Blackbird, Fly
by Engazed

Summary

It's been six months since John Watson's kidnapping and brutal treatment at the hands of Sherlock's enemies. It's been six weeks since the demise of the notorious killer the Slash Man. Now Sherlock and John must work together to defeat Moriarty once and for all, in the greatest fight of their lives.
The day Mary Morstan met John Watson, she had fifteen months left to live.

She arrived at St Elizabeth’s Hospital early, having taken two buses and the Tube to get there. After some hesitation, she strode almost defiantly to the sliding glass doors, which glided apart and greeted her with a ding. But there, she stopped as suddenly as if the doors had remained stubbornly
closed. Now was the moment to rethink the decision, turn back, carry on as she was. After all, she’d never done anything like this before. Not remotely. The rising summer sun was at her back, and her purse containing months’ worth of sensitive letters was clutched tightly under her arm. Nerves flared in her stomach, her resolve wavered. She pushed her long ginger hair behind an ear and took a deep breath to pacify the stomach-dwelling butterflies. She wondered if this sort of thing would get her into trouble. Well, more trouble than she was in already.

It had been Samantha’s idea to look into hiring a private detective.

‘No no, don’t go to the police.’

Samantha had always been the sensible one, the older sister with a head level enough for balancing spouse and children in one hand, and a career as a paralegal in the other. Mary, she was the dreamer, the dancer, the lover of yesterday’s stories and tomorrow’s possibilities. A practical girl in her own right, but with the hope of something special just around the bend. That was why she was still living in London, not Calgary, where Samantha insisted her little sister belonged.

‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’ Mary replied.

‘I know that, believe me, I know. But think it through. This a civil matter, not a criminal one. There’s no plausible deniability. Your signature on that document says you accept legal liability.’

‘But it’s not my sig—’

‘As far as any court is concerned, it is. The police won’t help you. Don’t give them any reason to charge you. You have to keep law enforcement out of it, Mary, do you hear me?’

‘So what do I do? What can I possibly do? Do I consult a barrister?’

‘You can’t afford one. Look, I know it feels shady, but the best thing for you is to come here, live with me, and just wait for this whole thing to blow over.’

‘I can’t do that, Sam. I have a life here.’

‘The flower shop?’ He tone was decidedly unimpressed, just shy of mocking. But she sighed, knowing the fight was lost. This wasn’t the first time she had tried to convince Mary to come to Canada. ‘Fine. But like I said, you need proof. You need to convince these people that you were never involved.’

‘I’ve been trying, Sam! But I have no way of contacting them, nothing. No phone number, no address, no website. I’m at my wit’s end.’

‘So hire someone who can find them. Someone discreet but professional.’ There was a pause while both women chewed this over. Samantha came up with the solution first: ‘A PI.’

‘A private investigator? Are you serious?’

‘It’s what I would do.’

Over the next several days, even while scrolling through page after page of PI services advertised around London, she doubted Samantha’s advice and fretted over whether she should actually go through with it. They seemed so dodgy, private detectives, and she had enough knotty problems to be going on with already. But the alternative was an expensive barrister, or law enforcement, and Samantha was probably right on the nose with that one: when it came to legal matters, things could get . . . sticky. Very sticky. She didn’t know if her case was sympathetic enough for police to side
with her, and she was too afraid to risk it. This was a matter that needed to be settled tactfully. That meant there was only one realistic option available to her.

It was just about the time that she had resigned herself to this unhappy fact that she came across a website buried pages and pages deep on the search browser. Even at first glance, it was a modest though intriguing site: unlike the others, it did not display a long list of provided services (surveillance, tracking, fraud investigation, employee verification, and so on), nor links to costs/fees/pricing, nor boxes and boxes of testimonials cluttering the page. Instead, it made a simple but pointed claim: *I’m Sherlock Holmes, the world’s only consulting detective.*

She didn’t know what a consulting detective was, exactly. She didn’t know what the science of deduction was. But the name *Sherlock Holmes* struck familiar chord—though she couldn’t quite place him in her memory—so perhaps his work was good enough to afford him something of a reputation. In any case, he wrote with the sort of haughty confidence that instilled in her, right from the start, a measure of trust. Trust, that is, that this was a man who might be able to help her.

*If you’ve got a problem that you want me to solve, then contact me. Interesting cases only please.*

She certainly had that. An interesting case, that was.

There could be no harm in going for a consultation, surely. So she searched for contact information on the site, an email or a phone number to call, and that’s when she found, at the bottom on the page in cerulean blue text, the instruction: *If you want my help, write to me at 221B Baker Street, London, or contact me through John’s blog. –SH*

A companion site? She clicked the link and found herself on The Personal Blog of Dr John H Watson.

For the next hour, curled up in bed with her laptop, Mary read the entire narrative of the lives and work of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson that had been dedicated to the blog. She was enraptured. The detective was astoundingly clever, delightfully eccentric, and at times surprisingly funny (particularly in the comments). With each new case, she began to imagine her own being narrated alongside them, a chapter in the casebook, and she found herself becoming more and more invested in her belief that *this* was the man who would right the wrongs in her life and help her to sleep again at night.

But it was the other character, the narrator, the ‘I’ of all the tales, that partner-in-detective-work John Watson, who had her smiling most often. He was not the star of his own stories, and his attentions were far more often focused on the astounding brainwork of his partner than on his own humble contributions. Nevertheless, it was clear, to Mary at least, that he was quite clever himself, in his own, understated, far more modest way. He had a wry sense of humour and a dry kind of wit that came across in his entries and interactions with commenters; he was longsuffering in his exasperations and compassionate in his concern for others’ welfare. Above all, it was obvious how much he admired the man he worked with, how much faith he had in Sherlock Holmes, and *that* was the final commendation she needed to know that this was the man she wanted to hire.

Until, that is, she came to a post dated June 16, 2011, and read the brief and troubling entry: ‘He was my best friend and I’ll always believe him.’

Mary stared. It was the final post, and it was over two years old. Where was the rest of it? She clicked backwards, forwards again, and looked for another link, but there was nothing. Dr Watson had written *was*: he *was* my best friend. What had happened?

A quick search online provided the answer, and Mary felt her heart sink as she read it: *Suicide of*
Fake Genius and Fraudulent Detective Takes Own Life and Sherlock Holmes Falls to His Death. She couldn’t explain it. She was glad no one was there to witness it. But upon learning of the death of this brilliant stranger, now two years past, she broke down and cried. She hadn’t known him; she would never know him. But for that one glorious hour, he had seemed so real, and so, too, was his loss. It was the kind of tragedy to which she was no stranger. So it was that, alone in her flat, she felt the sorrow of John Watson, and it was for John that she cried.

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When she awoke in the morning, the computer was still open on her bed, and a nudge that brightened the screen recalled her to her plight. It also awoke within her a new and startling resolve: to find John Watson.

She played at being detective herself that morning. In the greenhouse, when the shop was quiet and between waterings and trimmings and ledger work, she searched for him on her phone. There were dozens of John Watsons in London alone, and for a time she thought she’d have to hire a detective to find a detective. But then she remembered he was a doctor, as well as a detective. She had no idea what kind of medicine he practised—his medical career had not featured prominently on the blog—but a search for Dr John Watson and hospital and London brought her straight to him: he worked at St Elizabeth’s in South London, right near Kennington Park. A brief biography on the hospital’s website named him a junior consultant general surgeon.

Before she lost her nerve, she phoned the hospital. She asked for an appointment with Dr Watson. A consultation. The receptionist asked: Was this an emergency? Was she a current patient, or a referral? What was her ailment? Wincing, she lied and complained of abdominal aches, saying that Dr Watson had come highly recommended, and could she get in to see him as quickly as possible? By the end of the call, and owing to a fortunate last-minute cancellation, she had an appointment for the very next day.

And that was how she found herself at the doors of St E’s.

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‘Just sit tight, Ms Morstan, and the doctor will be right with you.’

She had already de-robed and now sat on the edge of a paper-draped hospital bed wearing a paper gown, her hair now pulled back into a ponytail. Already, she knew, she had taken the charade too far. The nurse had weighed her, taken her vitals, noted everything down on a clipboard, and treated her with the kind of hospital-trained gentleness her apparent nervousness required. At this point, she no longer had any idea how to make the transition from pantomime patient to potential client in need of a detective. Maybe she could just play it through: let the doctor examine her, determine she was well, and prescribe her the mildest medication he could think of to ease symptoms she didn’t even have. Then she could flee back to Stratford, pretending none of this had happened, and flush the pills down the toilet. Naturally, she would phone Samantha, and together they would have a good laugh at her foolishness.

The door opened. The doctor came in.

Mary stopped swinging her restless feet as her heart gave a lurch.

