
With lights flashing, the panda car pulled up to the airport’s entrance at the same time as Lestrade’s sensible mini-van did. John had obviously interrupted Lestrade’s time with his family because Lestrade wore jeans, trainers and a Bedford Blues T-shirt under a sensible grey jacket instead of his usual “work uniform” of suit, tie, black trench coat and scarf.

The security guard smirked at him and adjusted his belt, hand on truncheon.

When the disgruntled security guard approached him, ready to tell them out for stopping in a No Parking Zone, Lestrade pulled rank, pulling his badge out of his back pocket. Showing the guard his identification, he ordered *sotto voce*, “I need to talk to your boss, now. There’s a potential death threat towards a passenger on an incoming flight and her husband, but we need to handle this quietly so we avoid a panic,” he glared at the driver in the panda car pulling up next to his van with the sirens wailing and lights flashing.

The uniformed cop quickly switched the lights off as John hurried out.

“Yes sir,” the security guard straightened up as John approached. Seeing John, the guard asked, “Who’s this?”

“Captain John Watson of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, retired. He’s with me,” Lestrade pulled John’s rank for him. John and Lestrade flanked the security guard. Lestrade pulled out his mobile, having a photograph of Sherlock at the ready, “We need to pull security footage of the last hour or so. We need to find this man and his wife. They are both in serious danger. He’s not answering his mobile and she might not be able to, if her flight is starting to land and she had to turn hers off.”

“Right away sirs,” the security guard’s chest puffed out a bit, pleased to be a part of something potentially dangerous, as if this was his chance to really shine.

“Flight 1122,” John blurted out, suddenly remembering. “He’s meeting his wife on that flight. It was supposed to arrive at eight o’clock from Madrid.”

“Right, if he’s not a passenger, he wouldn’t be allowed actually inside, security and all that. He’s probably waiting outside of the queue to go through security checks,” the security guard nodded decisively, convinced he was right.

“He can’t be allowed to leave the airport,” Lestrade said urgently. “Neither can his wife.”

“We’ll get on it,” the guard nodded again, as if that motion helped. “Let’s find out if Flight 1122 landed on time.”

***

Sherlock let loose a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding when he watched the Arrivals/Departure board update.
Sherlock checked his watch. Forty-five minutes. Cutting it close, cutting it very close.

He wished John could be with him here after all.

He loosened his scarf a bit, then put his hands behind his back and closed his eyes. Taking long breaths in and short breaths out, he ordered himself to be calm.

He was as ready as he was ever going to be for what was going to happen next.

_This will work, it will work_…

***

4 July 2016

Gatwick Airport

North Terminal

Horley, Gatwick

8:40 PM

“There!” a different security guard, a young woman not so full of herself as the first guard, jabbed at one of the CCTV screens in the security room. “That’s him, isn’t it? I recognize the coat from the news.”

So did John. He wanted to vomit. “Yeah, that’s him.”

_Oh Violet, please don’t do this. Trust us to keep everyone alive…._

_Don’t hurt him, you promised me you would never hurt him…_  

“How the hell did he get past the security queue?” she snapped, glowering at John and Lestrade as if it was their fault Sherlock had tricked security. “You can’t get through if you don’t have a ticket.”

“He’s Sherlock Holmes,” John mumbled, as if that explained everything.

It usually did, but this security guard obviously didn’t follow his blog or any popular culture. “So?”

“It doesn’t matter,” the head of security, a portly woman on the wrong side of forty, bit the young woman’s head off. “What matters is that there is a legitimate threat that we do not want escalating. How do you want us to handle this, Detective-Inspector?”

“Let security know what’s going on,” Lestrade told the head of security. “But keep it _quiet_, keep it calm. If we can escort Mr. and Mrs. Holmes safely out of the airport without incident, that’s the preferred method, OK?”

“Flight 1122 is landing in five minutes,” the first security guard reminded them, obviously pleased that his colleague got dressed down. “Are you sure we shouldn’t radio the captain? Maybe we should detain Mrs. Holmes on the plane.”

_Mrs. Holmes_. That still sounded so strange to John.

“No,” Lestrade snapped. “We want to do this quietly. Keeping Mrs. Holmes on the plane is the opposite of quiet. It will draw attention.”