Though she had seen photographs online—from both the blog, news articles, and St E’s website—she was only now struck with how familiar he was to her, like this wasn’t a first meeting at all but a reunion of sorts. Which, of course, made no sense. In a way, though, she did feel like she knew him. After all, she had read so much about the life he had led and the things he had done, and
based on those narratives, she had already ascribed to him a personality and imagined his history and was calling him *John* in her head. She felt like they could fall at once into easy conversation. *So good to see you again. And how is Harry these days?* she might ask, or *I loved the one about the aluminium crutch,* or *Wouldn’t you know it? I actually had tickets to the Vermeer unveiling at the Hickman Art Gallery. I’m still waiting for my refund!* But instead, she just stared, a little wide-eyed and open-mouthed. It wasn’t celebrity awe or girlish fancy, but an impulse to say, above all else, *I know you.* And she couldn’t.

‘Good morning, Ms Morstan,’ he said, drawing up a swivel chair. ‘How are we today?’

His voice was warm, his smile soft, and when he lifted his dark blue eyes from the clipboard to meet hers, there flickered a moment in which she saw him mirroring her expression, and he knew her, too. But no—she had imagined it, because he recovered himself quickly, cleared his throat, and returned his attention to the clipboard. But a slight flush remained behind to colour his cheeks.

Consulting her chart, he began with a practised air of professionalism, ‘You told the nurse you were experiencing some discomfort—?’

‘Chest pains,’ she blurted out. Yes. That wasn’t a lie. She was definitely feeling some sort of ache in her chest now, a little to the left. ‘Trouble breathing.’

‘Oh.’ He flipped a page, eyes narrowing, and she realised her mistake. Dr Watson was a general surgeon, for whom the abdominal pains she had invented over the phone got her an appointment. In his line of work, he would have little to do with chest pains.

Before she could flounder and fluster in correcting herself, Dr Watson rose from the stool and took out a stethoscope, settling the tips in his ears. He wasn’t questioning her. He wasn’t calling her out on her obvious deceit. Instead, he just smiled, a close-lipped and kind smile, and said, ‘Let’s have a listen, then, shall we?’

Mary wondered if she was being indulged in the lies of a hypochondriac.

He stepped around, breathed warm air on the diaphragm, and placed it against her back, to the right, and just within the folds of the paper gown. ‘Nice, deep breath,’ he said. She breathed. ‘Hold it.’ She did. ‘And release.’ He moved the diaphragm to the left, and she breathed for him again. Finally, he came back around to the front and held the stethoscope to her chest. ‘Just one more . . .’ His voice had softened a bit. He cleared his throat and muttered a shy sort of *pardon.* With the placement of the instrument, surely he was now listening to the rapid thrumming of her heart.

Their eyes met again, this time only inches apart. He felt it too, and stepped away.

‘Well, Ms Morstan,’ he said, taking up the clipboard again, making careful study of the notes there, ‘breath is strong, lungs sound clear. Can you tell me when you first started experiencing—?’

‘Dr Watson, I’m here because I need a detective.’

His head came up sharply, and his hands tightened around the board. His expression, though, was unfathomable. It wasn’t anger, or annoyance, or affront, or disgust. Shock came closest, but there was something behind the shock, deeper, more guarded. It was pain. She had caused him pain. Never had she felt more miserable in her life.

‘God, I am so sorry. That came out all wrong. What I mean is—’

‘Stop.’ He put up a hand to forestall whatever she was about to say; even she didn’t quite know what that was going to be. Her mouth fell closed and she pressed fingers to her lips. His jaw was
tight for a moment, his head lowered, but he lifted his guarded eyes and said, ‘Who are you?’
‘I’m . . . I’m no one.’
‘Who sent you?’
‘What? No one. No one sent me. I saw the website, that’s all. And the blog. And I needed help.’
He laughed, but not because this was funny. Nothing about this was funny. Mary wished she really were dying.
‘Those sites shouldn’t even exist,’ he said. ‘They should be deleted.’
‘But—’
‘We’re not in business anymore, Ms Morstan. I’m sorry, but it looks like you wasted your time coming here. On the plus side, you seem to be in perfectly good health, so you should take comfort in that, at least.’ He started for the door.
‘John, please!’
He froze, one hand on the door knob.
‘Sorry,’ she said again, covering half of her face with a hand. How could this have gone so wrong, so quickly? ‘Sorry, that’s not appropriate. I don’t mean to take liberty. Dr Watson, I mean. I shouldn’t have come to you like this. I shouldn’t have lied. But I didn’t know how else to— I’m in trouble, and I don’t know who to turn to.’
She watched his shoulders rise and fall with a silent sigh, and his head bowed a little. From behind, she could just make out his eyelashes falling closed while he thought. She clenched the paper gown so fiercely at her chest that she heard a soft rip. Hurriedly, she flattened her hand to hide it.
‘If you’re in trouble,’ he spoke to the door, ‘you should go to the police.’
‘I can’t go to the police. Not with this.’
‘There are other private detectives.’
‘I don’t trust any other detectives.’
He looked back over his shoulder, eyebrows lifted, both surprised and incredulous.
She hastened to explain. ‘I know it sounds silly. But I read the blog. All those cases, the fascinating and bizarre and important. You solved them.’
‘I didn’t solve them. Any of them.’
‘Both of you, I mean.’
He turned away again. ‘I’m not a detective, Ms Morstan. I’m a doctor. I can’t help you. Not with this.’
‘I just thought—’ She should have backed off; she should have conceded her own stupidity in coming here. She was in the vulnerable position of being half naked in a paper dressing gown, having just been caught lying to a medical professional who should at this very moment be tossing her out or summoning security to come do it for him. But he wasn’t doing that. He was denying
her, denying himself even, but he was still . . . listening. His hand had left the door and now remained clenched at his side, but he was waiting for her to finish. Mary dared to press her advantage.

‘You saw the way he worked. Didn’t you? More than anyone else, you saw him solve case after case. And I thought, one doesn’t see all that, and write it all down, without learning a thing or two.’

Still, he didn’t answer, barely blinked.

‘I can pay. I don’t have much, but we can work something out.’

He flinched. ‘That’s not how we— Look. Discussing this, here, isn’t appropriate.’ He worried his tongued against his teeth behind closed lips. ‘My shift ends in a few hours. If you’re still mad enough to want me, I’ll be across the street at half four. Vivian’s Café.’

She was nodding even before he finished.

‘Just to talk.’

‘I understand.’

‘I’m not saying I can do anything for you.’ His voice carried with it a warning. ‘But I may be able to point you in the right direction. Sound fair?’

‘That’s all I ask.’

‘Good day, Ms Morstan.’

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‘Can I buy you a coffee?’ she asked as he draped his suit coat across the back of a vacant chair and slid into the seat across from her. She silently chided the butterflies that had re-awoken at the sight of him coming through the door. Having spent the last six hours agonising over whether he would actually show, she had half-convinced herself that he would not, but would put as much distance as possible between himself and the crazy woman.

‘Ah,’ he hesitated. His smile was shy but genuine. His eyes flicked toward the server at the adjacent table. ‘No, you don’t have to do that.’

‘I insist. I’m clearly a spanner in your works, so the least I can do is buy you a coffee, Dr Watson.’

‘John,’ he corrected her. ‘You’re not my patient, after all. Clearly.’

‘Mary,’ she said. And they grasped hands across the table in proper greeting.

‘Mary,’ he repeated, ‘would be lovely. Coffee, I mean. Coffee would be lovely.’ His blush made her smile more brightly. ‘Thank you.’

She ordered. For herself, cream and two sugars. For John Watson, black. While they waited for their drinks to arrive, and then while they waited for their drinks to cool, and then while they waited for the sun to shift just enough so that it was no longer in their eyes but sinking behind a tree and dappling their faces and serviettes, they chatted, avoiding the business at hand. It was easy. Comfortable. She had imagined that she’d never recover from the awkwardness of the examination room, but he was at such ease with her now that either he was a remarkably good actor or she wasn’t the oddest thing he had ever dealt with in that room. Whatever it was, she was
enjoying herself far too much, because for those first lovely minutes, she entirely forgot what had brought her and John both there to begin with.

‘So, Mary.’ He set his mug down on the table at his right elbow and smiled again, that soft, shy smile, like he was out of practice. ‘You said you were in trouble.’

Of course. To business. This was, after all, a business meeting. She chided herself for forgetting. With an apologetic grin, she set her zipped purse in her lap and began:

‘About a year ago, I received a letter from my father. It was posted from Mumbai and dated September 2, 2012. It was written in his hand, and signed with his signature, which I know as well as my own. In the letter, he said there was an emergency and asked me to wire him twelve thousand pounds.’

‘Was this request unusual for him?’

‘John,’ she said, ‘my father, Arthur Morstan, has been dead for five years.’

He straightened a little, his attention—already piqued—now elevated. She knew then that she had him. *Interesting cases only*, Sherlock Holmes had written, and based on what she had read on the blog, they stuck to the policy. Apparently, it was a rule that appealed to John Watson, too.

She was pleased. She very much wanted his interest. Blushing a little herself now, trying to dispel such irrational thoughts, she continued.

‘Naturally, I didn’t believe it was him.’

‘Do you have the letter?’

‘I have all of them.’ She opened her purse and pulled out a short stack of envelopes bound together with a rubber band. She handed them over.

He removed the rubber band and fanned them out. ‘Just these five?’

‘Yes.’

‘Over the past year?’

‘Yes.’

‘All from someone posing as your father?’

‘No, but that’s how they began.’

She proceeded to explain all that had happened. Believing that someone, somewhere, had been playing a cruel joke, she dismissed that first letter easily as a fake. Though the handwriting was a startlingly accurate duplication of her father’s, the tone was not, and no details spoke to the closeness of the relationship they had once shared. Upset, she had called Samantha, who shared in her anger over the insensitivity and deceitful nature of the letter, and received the advice, ‘Ignore it. Burn it. Don’t make this your problem.’

She did ignore it, but she didn’t burn it. To be truthful, though it upset her that someone was impersonating her father and requesting money, she didn’t think it particularly malicious. Rather, she regarded it in the same vein as Internet spam, tucked it away in the bottom drawer of her bureau, and carried on, otherwise unperturbed.
When the second letter arrived in November, reiterating almost verbatim the monetary request of the first, she didn’t call Samantha but wrote back to the return Mumbai post box address an angry letter explaining that her father was dead and demanding the cessation of letters, and if they didn’t stop, she would consider this harassment and take the matter to the police. For four more months, she believed that had done the trick, until one chilly March morning, the post delivered, on top of a stack of bills and the latest issue of *House and Garden*, a third letter. Or rather, a bill.

‘A statement,’ Mary said, unfolding the letter and spreading all three pages in front of John, ‘for debts attributed to my father. Businesses I’ve never heard of, expenses I don’t understand. I knew he had financial troubles. For years, he had, right up until the end, but I had no idea that they sang to the tune of—’

‘Two hundred and sixty-four thousand pounds,’ John said, noting the total at the bottom of the page. ‘Jesus.’

It had been so long since the previous letter requesting a comparatively meagre sum that she didn’t automatically connect them, not until she noticed that the first item on the statement was for an unspecified loan in the exact amount the first letter had requested of her.

She didn’t know what to do. Mary, who couldn’t cover even the initial demand of twelve thousand quid, balked at the thought of more than two hundred and fifty thousand. Frightened, believing there had been some grave error, she again went to Samantha, who assured her that, according to British law, a deceased man’s debts could not follow his children. If the estate one left behind could not cover the debts, they died with the man.

But someone clearly thought Arthur Morstan was still alive, and in trying to track him down, contacted instead his nearest living relative. Again, Mary drafted a letter, and with it she included a photocopy of her father’s death certificate.

The fourth letter arrived less than a month later: a copy of the bill with a rubber stamp inking the top of the page in red: *Past Due*. A monthly interest penalty of 25% had been accrued, bringing her debt to £330,000. The final page was a photocopy of the terms and conditions for an unsecured loan, and at the bottom were two signatures: Arthur Morstan’s, and Mary Morstan’s. Evidently, she had signed and dated a joint-liability agreement.

‘That’s not my signature,’ she told John, laying the page before him. Her voice shook with emotion, and she swallowed hard to clear her throat of the lump that had grown there. ‘I mean, it looks like mine. It looks exactly like mine, but I promise you, I never signed this. This wasn’t me.’

John lifted the page and turned it toward the sun, angling the paper this way and that, but it was a photocopy. Though dated February 21, 2008, there was no way to discern when that signature had actually been made.

‘That was three months before he died,’ she said. Then, morosely, ‘We were barely speaking.’

‘Forgive my asking: why not?’

‘Please don’t misunderstand. We were close. Most of my life, it was just Dad and me. My mother and sister lived in Canada. But those last few of years, he was depressed. He withdrew. I didn’t know what he was up to half the time. But he never asked me to co-sign on a loan.’

‘Might he have forged your signature?’

‘He would never do something like that.’
‘Do you have writing samples?’ John asked next. He dug into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a notepad. ‘Yours and his? A variety would be ideal.’

‘I can find some.’

‘Thank you. And . . . the last letter?’

She opened the final envelope containing her most recent correspondence.

In addition to a new statement that brought her debts to nearly a half million quid, the letter included a veiled threat: *actions will be taken to satisfy this debt, by force if necessary.* All she had was a financial account to which she was expected to wire the money. But internet searches and phone calls couldn’t trace where the letters were coming from, and Mary, believing herself to be in serious financial, if not legal, straits, sought advice from her sister once again.

‘What am I to do?’ she asked through tears, and she pressed the phone to her ear like it was a lifeline. ‘They say I owe hundreds of thousands of pounds! I’ll never be able to pay it back, not in ten lifetimes, and every month it gets worse. The interest alone—!’

‘Mary, calm down.’

‘I’ll lose my flat, I’ll lose *everything*.’

‘I want you to calm down and *listen.*’

‘I think . . . I think I have to go to the police.’

‘No no, *don’t* go to the police . . .’

John Watson’s eyes grew more and more concerned the further down the page he went. His lips moved with what he was reading until he got to the end, and she heard him speak softly, as though to himself, ‘By force if necessary.’

‘They’ll garnish my wages,’ she said without breath. ‘They’ll take everything I own, down to the doorknobs, and I’ll be out on the streets. And I can’t even prove that I didn’t co-sign on that loan. My sister’s husband is an attorney in Canada, and she’s a paralegal, and they say that the contract, the one I supposedly signed, makes my claim against it a civil matter, not a criminal one, so going to the police is pointless, if not dangerous. I’d have to take it to court, but a court will see my signature as legally binding. I *know* that’s not my signature, but I can’t prove it. I can’t even find these people and talk to them, explain things. If you . . .’ She straightened in her chair and leant into the table, ‘I don’t know, if you could find them, as a detective, and help me prove that I never signed anything, they would *have* to remove my name from my father’s debts.’

His eyes were filled with doubt, his expression troubled. She knew that he had said he was only there to talk. Maybe he thought he had made a mistake and couldn’t help her after all, not even to point her in the right direction. And here she was, confiding in him, a practical stranger, the details of her life, ready to answer any and all questions. The only other people on the planet who knew the extent of her plight—besides those perpetrating it—were Samantha and her husband Gayan. And now there was John Watson.

‘People like this,’ he began slowly, ‘can’t simply be reasoned with.’

‘But,’ she protested, smoothing out the latest letter beneath her hands and feeling her throat thicken again. ‘But the law . . . If they realise that I never co-signed on a loan with my father, then they’d have to . . .’
‘The law means very little to crooks.’

‘Crooks?’

John sighed, though not in annoyance. More like . . . sadness. ‘The first letter you received was obviously forged. Your signature was, too. My guess is that these people’s true business is fraud. That is a criminal matter.’

She shook her head in disbelief, horrified at the thought that she, of all the lowly people in the world, could ever be involved in such a horrendous thing. ‘But the loan,’ she said, flipping through paper to produce the proof of it.

‘You shouldn’t be so quick to trust people, Mary. The world is filled with liars and thieves.’

‘Not everyone is a liar and a thief,’ she said weakly.

He smiled, but not as though he believed her. ‘Enough of us are.’

‘Are you saying I shouldn’t trust you?’

‘Probably not,’ he said, but his smile remained. Maybe it was just her imagination, but it seemed to be glowing brighter the longer they sat there. ‘But only because I’m certain to disappoint you.’

‘If that’s your aim, I’m afraid you’ll have to work a fair bit harder,’ she countered.

There was a beat of silence, a moment of bright-eyed awkwardness that had the potential for both regret and brazen shamelessness. Then John laughed, and Mary with him, and for a few seconds her troubles seemed to weigh less around her neck.

‘I want to help you, Mary,’ he said. ‘I do. I want to find these people and get them off your back. At least, get you something solid to take to the police. But I have to warn you, I’m a little out of practice. And to be brutally frank, I never really did fly solo. You’re getting the monkey, not the organ grinder.’

But his self-doubt did not dissuade her. Nor did his own cautions against trust. Despite having known him for little more than an hour, all told, she trusted John Watson. And it was with that confidence that she entrusted all five letters to his care and gave him her phone number. At last, their coffee mugs drained and the sun fully hidden behind the trees, John and Mary arose, shook hands, and exchanged promises.

‘I’ll call,’ he said, ‘once I’ve got something . . .’

‘Or if you need anything else from me . . .’

‘Or just to tell you . . .’

‘. . . how things are going . . .’

‘. . . just so you know I haven’t given up on you.’

She smiled. ‘I’ll have my phone on me,’ she said. ‘Night and day.’