“We’ve got to go. Now,” John felt dread swelling in his belly. “We’ve got to catch the next shuttle to
the South Terminal.”

“Thank you,” Lestrade gave the head of security a friendly shoulder squeeze. “I know this goes against protocol. We’ll take it from here.”

***

4 July 2016
Gatwick Airport
South Terminal
Horley, Gatwick
9:01 PM

*Can they deplane any slower?* Sherlock fumed, close to pacing again.

This was taking too long.

He stalked over to the beverage kiosk next to the newsagent. Took out his wallet and ordered another shoddy cup of coffee. Grudgingly he held out a fiver and got ten pence in return. Pocketing his change, he asked for four sugar packets instead of his usual two.

He wasn’t thirsty or even tired. Even nerve in his body was a live wire. He felt he could actually electrocute someone if he touched them.

He just needed something to do.

Another five agonizing minutes ticked passed. The coffee cooled enough to drink.

He took a sip and wrinkled his nose in disgust. Despite the extra sugar, the coffee still tasted terrible. *Inferior beans, left to dry in the sun instead of in a proper mechanical dryer to ensure proper evaporation of moisture, then ground quickly and not very finely. Roasted hastily then stored in large containers for months, maybe even years. Labeled 'sub-grade' and sold cheaply in bulk to chain cafés and crap kiosks like this one here.*

*Dear God, I am deducing coffee. I’m either bored or nervous. Can’t tell which from which…*

*Hurry up Violet.*

As he drank, he watched the passengers finally starting to spill from the terminal and walk towards the baggage claims area, towards him.

No Violet.

He felt a ripple of panic. He reminded himself that panic was illogical.

*Be like the water… as Dupin had advised him once.*

Be flexible, be *smart*. If the plan isn’t going the way it’s supposed to, change course.

Water wears down rock and earth. Be like the water, not unyielding like stone.

He finished his over-sweetened, overpriced coffee with a grimace.

He checked his watch again and ground his teeth when he saw it was now 9:11.

He crushed the small paper cup in his huge hand and binned it.
Too long, we can't risk it now…

Just as he reached into his coat pocket for his mobile, to pull the trigger on Plan B, he saw her, surrounded by weary travelers.

She had dyed her hair bright chestnut again.

But she didn’t have her Miss Smith disguise on. Other than the hair, she was dressed as herself, Violet Hunter, for the first time in public in over eight years.

She wore a loose fitting ivory jacket over a bone-white T-shirt paired with skinny denim trousers, bright red Converse trainers and no fake spectacles. A pretty crimson scarf was wound around her neck. She carried a matching crimson handbag and had a black rucksack slung over one shoulder.

Her chestnut curls grazed her shoulders. Although she had obviously stopped to touch up her cosmetics, her face wasn’t nearly as made up as it was when she was Miss Smith. Her freckles and her crescent-shaped scar on her cheek were clearly visible.

She seemed to be sleep-walking.

Then she lifted her eyes.

She saw him and smiled.

***

4 July 2016
Gatwick Airport
South Terminal Shuttle Station
Horley, Gatwick
9:02 PM

The metallic doors glided open as if by magic. People desperate to make their flights poured out. John and Lestrade jogged along with them.

“John, c’mon,” Lestrade pointed towards the security office in the South Terminal, “This way.”

But John shook his head. “You go on ahead. Tell them to call ahead and let me through. Then you go outside where the taxis and shuttles pull up. Get a cab. Stop Sherlock and Violet from leaving if I don’t reach them first,” John started walking away from Lestrade backwards. “Whatever you do, Greg, do not let them leave this airport.”

“John, wait! We shouldn’t split up!”

But John was already running down the corridor.

“Shit,” Lestrade hissed as he fumbled for his mobile.

***

4 July 2016
Gatwick Airport
South Terminal
Horley, Gatwick
9:16 PM
When she reached him, she let the rucksack fall off her shoulder, but held onto her handbag. Still, she stood on her tiptoes and threw both arms around his shoulders. He kissed her cheek and buried his face in her curls. He ran his hand down her back before winding his arms around her waist.

“Sorry, my pit stop at the Ladies’ took longer than I thought.”