With that, they parted, he going south to her north. Mary couldn’t explain it, not then, not in that exact moment, but she knew that calling on John Watson was the most wonderful thing she had ever done in her life. Fifteen months later, and down to that final second, she wouldn’t regret it, not one moment, not for half a breath or an arrested heartbeat.
That night, John didn’t sleep. Alone in his studio flat in Camberwell, South London, with its sterile walls, bare floors, and spotty electricity, he re-examined the letters, reading them slowly and taking notes. But he didn’t know what he was looking for, and his notes were as scattered as his thoughts as he kept reaching dead-ends and so-whats.

He had come to the conclusion that, even if Mary’s father were still alive, it was highly doubtful that he had written that letter. It lacked all the characteristics of a letter penned from father to daughter. Yes, there was a Dear Mary at the top of the page, and a Love, Dad at the bottom. There was even a polite but detached how are you and I am well. But virtually nothing else about the letter suggested a personal relationship. How, then, was the handwriting so spot on that it convinced his own daughter? For that matter, how had her exact likeness of signature appeared on the unsecured loan application?

Forgery. Obviously.

‘I already know that,’ John muttered to himself. ‘What am I supposed to do with it?’

There was no answer.

He turned to the billing statements, poured over them, scrutinized them without knowing what he was doing or what he should be looking for or what he might do if he stumbled upon something useful. By three in the morning, he found himself working out the figures on a calculator, just to see whether they added up, just to feel like he was accomplishing something. When he realised the futility of all his work, which amounted to nothing, he shot out of the chair, which overturned and clattered to the floor, and spoke aloud to himself, ‘What am I not seeing? Tell me! What don’t I observe? Damn you, why did you have to leave me? I’m no good on my own.’

He was completely in over his head. What he should do, he knew, was turn it all over to the police, insist that there was something fraudulent afoot, and let the pieces fall where they may. He was a doctor, for chrissakes. What he was not was a detective. He never had been. Who was he fooling? Why had he believed he could help? Yes, he had been a witness, a modern-day chronicler of sorts, but that was a far cry from seeing what to everyone else was invisible and then making brilliant leaps of logic. He had been barely useful then, and he was sure as hell useless now. Monkey indeed.

Frustration and exhaustion eventually drove him to curl up on the unforgiving single bed in his pitiful bedsit and sleep fitfully. There, he dreamt of piles of forged letters written in languages he’d never even heard of, then of books stacked to the ceiling and a task to read them all under an impossible deadline, and on the walls, important messages concealed in yellow spray paint.

Concentrate. I need you to concentrate.

His head twitched against the pillows. Tucked to his chest, one hand clenched and unclenched as though holding a stress toy.

I need you to maximise your visual memory.

And the thought arose, unbidden: Check the envelopes.

John’s eyes snapped open. Morning light streamed through the sitting room windows. He sat up, stretched his sore muscles and massaged the crick in his neck. Even before he had rubbed the sleep from his eyes, he returned to his pile of notes. This time, he ignored the letters in favour of their
casings. And that’s where he found the faint watermarks, maybe a stamp: white on white, a circle, no larger than a penny, unobtrusively placed at the bottom of the flap where it was easily torn through upon opening. And in the centre of the circle, discernible only by tilting the paper to catch the light at just the right angle, were the tiny letters in all caps: A.G.R.A.

July 2012

The bustling city of Mumbai, India, was alternately known as a city of gold and a city of paucity, on the one hand a city of dreamers, on the other a city of the downtrodden. It was there that, years before, two down-and-out brothers, seeking their fortune, came up with a plan. They had the brains for it, the unmatched and prodigious talents for penmanship and forgery. The elder brother could replicate any hand, any at all, which he had once performed as a party trick. The younger had a talent for schemes. What they didn’t have were the connections, or the means, to get it off the ground. Until one day, one of the brothers heard whispers of a man who could provide both. A business tycoon, or an investor, they couldn’t be too sure. They never did meet him, after all; there was no real contact. But through his people, they acquired the needed funds, made invaluable connections, and maintained a discreet profile. Within a year, they were in business.

They never heard from their benefactor again, but it didn’t matter: their little scheme continued to develop into a full-grown, underground organisation. Their targets, which they coded as clients, were specially selected Westerners—gullible, fearful, and rich—and, exploiting these factors, it wasn’t long before the brothers themselves were sleeping on money-stuffed mattresses.

Which is how, when seeking to expand their client pool, they were able to afford new names, new identities, from a different organisation desperate to sell. Among the names they acquired was one Arthur Morstan, whom they did not know was deceased.

Late June 2012

There were those who called them terrorists, and not just as a slur. Yes, their names could be found on registries in Islamabad and nations in the West, categorised under ‘terrorist and extremist groups’ alongside forty-eight other domestic and transnational organisations quartered in Pakistan. But terrorist was just a name the fear-mongers gave to rebellions they sought to quash in the interest of maintaining hegemonic sovereignty. They didn’t understand the injustices being fought for, the balance that needed to be restored, the infidels deposed and the righteous lifted up.

But the People’s Force was struggling. Its funds were suddenly drying up as their streams of resources were being pinched, though where and how and by whom they did not know. Finances were critical—to purchase artillery and intelligence, to sway votes and make good on threats—and they had none.

So they looked to their assets and what they could liquidate. Names. They had names. Names from around the world of men and women who had made ‘charitable donations’ to their cause. Names that could be sold to the highest bidder. There were many names. Oh, so many.

Early June 2012

Earlier that month, a man who had died in Kyoto was resurrected in Perth. His Australian passport gave the name William Upfield, but in his few and brief introductions, he never once spoke it aloud. He was a solitary man, tired and melancholy. He said little, and when he did, his accent was British. But no one asked what he did, why he was there, whether he had eaten, though a few did wonder, privately. None knew he had arrived in Perth following an invisible line of spider’s silk.

He had followed the vibrations, stronger, stronger, until he reached a point where several strings
intersected. It was here he met his quarry, a small spider he had been chasing for thousands of miles and hundreds of days, and it was here that he crushed the spider and snapped the string, not knowing how long it would take for that string to unravel. He did not pause to watch the dominoes fall across the hemispheres. Instead, he kept moving. Another vibration tickled at his feet, pulling him across an ocean. By the time the unravelling thread reached Mary Morstan, he was no longer William Upfield but Harun ibn Yahya, and he was about to fall into a trap.

June 2011

Word fell off the rooftop and into the gutter of the world below: The king is dead. Long live the king.

But his throne sat empty.

Before the headstone was laid, before his body was set in ground, and before the death certificate was signed, more than one disciple rushed to claim the throne.

March 2011

He descended into a hole in the earth. Above his head, an archway of blackened red brick, and below his feet, fireclay. Dusty, dirty, no matter. He had already exchanged his dark blue Anthony Cleverley Oxfords for nondescript workmen’s boots.

The man flanking him on the left, just over his shoulder, coughed. The noise of it echoed like a rock dropped down a metal pipe.

‘Don’t make me push you down a shaft,’ he droned.

‘Sorry, sir.’

They pointed their torches straight ahead and kept moving.

At the end of a passageway, they spotted the poor bastard, just where they had left him. The abject man, stripped of all but his underwear, wavered on splayed knees as the sounds of their footsteps drew nearer. Wrist bound to a metal track on one side and an iron rod on the other stretched his arms taut, prohibiting him from either rising or lying down. One thumb was discoloured and grossly swollen, broken from attempts to wrench himself free. Futile, had he managed it. It was dark as pitch without torches or lamps, even if he had managed to remove the bag from his head. His clothes—a pair of jeans, t-shirt, and jacket—were folded and stacked a few feet away, trainers laced and resting on top of the pile.

‘Let me see him.’

The man on his right stepped forward, and the sad, kneeling sod whimpered as a hand came down on his head, fist the dark cloth, and yanked it away. Three beams from torches fell on his face. Squeezing his eyes, he tried to turn his head away. He had been blinded for more than forty-eight hours and could not now abide the light.

‘His name.’

‘Calls himself Brook. Richard Brook.’

‘Rich Brook,’ he repeated. Then suddenly he laughed. ‘You don’t say! My very own Reichen Bach.’ He crouched down in front of the man called Brook, took hold of his chin, and pulled it straight. Then he stared, evaluating.
'It’s uncanny.’ He slapped the man’s face lightly. ‘Oi. You. Brook. Eyes open, brother. There you go, gorgeous, you’re doing so well. How tall is he?’

‘Five foot eight,’ said his right-hand.

‘Eleven stones,’ said his left.

‘And such pretty, pretty brown eyes,’ he finished.

The man’s eyes were open and streaming, and he might have said something but for the gag in his mouth, so all he did was whimper.

‘Actor by trade,’ his right added.

‘Ah, a seeker of fame, is he? Looks like someone is about to get his wish.’ He smoothed down the man’s dirty hair and whispered, ‘You’re going to be famous, Richard Brook.’ Then he patted his cheeks and laughed before rising to his feet. He pulled out a kerchief and wiped his hands clean.

‘No blood,’ he said. ‘Just make sure the body is never found.’

The man’s eyes widened with trepidation. He moaned in objection behind the gag and shook his head with pitiful futility.

‘Yes, sir. We can take him to—’

‘No details, thank you, I don’t need the particulars. Just get it done. Off you pop.’

He retrieved his torch and turned to go, leaving the man Richard with his executioners. But he paused midstride, looked down at the pile of clothes, and reached for the shoes. They were heavy in his hands, the way a good pair of shoes ought to be.

Richard Brook, he mouthed, trying out his new name as he walked away, a little bounce in his step. It had a nice, innocuous note to it. Richard Brook, an actor, in his greatest role yet.

**Summer 2010**

‘And these pretty little webs of yours, they spread across England, do they?’

Moriarty tutted. ‘Naughty naughty, Mr Holmes, you’re not playing by the rules. It’s my turn.’

Stretching his legs out in front of him and crossing an ankle over, he brought his palms together and fingertips to his lips, perfectly replicating Mycroft Holmes’ nasty little brother. It didn’t matter that he was in cuffs. The pose would be recognised, and it was designed to unnerve. Sure enough, he detected a scarcely controlled flinch in the corner of Mr Holmes’ eye.

‘The skull on his mantelpiece,’ he said, imitating the voice, too, when in deduction mode, ‘and the one hanging on the wall, and the painting by door. How very indecorous of him. How it borders on the obsessive. Not a new hobby for him, is it. So tell me. When did it all begin, this skeletal fascination of his?’

Across the table from him, Mycroft Holmes’ eyes had gone dark. His crossed arms locked in position, and James Moriarty withheld a smirk. He’d touched a nerve and set Mr Holmes’ whole corpus afire.

But he answered in clipped measure. ‘I couldn’t say.’
Moriarty gave him a dubious stare.

‘I was little involved in the affairs of his childhood.’

‘So he was a child, then.’

Mycroft frowned; he was a man unaccustomed to being caught out. But he made no reply.

Tutting again, Moriarty said in a voice of childish disappointment, ‘No fair, Mr Holmes. You’re not playing the game.’

‘Sherlock memorised the human skeleton when he was very young,’ Mycroft answered quickly, as though to get it over with. ‘He’s always had an inquisitive mind, a brain for memorisation, and a propensity for science. Hardly remarkable he should know his anatomy.’

‘I’ll add my own commentary, thank you. But you didn’t answer my question. When did it begin? Why skulls?’

Mycroft Holmes appeared to be chewing his tongue, debating whether to answer. But he did. ‘An uncle died, as uncles do. It was Sherlock’s first real experience with death. Quite normal for a child to have questions. Even more normal for Sherlock to seek answers, ad nauseam.’

‘And he liked it, did he? Death. The stink of corpses? The decay of flesh? The dissolution into nothing but a pile of hard, white bone? Does he find it comforting, the dead? Sensible? Sexy?’

‘There are rules to this, Mr Moriarty, lest you forget. It is my turn to ask a question.’ Mr Holmes unfolded his arms and leant his elbows on the table. ‘I’ll repeat. How far does this web of yours stretch?’

‘Ah, Mr Holmes,’ he groaned, ‘don’t be boring. It’s pointless, this line of inquiry. After all, you can’t topple the world.’

**January 2010**

His kingdom. His life’s work. A vast, complex nexus of anarchists and terror cells, criminal underbellies and amateur crooks—thieves and liars, murderers and rapists—and he alone saw them all, and he alone could make them all dance with a flick of the wrist and turn of the puppet.

Sometimes, though, too often anymore, he was just so bored with it. They were all so predictable, so easy to manipulate, and there was no satisfaction in sponsoring dastardly deeds or organising destructive plots. Too easy, it was all too easy.

But ah, London. There was his salvation, his relief from caustic boredom. Because Sherlock Holmes was in London. He felt it like prophecy but knew it to be sheer, unadulterated logic. With Sherlock, he would never be bored again.

**October 2009**

He kept a weather eye on the work of his acolytes, of course. In San Salvador, he orchestrated a string of kidnappings-for-ransom to help fund drug trades with Caracas and monitored activities via watchdog websites. In Burundi, he coordinated the assassination of a diplomat with one of his very own and favourite snipers, knowing that the blame would fall to the man's own security detail (and the news reported that it did). In London, he sponsored a hard-luck cabbie to commit random murders of his patrons, and he read about the first of them in the papers. With a grin, he slid a few thousand pounds into the man’s bank account, the promise of more to come.
But while gathering intelligence on this latest activity in London, he came across a name that plucked a string in his memory, one he’d not heard since he was a child, and it gave him pause. A detective, a consulting detective, some sort of self-described ‘specialist’, called Sherlock Holmes. Twenty years, and his once-opponent had come back to play.

1989

Carl Powers was dead. Drowned. A seizure, they said, laying blame on the body, lamenting the malice of happenstance. A tragedy, they said, when death comes so unexpectedly to the young.

But Jim Moriarty laughed—at their foolishness, their blindness—and clipped another article out of the paper. Anyone with eyes should have seen. It was not unexpected at all. In fact, it was only fitting that an athletic, well-liked, but black-hearted boy such as Carl, who ceaselessly tormented another kid with cruel names like duffer, bog-trotter, and freak, solely because he was different, should be meted out his just comeuppance. Jim believed in punishment for hubris.

In the end, it was easy. Clostridum botulinum. It was a soil bacterium he had read about in an encyclopaedia, when all his interests and private studies had orbited around disease and death. He liked death. He was fascinated by it. He found it comforting. Sensible. Stimulating. It was the one sure thing in the world, certain to come to everyone, including him, and certainly including little blighters like Carl Powers. Death—and those who dared to wield it—held the greatest power on earth.

For a few days, Carl Powers’ name was sprinkled throughout the London papers, and Jim devoured every letter that erroneously attributed his death to natural causes. He laughed at the incompetence of the police, the laziness of the coroner, the grief of the family. But the story of a natural death, even that of a child, was not newsworthy enough to hold anyone’s attention for more than a few runs of ink. Powers disappeared from the London papers. Jim’s brilliant work had been a little too brilliant: not one eyebrow was raised, not one person came out to play. In the end, the whole affair was rather . . . disappointing.

He had kept the shoes. At first, in a box beneath his bed, but eventually in more treasured and more secure places, and once in a while he took them out to admire. The shoes of a dead boy—they excited him. They were a reminder of the thrill of snuffing out a life and not getting caught, and a promise that he could feel the same again, if he was of a mind to.

And then, some four weeks after Carl Powers’ poisoned corpse was laid in the earth, Jim spotted it in The Argus: a letter to the editor, printed near the back.

I find it curious that no one has questioned the disappearance of Carl Powers’ shoes. What, did he eat them? I find it even more curious that the London police force have a policy to employ only imbeciles to investigate the suspicious nature of the death of an 11-year-old boy.

It was signed Sherlock Holmes of Eton, Berkshire (age 13).

A tingle of excitement chased up Jim’s spine, titillating his brain and setting his nerve endings aglow. His work had been noticed, admired, appreciated. Someone had noticed the shoes! Of a sudden, he felt as though he had set a board and moved a pawn; all he had been waiting for was someone to occupy the seat across from him. A worthy opponent. Was it he, this Berkshire boy of an age with him, this Sherlock Holmes?

But nothing happened. The letter made no ripples, and the boy apparently had lost interest and pursued the issue no further. With a stab of resentment, Jim closed the door on the chess board, though he didn’t clear it away. Not yet. There was always the chance the one day, he might like to
The room was bare but bright, so bright his eyes burned and he struggled to keep his lids parted as they adjusted. Was it a room? The floor beneath his feet was solid like tile, and each step he took clipped but did not echo, and he could see no edge, no wall, as if the floor stretched on and on in every direction to a far-distant horizon. The ceiling or sky was just as white. Or maybe just blank. Maybe it was nothingness. Maybe oblivion was not darkness after all, but a vast, blank slate.

Behind him, he heard a chink, stone against stone. He turned. There stood the table, and on the table a board, and on the board, the players were set. A game was in progress.

Seated at the table, reclined in a chair with hands folded in his lap, his opponent sat in suspension.

‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ James Moriarty said, tone droll, expression bored, nearing impatience. He nodded to the empty seat. ‘Are you finally ready to play?’

He reviewed the board, recalling the history of every move, every victory, every sacrifice. Removed from the black and white squares and set to the side, no longer a part of the game, were the pieces that had been lost. Among the remaining black pieces stood two queens, and he remembered that, too. When the Woman had slipped past his defences, when her pawn had reached the other side, she had been promoted to a queen. Facing off, his own white queen stood in danger, having ventured too far from the line of defence.

‘Yes,’ he said, resuming his familiar seat.

Moriarty sat forward in his chair, hands on the table, leaning his body toward Sherlock. Surrounded in oblivion, his eyes were as black as nightfall. Once, they had been like a mirror. Now, they were two empty pits, threatening to swallow him whole.