He gracefully broke the embrace and scooped up her rucksack. “How are you,” he cupped her face, running his thumb over her cheekbone, studying her intently. Despite the concealer, he could still see lavender smudges under weary eyes. “How was the flight?”

“Long. I’m tired. Side-effects of the medication plus I sat next to an old lady who wouldn’t fucking shut up for six hours,” she smiled apologetically. “I’m ready to be done with this shit. I’m ready to go.”

Carding his fingers through her soft, curly hair, he pulled her towards him, kissing her forehead. To the casual observer, he really did look like a doting husband welcoming his wife home.

“Then let’s be done with it,” he tucked a curl behind her ear. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll get my suitcase,” she smoothed down his scarf, then the lapels of his coat. Then she turned and started limping towards the baggage carousel as suitcases started appearing and going around and around like a merry-go-round.

Sherlock watched her shuffle away with furrowed brows and his lips tilted down. He was glad he ate lightly today. His stomach had dropped to his knees. She’s getting worse...

Meanwhile, John struggled his way through the throngs of people, trying to get to the baggage carousel. He had already had words with the security guards at the entrance of the South Terminal. After an agonizingly long (to John anyway) call to security, they let him jump the queue and even gave him directions towards baggage claim.

But when he asked, then demanded that a security guard accompany him, they flat out refused.

John debated with himself then decided not to argue. He took off at a run.

Heart in his throat, John desperately ran down the terminal, feeling the shock of the cement floor radiate up to his knees as the soles of his cheap Oxfords hit the floor. He ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time, quickly apologizing to the people he ran into on his way down.

Finally, he reached the bottom of the stairwell, turning his head this way and that, agonizing, trying to find Sherlock and Violet in the crowds. Why is it so busy here tonight?

Then he kicked himself. It would be stupid to look for Violet. She’d blend into the crowd. She might have walked past him, wearing something that made her unrecognizable to him.

Where are the security guards that were supposed to fetch Sherlock?

So, he started looking for Sherlock, looking for his curly black head above the crowd.

Ironically, he didn’t see Sherlock first, she saw Violet.

Her chestnut curls made it easy to spot her.

She was trying to grab her luggage off the carousel but the handle of her suitcase slipped through her fingers. Shoulders slumped in frustration, she scowled, straightening up, clutching the strap of her
handbag.

Then her eyes locked on John’s and widened in utter horror. Her mouth dropped open.

“Violet…” John took a step forward but froze when Violet started surreptitiously shaking her head. Then she started making small shooing motions with her free hand.

The message was clear: Go away.

John’s face darkened. Not a chance.

Then realization hit him like a kick to the gut with steel-tipped boots.

Oh my God, she’s not going to wait until Baker Street. She’s going to kill him here.

“SHERLOCK!” John shouted, hoping to be heard over the din. Seeing Sherlock, standing by the newsagent stand, near the exit yet somewhat close to the baggage carousel, John started running towards him, “SHERLOCK!”

Of course Sherlock’s wolf-like hearing caught John’s voice. An expression not usually seen on his pale face appeared: confusion.

Then a more typical expression appeared: irritation tinged with exasperation.

A businessman trying to collect his things from the carousel ran into John, nearly knocking him over, hitting him with his heavy laptop bag. Rubbing his shoulder, John looked up at Sherlock.

But Sherlock was not looking at John, he was staring at Violet.

John risked a glance at Violet instead.

Her hand over her eyes, her handbag now clutched in her arm like a beloved dolly or teddy, her shoulders shook as tears coursed down her face.

John changed tactics, changed course. Instead of pushing his way towards Sherlock, he moved towards the baggage carousel, towards Violet.

If she’s crying, she’s regretting her decision. I can talk her out of it. I can, I just… need to get to her. Goddamn these blasted people… “Get out of my way!” he shouted and was ignored.

People continued being rude arseholes, bumping into him, hitting him with their hold-alls and laptop bags. One woman actually ran over his foot with her oversized suitcase, not even looking at him as she continued to drag the case behind her, its wheels wobbling.

Tears sprang into John’s eyes as his toes screamed bloody murder, but he kept his eyes on her. He started calling to her, begging, “Violet! Violet! Don’t do this, please don’t do this. There’s another way, there is always another way.”