‘Your move, Sherlock.’

Sherlock selected his knight.

Chapter End Notes

For updates, follow my Tumblr at engazed.tumblr.com
Queen of Poisons

THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2015

The world fell away.

Sherlock felt as though unseen hands were arresting him, clutching his shoulders and pushing him back by the chest as he sprinted for the door. It was like running in a dream, legs paralysed and heartbeat slowed to a steady throb. The only sound was the strident tick of an unmerciful clock. But this was no dream. At least, not the kind he could wake from. Behind him, like a distorted echo:

Wait for me! Wait for me! Don’t open the door!

They were words he couldn’t heed. He could not stop, not even when his half-healed ankle twisted on the bottom step and he collapsed to his chest. He felt no pain, only bodily numbness as he scrambled up again to keep pace with his thrumming heart and the eternal clock.

He threw open the front door. The cool air shocked his senses, and everything came into pinprick focus: Beneath the streetlamps, laid out on his side, his brother’s unmoving form lay like a fallen giant. Sherlock hit the ground beside him, knees oblivious to his crash, and took hold of Mycroft’s shoulders to roll him onto his back.

Eyes sealed. Mouth slack. Body cold.

No. No no no think!! See, observe, reason. No no no! Not happening, this could not be happening!

His brain skittered as eyes darted from the wet line of tears tracking down the side of Mycroft’s face, to his swollen, reddened lips, to flecks of vomit down his front. His chest was flat, hands senseless.

Not real not real, this could not be real. He felt like he was dying.

‘John!’ Sherlock cried in anguish, a ragged scream shaking his whole body.

As if conjured there, John was instantly at his side, pulling him to his feet and away from the body. ‘Back, I need you to move back,’ John said. Then, ‘Take the gun.’

Sherlock didn’t know where it came from, but suddenly there was a cold pistol in his hands, and John was on the pavement, checking for signs of life.

Please, he thought, lips moving but unable to speak for the constriction in his throat. Please.

‘He’s not breathing,’ said John. ‘No pulse. Vomit on his breath. May be asphyxiation. Call 999, right now.’ Then he raised himself up, interlocked his fingers over Mycroft’s breastbone, and began chest compressions to do the work Mycroft’s heart could not. He pumped a sure, steady rhythm. Press. Press. Press.

Sherlock stared, frozen. Mycroft’s body jarred like a mannequin with each downward thrust, merely an object being acted upon by a greater force. A head lolling against the hard pavement, heavy like a rounded stone.

‘Sherlock! Now!’
He pivoted for the door and launched himself across the threshold, the gun still in hand. ‘Mrs Hudson!’ he cried, but he needn’t have done. She had heard the blasts of the car horn and his and John’s footsteps crashing down the stairs. Standing in her doorway in her nightdress, she hit the switch and looked fearfully out into the hallway.

‘Call an ambulance!’

He didn’t wait to see her disappear from her doorway before he was rushing back outside in time to see John lifting Mycroft’s chin with two fingers, pinching his nose, and lowering his mouth.

Something flashed in his brain, bright as lightning, and he thrust an arm forward to seize a fistful of John’s shirt. ‘No!’ He jerked John away from Mycroft’s body so violently John cried aloud and landed on his backside.

‘Sherlock!’ John protested.

‘He’s been poisoned!’

The text: \textit{C34H47NO11}. Not just a random sequence of letters and numbers. It was a chemical formula, and it had led him to aconitine, a lethal poison ingested or absorbed by the skin. And there, right there, was the inflammation around Mycroft’s lips. He saw it more clearly now: lipstick, smudged, rubbed away, and there, too, was the proof of it, smeared on the back of his right hand, which had also taken on the inflamed quality of a rash. Mycroft had been given a deadly kiss.

‘It’s on his lips, his hand, in his skin and blood. You can’t touch it, John, you can’t.’

‘He needs air!’

‘You can’t,’ Sherlock sobbed. ‘She’s killed him. My god, she’s killed my brother.’

But John had scrambled upright again and did not cease to pump Mycroft’s heart. Press. Press. Press.

‘An ambulance is coming, Sherlock.’

He heard Mrs Hudson’s voice behind him, and he whirled, shouting, ‘Stay inside!’

‘Oh, Mr Holmes!’ she said, seeing Mycroft on the pavement.

‘Plastic, I need a sheet of plastic!’ said John. ‘Cellophane, a shopping bag, anything!’

‘Go!’ Sherlock barked, and Mrs Hudson fled back inside.

For seven minutes, as the neighbours watched in horrified but silent fascination from behind dark windows, Sherlock paced, pistol quivering in his hands, eyes locked on John’s futile efforts. Seven minutes and ever-ticking seconds. Mrs Hudson had brought Cellophane, and John used a sheet of it as a glove to first clear Mycroft’s mouth of vomit, and another with a hole torn through to act as a shield as he performed rescue breaths, their two mouths sealed together with Cellophane and pressure. Mycroft’s chest swelled with John’s air, and deflated again, a bag squeezed of oxygen. Two breaths, and thirty chest compressions. Then two more. Sherlock counted them. For seven minutes, he counted the artificial pumps designed to keep the blood circulating (\textit{seventy-seven, seventy-eight, seventy-nine}); he counted the forced breaths delivering oxygen to deprived cells (\textit{eleven . . . twelve}). His lips formed the numbers; his brain stored them in an ever-increasing series in a registry. Aloud, he whispered, for he had no breath with which to speak, ‘I’m sorry, Mycroft.
Oh god, I’m sorry.’

‘Shut up, Sherlock,’ John snapped, but Sherlock heard it in his voice: he was tiring, and Sherlock didn’t know how much longer he would last. He didn’t know whether every downward press was in vain.

Then came the wailing call of an approaching ambulance. Seconds later, speeding up Baker Street, flashing lights and a yellow emergency vehicle came into view. Still administering compressions, John looked up and murmured, ‘Put the gun away, Sherlock.’

But Sherlock stood insensate, arms hanging uselessly at his sides, right hand barely even curled around the grip. Getting no response, John reached for the pistol himself from where he sat on his knees, tucked it into the back of his trousers, and resumed the work of Mycroft’s lungs and heart.

Next Sherlock knew, the pavement was crowded with a team of paramedics. John took his arm and pulled him out of their way. Perhaps John said something to them, or to him; perhaps he even answered. If so, he was on autopilot, a computer receiving commands and returning information. As for the man, he heard nothing, felt nothing. It was as if his brain had stopped functioning altogether, registering nothing but the sight of Mycroft’s body being lifted, set upon a gurney, and slid into the back of the ambulance like meat on a tray. Just as they were closing the doors, he felt jolted to life. With his flinch, John’s hand tighten around his arm, but he pulled away, rushing for the ambulance.

‘Let me in!’ he cried. ‘He can’t be alone, let me in!’

‘Mr Holmes, there’s no room.’

‘Let him in, that’s his brother,’ said John, steady and commanding. ‘There’s room enough.’

They let him into the back of the ambulance, where one paramedic was squeezing the bag of an oxygen mask, and another was straddling Mycroft’s body, continuing the chest compressions John had begun. John.

Sherlock turned back, looking for him, and found him standing barefoot in the street. ‘John?’ he said, reaching back for him.

‘I’ll be right behind, Sherlock.’

‘John.’

The doors closed, trapping him in a large, steel box, which began to move at once. It felt like the inside of a coffin.

***

Anthea awoke in a different kind of steel, moving box, blood pounding in her temples and shoulder muscles wrenched. Disoriented in mind and body, minutes passed before she could identify the loud hum filling her ears, shaking her skull: a car’s engine. She tried to move, but in that dark, constricted space she discovered her hands bound. Electric tape, she thought, which circled her wrists and pulled the small hairs of her hands and arms. It sealed her mouth, too, as she discovered when she tried to part her lips to breathe more easily, or to scream.

She was in the boot of a car. Whose car? She struggled to remember, but her mind was still fogged, rendering the memory hazy. Last she had known for certain, she had been in the back of the town car. She had received a phone call. *Two minutes. Have the car ready.* But having anticipated his
command, as she always did, she was already on her way. It’s what made her such a good assistant. Thirty seconds later, they had pulled up to the building, she and Davenport, as reliable as ever, and then . . .

Davenport. That’s when she noticed him: He was in the boot with her. The fog evaporated in an instant, and she remembered it all: The moment he had parked the car, in the very second she had put her hand on the door to push it open, someone else had pushed inside. They came in from either door, two men, and while one wrestled her into the backseat, the other stuck her. A needle on the end of a syringe, plunging into the side of her neck. She could now feel the soreness, the swelling. The drug had been fast-acting. For another twenty or thirty seconds, she fought, but she was too well pinned. Her phone had been knocked to the floor; in the front, Davenport huffed and struggled, his muffled grunts of pain telling her that he was losing his battle as well. And then she was gone.