Violet dropped her hand and stared helplessly at Sherlock through the crowd of pushing people.

Sherlock, still annoyed, held his right finger and thumb to his forehead, as if he was going to make the juvenile “Loser” sign that kids used to do a decade or so ago. But he was probably trying to rub away a tension headache; his face looked drawn and pallid, more so than usual.

Then he let his right hand drop to his left hand, curled into a fist into the middle of his chest.
John froze again. *He knows…*

“Oh God,” John whipped his head back and forth between Sherlock and Violet. Just as he decided he was going to throw himself in front of whatever she had planned for Sherlock, Violet closed her eyes and lowered her arms, holding them to her sides, as if in military formation. Her handbag slipped from her fingers.

The shot rang out through the terminal. Then another and another, *pop, pop, pop!* People started screaming, running away. The din was deafening.

None of the terrible things John had experienced in his adult life had every happened in slow motion, not like the way it did in television or in films. Everything always happened horrifically fast with no chance to catch his breath. A bullet ripped through his shoulder, another bullet shredded Magnussen’s brain. Sherlock fell from the sky. Sherlock bled from his gut onto Magnussen’s marble floor. His unborn son slept eternally under the earth. His daughter raised by strangers in America. And he, John, woke up three times in hospital, barely clinging to life.

Everything bad, *really* fucking bad, moved at the speed of a bullet, of several bullets from a semi-automatic.

And there was never chance to recover properly because there was always another disaster that needed handling. It didn’t matter what was injured, body, heart, soul, mind. He always had to pull it together and ignore the pain to weather the next storm. Lightening does strike twice and it always sets things on fire.

Except now… time did not move like lightning when this bullet was fired. This time, it was a flood, no, a tsunami, and John was drowning.

People screamed and scattered like roaches exposed to light. But to John they moved as if underwater, slow, sluggish, almost comical. The newsagent and the barista both ducked behind their respective kiosks, like puppets that had their strings cut.

John expected to see a circle forming around where Sherlock fell… *why is he always falling?*

Expect, he wasn’t… *didn’t* fall. He wasn’t bleeding either. He was running, sprinting, his coat flapping around him like a cape, towards the carousel, where a circle had formed near the baggage carousel around where…

*No…*

A blond bloke actually grabbed John under his arm and started dragging him away. “Come on, man!” he shouted in an indistinct accent. Could have been American, could have been Canadian. “We got to go.”

The young man was strong and managed to drag John away a few steps. John tried to shake him off, but then felt his feet get tangled and he tumbled to the ground. A sharp pain radiated from his hip as well as his hand when he tried to catch himself. He covered his head for a moment, afraid he’d get stepped on, as people scurried around him. High heels clacked, rubber soles of trainers squeaked and loafers slapped on the ugly, grimy floor.

John forced his way up and immediately got buffeted by suitcases and rucksacks. He persevered, pushing against the current, calling for Sherlock, calling for Violet, insisting that they let him through
because he’s a doctor.

His ears hummed, his blood rushed through his veins as his heart, still stuck in his throat, started to race.

He smelt gunpowder. He smelt blood.

He smelt the war.

It had followed him. It had finally found him.

Through the crowd, John could now see Sherlock, kneeling over Violet. His hand pressed hard over Violet’s chest, he spoke to her urgently, cradling her head with his other hand. Her face was white, very white. Shock, John immediately thought.

He didn’t see much blood though… John dared to hope…

Sucking chest wound, seal the hole and then… oh no.

Sherlock had lifted her up off her back, pulling her towards him and John saw the exit wound.

Or rather, he saw the back of her white T-shirt now completely drenched with blood. Sherlock realized this as well, removing his hand from her back, staring at the blood on his palm.

Lungs, spine… John thought numbly, clinically, almost detached. Almost as if it wasn’t happening to him, or his friend, or her… still he continued to press on, to try to reach them. He shouldn’t have picked her up… he instinctively reached for his pocket for his mobile to call 999… then remembered he didn’t have his mobile. The Professor had his mobile and Mary had the spare burner mobile in case she ran into trouble picking up the girls…

Put her down, keep her still, Sherlock, John beseeched him, as if telepathy worked. Keep still and watch her airway, make sure she doesn’t start choking, plug the bullet holes, keep her alive until we can get her to hospital…

“CALL AN AMBULANCE, CALL 999!” he roared, still struggling to get to his friends. The few feet away from them might as well have been miles, as people continued to panic and run away like beheaded chickens.

“Come on, mate,” a security guard roughly grabbed John from behind.

(… oh, now you’re here, you prick…)

“We’re evacuating,” he harshly informed John, trying to haul him away.

This time, John had better bearings and easily shook off the security guard. “I’m a doctor, let me go,” he gave the guard a hard shove for good measure. “Get me a first aid kit,” he yelled. When the security guard dithered, John bellowed, “NOW!”

As the guard bolted from John, Sherlock wasted no time, he unknotted and unwound Violet’s scarf off her neck as quickly as he could. Then he pressed it against her bleeding back. The crimson turned sanguine in seconds, a gruesome maroon.

Then Sherlock carefully laid her back down again, keeping her sandwiched between his massive hands, one hand on the entrance in her chest, the other on the exit wound in her back. It looked like he was trying to crush her with his bare hands. He now appeared to be speaking frantically to her,
trying to give her orders. Then he risked taking his hand off her chest. He snatched up her limp hands and placed them over the bullet wound. Then he scooped up her legs, forcing her to bend them at the knees. Then he pushed her legs over, now apparently trying to put her into some sort of position to prevent shock. Then he slammed his hand over hers, continuing to chatter to her non-stop.

John couldn’t hear him, but he could guess what he was saying…

*You’re alright, you’re fine, you’re going to be fine, help is coming…*

*We’re losing you. Sherlock…*

But the bullet that penetrated Sherlock didn’t perforate him. Luckily, he had fallen onto his back, the bullet within him acting like cork, keeping the blood inside.

And someone, not Mary, but someone in Magnussen’s office had called 999.

The bullet that penetrated Violet ripped straight through her, tearing muscle, bone, organs, arteries, veins. Without exploratory surgery the type of damage done to her could not be properly assessed.

John didn’t know if anyone had called for help. But he could see now the blood pooling around her, how much blood pooled around her.

He had seen this too many times before, back when he was still active military.

Back when he had to triage… *No good, he’s not going to make it, red tag…*

John finally reached the edge of the circle, the red circle, a ring isolating the victim and her one hero while everyone else abandoned them. Interested in saving their own arses, they fled.

Saw the puddle of blood. Knew how much blood was *too much…*

Sherlock’s desperate voice sounded muted to John… like he was underwater…

“Violet…Violet, keep your eyes fixed on me, can you do that?”

Shaking uncontrollably, Violet tried to lift her head. She opened her mouth to speak but a streak of blood dribbled out instead.

Then she became still… very, very still.

Her head slumped back down on the dirty floor.

Her eyes became fixed and dilated.

“Violet?” Sherlock’s voice was hushed, small and frightened. Like a child’s.

John looked at the floor. *Too much blood…*

“Sherlock,” John’s voice wobbled.

Sherlock whipped his head around, “Oh John,” he sounded so relieved that John wanted to drop to the floor and weep right there.

He made himself say, “I’m here.”

“John, please help her…”
A memory jolted John, their first adventure, the three of them, the Solitary Hunter case, the one that had started this all. They had just rescued Violet from the murderous and duplicitous Jack Woodley. He had tortured her and beaten her, leaving a nasty scar on her face. She had needed sutures. Sherlock had to hold her still because her anxiety and her heart rate had been through the roof…

*Jesus, John. Can’t you give her anything? Her heart rate is speeding like a runaway train…*

John closed his eyes and felt his entire world slipping away.

“Sherlock… I can’t.”

“Oh…” Sherlock dropped his eyes back down at Violet, back at her fixed, unblinking eyes. He took his hand off her chest and slid his other hand out from under her back.

He tilted her head back and placed his fingertips on her throat, searching for a pulse.

“Oh,” he said again, his voice barely more than a breath.

He removed his fingers, leaving bloody fingerprints near the scar where Jim Moriarty once held a serrated knife to her throat.

He looked around the airport, as if he wasn’t quite sure where he was. He looked up at John then looked away without saying a word. Still kneeling next to her, he reached down to close her eyes then stopped himself when he realized how bloody his hands were.