Sodium thiopental. She was sure of it. A short-term anaesthetic, it meant that no more than ten or fifteen minutes could have passed since the syringe had been emptied into her bloodstream and flooded her brain. Her nose was now crushed against Davenport’s knees; his chin dug into her shin. But he was as yet unmoving. While she waited for the effects to wear off for him, she wondered: Had Mycroft Holmes discovered their abduction? Was he deploying his resources to get them back? Or had he been left with bigger fish to fry? Given the choice between saving his assistant and driver or handling far graver matters, she knew which Mr Holmes would choose. She and Davenport were expendable. He had always made that perfectly clear, and it was a truth she had accepted long ago.

The minutes dragged by quietly, but for the drone of the engine and the jostling of the car that rocked them back and forth like an aggressive cradle. Still, Davenport was not waking. Maybe he had put up a greater fight. Maybe they had used something stronger on him. Whimpering—for she could not speak his name with her tape-covered mouth—she tried to jar him with her legs, but he remained unresponsive. What’s more, his body blocked her access to the boot’s release lever. If she could but wake him, they could coordinate an escape. The vehicle had to slow eventually, and when it did, they had to be ready to push open the lid, drop, and roll.

For several miles, she fought the binds on her hands and worked the tape across her mouth, forcing her tongue between her lips to dampen the sticky side and loosen its hold. Fingernails scraped at the edges but had difficulty finding purchase. When at last they did, she pulled, and it felt like she was tearing off her own skin. But she swallowed her scream, and when her mouth was finally free of the tape, she used her teeth to gnaw at the binds on her wrists. In that oxygen-depleted box, the work exhausted her, but she never paused, never succumbed to the likelihood that her efforts would prove pointless, and never once felt sorry for herself. In her task to free herself and her companion, she was single-minded, and she would fight until her last breath to see it done.

Just as she had chewed through the last of the tape, the car slowed and turned. More than half an hour had passed since she had woken, and Davenport still had given no signs of life. She thought surely he was dead. But as the roar of the engine lessened, she heard his laboured breathing, and she felt the paradox of relief: they were both alive, but surely they were headed to their deaths. With hands now free, she tried rousing him again, but the most she was able to evoke was a senseless grunt.

She deduced that they were far outside London by the time the car came to a near stop. The track below the tyres changed from smooth asphalt to bumpy dirt. Then something new: the creak of metal, the rumble of a ribbed surface, and a slight incline. She had been reasonably scared before, but now she felt panic begin to swell. More desperately now, she tried to reach beyond Davenport’s knees to the release lever, but his body filled the cramped space. Frustrated, fearful,
she whined more loudly in her throat, behind sealed lips and gritted teeth, and scraped her fingernails against the metal of the trunk.

The car’s engine died. Anthea stilled, too, and listened. She became aware of a new sound now: water. It slapped and sloshed and moved the whole car, gently, causing her to sway, and she realised where she was—in a boot, on a ferry, and it was pushing away from the dock and into open waters.

She gripped Davenport by the legs and shook him more roughly. ‘Adam,’ she hissed. ‘Adam.’

He moaned.

The side doors of the car opened and closed. She heard men’s voices but couldn’t make out their words. Their footsteps circled the car, three or four different sets, she didn’t know, she was too panicked to count. Her grip tightened, not to wake Davenport but to give herself an anchor to reality as various scenarios of her certain death occurred to her. Maybe they would shoot her in the head and dump her body overboard. Maybe they would weight her body and let her drown. She knew that the chances of her escape had slimmed to nil. On the water, there was nowhere to run, no one to hear her call for help. Not that she expected any. She was in the hands of murderers. Assassins. The sort who would target a prominent man, such as Mycroft Holmes, and the lackeys working for him. They would not allow for the possibility that she might be saved.

Suddenly, without the turn of a key to reignite its engine, the silent car began to roll. Her breath caught in her throat. In her mind’s eye, as if she were already floating incorporeally above the scene, she could see what was happening. They had taken off the brake; they were rolling the car to the edge; they would push it into the waters nose first. It would sink, the boot would flood, and she and Davenport would be entombed in a watery grave.

Frantic, Anthea scraped once again for the inaccessible lever, pinned behind Davenport’s body, until suddenly, she was free-falling.

The car slammed into the water. Crushed under Davenport’s body, the air knocked from her lungs, and Anthea’s vision darkened; but she fought to maintain consciousness. The car was bobbing, sinking, but its violent upheaval had jarred Davenport away from the release lever, and it was reaching that lever that was her paramount concern. As she stretched her arm, water seeped through the seams of the car. She curled her fingers; her skin was on fire with the icy cold spray. And though she had little leverage with which to wrench it, she let out a cry of desperation and pulled, just as the car fully submerged.

The boot popped. Water gushed into their cavern, filling it completely. The pressure from the surface pushed down, threatening to close the lid on them again and trap them in the steel box. So Anthea stuck out her hand. The lid came down, hard, gashing the skin and crunching the bone. Her scream escaped as a bubble. But the boot didn’t lock. As the car continued to sink, lower, faster, the loose lid of the boot floated up and gaped wide. Anthea acted instinctively, heaving Davenport out of the boot. Kicking with all her might, she swam through the icy black water. Below her, the car turned over and disappeared into the depths.

She could see nothing. The water in her ears was like a roaring engine. Disoriented, freezing, suffocating, she scarcely knew in which direction the surface lay. But she found Davenport, her only companion in the harsh and lonely water. And she seized him around the waist with one arm. With the other, she stretched forth a hand, searching, and kicked ferociously toward what she hoped would prove to be free air.

Suddenly, she broke the surface. She gasped and choked and spit, even as the water sought to
reclaim her, to pull her and Davenport back under. She resisted. Her muscles were seizing up in the cold, and her lungs were filling with water, but she fought to keep her chin above the surface. She tried to turn Davenport onto his back, to help him float, but she could barely tread water enough to keep herself above the surface. Davenport was dead weight. Grabbing him under the arms, she kicked for the distant lights of the shore, but he was sinking. She was drowning. And with each gasp, with each kick of her tiring legs, she was one stroke closer to dying. She couldn’t do it.

It was a decision made in an instant, one she knew she could never take back, one that would haunt her for the rest of her life. In the end, it was barely a decision at all. She released him. Without drama or ceremony, his head sank into the dark water. Just like that, he was gone.

And there, she floated, alone. Treading water. Fighting exhaustion. Enduring the ice-sharp pain of the freezing water. The ferry was gone, and the shore was too far. She knew she couldn’t make it. The sky was black above, and the water black below.

But then, a single circle of light, growing larger, and the purr of a speedboat.

***

They took Mycroft to the A&E nearest Baker Street: St Mary’s Hospital on Praed Street, just over a mile away. With the trouble of finding proper coats and shoes and then calling for a taxi, John and Mrs Hudson took twenty minutes to arrive. By the time they did, the emergency department was eerily still. John’s first thought, upon walking through the sliding glass doors holding Mrs Hudson by the hand, was that he had got it wrong and they had taken Mycroft somewhere else. Then he spotted Sherlock, just outside the double doors leading to the trauma centre, still wearing his midnight-blue dressing gown and slippers. His back was to them, and he stood stock still, staring dead ahead. John felt his heart sinking. He dropped Mrs Hudson’s hand, jogged past reception, and came up beside him.

‘Sherlock,’ he said softly, taking his arm and turning him, but though Sherlock’s body followed John’s lead, his face still pointed at the doors, as if by taking his eyes off of them he would miss something important.

‘Sherlock,’ he tried again, putting more pressure on his arm. ‘What do we know?’

Sherlock’s lips moved, but he had to try again before any sound came out. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘We’re still waiting.’

By that time, Mrs Hudson had caught them up. Without a word, she put her arms around Sherlock’s waist and laid her head against his chest.

‘Where did they take him?’ John asked.

‘Through there. Last I saw, they were trying to restart his heart.’ For all his effort to sound composed, his voice quavered on the final syllable. Gently, he removed Mrs Hudson’s arms and turned away. A hand came up to drag across his scalp as he shuffled down the hall, seeking solitude.

Digging into his pocket, John turned to Mrs Hudson, whose eyes were wide and wet. ‘They’ll have already alerted the police,’ he said, passing his phone into her hands. ‘But I need you to call Lestrade directly. Wake him up. Get him down here.’

She nodded, accepting the charge. John followed after Sherlock.

‘Come on,’ he said quietly, steering Sherlock toward the waiting area. ‘That’s it, get off that
ankle.’ Sherlock let himself be lowered onto a waiting room sofa with all the cushion and comfort of a seat on the Tube, and John joined him there. For a while after that, they spoke no words between them. Sherlock sat elbows to knees, his forehead pressed into his palms. For his part, John kept a warm hand on Sherlock’s back, between his shoulder blades, occasionally rubbing a thumb or smoothing his palm, small gestures of comfort and presence, and all the while fixed an eye on the double doors and the passing doctors. He felt suspended in time, waiting for an answer neither of them could bear.