Then he looked down at himself, as if he couldn’t understand how blood got on his coat.

He looked like the one who killed Violet.

John watched helplessly as Sherlock drew out a snowy white handkerchief and tried to wipe his hands clean.

“I can do it,” John started towards Sherlock, towards Violet, prepared to do this duty. Prepared to take responsibility for his utter failure, he whispered, “Let me close her eyes.”

“Don’t,” Sherlock’s voice was a harsh and wounded thing. A fox cornered by hounds, a rabbit in a snare. “Don’t touch her.”

John stopped in his tracks as Sherlock crumpled the ruined handkerchief and stuffed it back in his coat pocket.

Sherlock carefully closed her eyes, still leaving bloody streaks over her eyelids despite his best efforts to wipe his hands clean. He let her head fall to the side, facing away from John.

With a yank, Sherlock pulled his scarf off and shook it out, like a picnic blanket. John recognized that it was the grey one he had worn when they had first met. Sherlock let it flutter down over Violet’s face, almost like a tent. Once her face was shrouded, he rose, holding his stomach as if he were about to be sick.

“Sherlock,” John called out as he heard Lestrade shouting behind him to let him through.

Without looking at him, Sherlock turned and started staggering towards the exit, as if he were drunk. He still kept his arms wrapped around himself.

Anguished, John looked at Sherlock’s retreating figure. Then back down at the body…
Another memory slammed into him, something she had confided in him once:

_Sherlock and I are under house arrest. He’s unstable and I’m untrustworthy. We are each other’s keepers. London is our prison and Baker Street is our private cellblock. I am never going to be allowed to leave. I’m going to die in England._

Wrenching his eyes away from her, he covered his face with this hand.

“Oh my God…”

^v^v^v

_Only know you've been high when you're feeling low_
_Only hate the road when you're missing home_  
_Only know you love her when you let her go_  
_And you let her go_

From _Let Her Go_, Passenger

To be continued in _Valley of Fear_

Chapter End Notes

*puts blindfold on, lights cigarette, waits for the firing squad...*

Edited to add: since nobody yelled "Ready... Aim... FIRE!" :^P

So... about that cliffhanger... :^0

I've got about 14 chapters finished with the first five chapters already with my trusted and beloved beta'er cadoganwest. The next installment will most likely be the last in this series... for now. I do have a "Violet scrap heap" where I keep the sections that I cut, free-writings, back-stories, character sketches, so on and so forth. I may or may not mold that all into a fic eventually, but for all intents and purposes "Valley of Fear" will be the Last One (I mean it this time... really!)

I honestly have no idea when I'm going to start posting due to good news/bad news. As I may or may not have mentioned previously, I have terrible insomnia. I started writing fic after getting tired of staring at the ceiling instead of falling asleep. I was given a new medication that is helping the insomnia tremendously. Good for sleep and mental health... bad for fic writing. I love you all for your patience with my erratic posting and responses to comments... but now I need to ask for just a little bit more patience please and thank you.

Thank you, everyone SO much for reading/commenting/bookmarking/kudo'ing! I've now lost track of how many times I've tried to write how much this means to me, only to hit backspace and start over. I am humbled and overwhelmed how many people have stuck with this series, despite the scary word counts.

Speaking of scary word counts, a THOUSAND thank you's to my beta'er,
cadogenwest, who not only has to deal with the scary word counts as well as my poor grammar skills, but has also gone above and beyond the normal duties of a beta reader. From letting use her for a sounding board whenever Real Life throws me a plot twist I did not see coming, talking me down from the edge and the hilarious asides she leaves in Comments when she's editing (which I have saved... every since one), I don't think any fic writer could have a better beta'er or friend. XOXO

Normally I rely on my own memory and re-watches when quoting the show, but this time Arianedevere's Sherlock transcripts saved my life (see below...)

Last but not least, credit where credit is due... (again... see below... ) and I'll be posting again hopefully very soon!

XOXOXOXO

Sherlock Holmes and Other Source References:

DeVere, Ariane. “Arianedevere.” Ariane DeVere, LiveJournal, arianedevere.livejournal.com


Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!