*She’s killed my brother,* he had said. *He’s been poisoned.* John didn’t know how Sherlock had discovered the culprit, or the weapon, but though he trusted Sherlock in both of those things, he couldn’t bring himself to believe this declaration. Not yet. Denial was safer. A future without Mycroft Holmes was too terrible to even imagine. Not yet.

And what would such a loss cost Sherlock? Here, he stood on the cusp of losing the most stable figure in his life, no matter the unspoken difficulties of their past or the thorniness of their relationship. Whatever he said about his brother and no matter how often he rolled his eyes, John knew Sherlock loved Mycroft, in his own way, and it was no trivial thing. Bicker and needle as they might, John had also been witness to a particular kind of care, one brother to the other. He had long suspected the depth of feeling Sherlock harboured for Mycroft, hidden beneath layers and layers of indifference and annoyance. But only recently had he become aware of just how much Mycroft reciprocated, the lengths to which he would go to see his little brother safe and well. It was a love John had not ever known himself. Not really. His own relationship with Harry had always been antagonistic, to one degree or another, and yet losing her . . . losing her had been its own special agony. So he knew only too well what Sherlock must be feeling, the horror of it. And the torment of waiting to know for sure.

John leant closer, his hand sliding to Sherlock’s far shoulder to hold him more securely. In response, Sherlock lowered one hand from his face and reached over, gripping John at the knee. John read the message clearly: Sherlock was afraid. So he held on tighter.

The minutes crawled by on broken limbs.

‘Mr Holmes?’

Their heads came up as one. A doctor was standing in front of them, dressed in theatre blues and a surgical cap. He’d removed his mask and apron and latex gloves, but John could see light flecks of blood on his sleeves, perhaps from a hasty IV, perhaps from a more invasive emergency procedure. And John knew that if he noticed those tiny pricks of red, Sherlock sure as hell did.

He helped Sherlock rise.

‘Let’s go somewhere more private,’ the doctor said, stepping back and gesturing with an arm. John noticed, then, that the A&E was humming. Hours had passed, and the waiting area was scattered with patients waiting to be seen and a triage nurse evaluating each in turn. Just outside, EMTs were pulling a stretcher from an ambulance, bearing a woman in a neck brace. How he’d failed to notice all the noises and activity was beyond him.

‘Are you the mother?’ the doctor asked, addressing Mrs Hudson, who was standing on Sherlock’s other side. ‘Family only, for now.’

‘Oh!’ said Mrs Hudson, a little surprised. ‘Well, I’m—’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock. He stood a little taller, though his face was still wan and voice thin, like he might faint at any moment. John tightened an arm. ‘And my partner, John Watson. Somewhere
private, then.’

They followed the doctor through the double doors and stopped in the hallway before advancing any further. John’s hand, pressed firmly to Sherlock’s back, sensed a throbbing heart beating through his shirt.

‘Mrs Holmes,’ said the doctor to Mrs Hudson, ‘your son is in stable but very critical condition.’

‘Alive?’ said Sherlock. ‘He’s alive. John, did you hear?’

‘I heard, Sherlock,’ said John, but he had also heard the second half of the doctor’s statement, and he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

‘He’s not out of the woods yet. Mr Holmes, your brother was administered aconitine, which contains lethal cardiotoxins and neurotoxins. It appears to have entered his system through the skin on his right hand and around his lips and tongue, so it may have also been ingested. There are also deep scratches on the back of his neck, like from fingernails, deep enough to bleed, leading to more direct contact to the aconitine. We don’t know how much he was exposed to, but as a poison, it is fast acting, and even the smallest amount can prove fatal.’

‘There’s no antidote,’ said Sherlock numbly.

The doctor nodded but said, ‘Fortunately, with modern medicine, we don’t, strictly speaking, require an antidote to save his life. But it’s an ongoing and uphill battle. By the time he arrived, the toxins had already done a fair deal of damage to his heart and gastrointestinal system. We’ve had to operate. Right now, we’re managing ventricular arrhythmias with a cardiopulmonary bypass to keep his blood oxygenated. We’re also treating him with charcoal haemoperfusion to eliminate the toxins.’

Sherlock was blinking rapidly and staring at a spot on the floor, and John knew that, despite his brilliance, he was too overwhelmed to fully comprehend the information. So John offered a quick layman’s interpretation: ‘Cleaning the blood.’

‘A transfusion?’ Sherlock asked.

‘The technique pumps the blood outside the body, treats it, and pumps it back,’ said the doctor. ‘If he responds well to this treatment, a transfusion won’t be necessary.’

‘If he needs blood, at any time, for any reason, take mine. We share the same blood type.’

The doctor started to nod and say thank you, but John turned his head and said under his breath, ‘Sherlock you can’t. Not yet.’

It had been just five weeks since both he and Sherlock had been exposed to Darrin Hirsch’s blood. Although they had been cleared in initial blood screens, until a full ninety days had passed and they had been given the all clear, neither of them could be confident they weren’t infected with something dire.

‘There will likely be no need,’ the doctor assured them.

‘You said the aconitine also contains neurotoxins,’ said John. ‘Do you know if . . . ?’

‘We won’t be able to accurately assess that until he wakes up.’

Sherlock started. ‘When?’
'I’m afraid I can’t say. We’ve induced a coma to control the pressure dynamics in the brain, and I’m sorry to say this, Mr Holmes, but there is no guarantee he will come out of it.'

‘Oh Sherlock,’ murmured Mrs Hudson.

‘It’s still too early to know much,’ the doctor said. ‘But I assure you, we’re doing everything within our power for him. Because poisonings like this are rare, we’re bringing in Dr Amelia Webster to consult. She was the primary care physician in the Singh poisoning back in 2009. You may remember it from the papers. It was the same poison.’

‘Lakhvinder Cheema died after an hour in hospital,’ said Sherlock in a monotone.

‘But his fiancé survived,’ said the doctor. ‘And we’re working hard to see that your brother does, too.’

Sherlock rubbed a hand across his face, still dazed. ‘May I see him?’

‘Maybe just one at a time,’ said the doctor.

‘Go on, Sherlock,’ John said. ‘We’ll wait for you outside.’

Sherlock nodded stiffly and followed after the doctor. John watched him go, until Mrs Hudson put an arm through his and led him away.

***

Only four hours earlier, Greg Lestrade had left Baker Street in good spirits. It was a funny thing, really: that’s not how he usually left Baker Street.

The evening had gone well. Good food, good conversation, and the best company in London. As Molly had remarked to him on their drive over, it wasn’t often (was it ever?) that they all got together on purely social terms. But tonight was meant to be just that. No talk of work or cases or criminals. No one had established it as a rule, exactly, but they all seemed keen to follow it. Then Greg and Molly had given John that gift, and the rule was broken.

Yet Lestrade’s good spirits remained. Despite the upset, he now had a new lead, and, coupled with the recent testimonies of the likes of Eddie Stallman, George Yarrow, and a dozen others, he felt like, for the first time in months, he was about to get a leg up on the case dubbed the Moriarty Mayhem. He felt energised. Going home (home being a generous word, as he and Molly were currently living in a space little better than a hotel room) seemed almost a waste of time. He wanted to get straight to work. But the new lead would keep until morning.

So they returned to their temporary flat, turned down the lights, undressed for bed, and kissed one another good night.

At one o’clock, the phone rang.

Deep in sleep, he rose slowly to the surface. Too slowly. A hand on his shoulder urged him rise more quickly.

‘Greg,’ said Molly. ‘Greg, wake up.’

The light snapped on. He rolled onto his back and tried to clear the fog.

‘It’s John.’ She held his phone up to his face well enough for him to read through squinting eyes
the ‘John W’ on the screen, right under the numbers 1.08. Why was he calling at this hour? Was it —oh! Had he remembered something about Bill Murray? Something that couldn’t wait? Lestrade pushed himself up to sitting and swung his feet to the floor. He took the call.

‘John?’

But it wasn’t John who answered.

‘Greg, I’m so sorry to wake you!’

Lestrade looked over his shoulder and mouthed to Molly: ‘Not John.’ Her eyebrows went up in surprise, not sure if she should be worried.

‘Mrs Hudson, is everything okay?’

‘I don’t mean to alarm you, but something’s happened. Something awful’s happened to Mr Holmes.’

The fear in her voice as she teetered on the edge of tears infected him. He shot to his feet and whirled to face Molly as he asked, ‘Sherlock?’

‘Mycroft,’ said Mrs Hudson.

Lestrade’s world narrowed. The ground tilted. Without fully realising it, he had been prepared for a midnight call about Sherlock, announcing some tragedy, some expediency, and necessitating a stalwart response. He was not, he discovered, prepared to hear that the unshakeable, untouchable Mycroft Holmes had been thrown from the watchtower.

‘We’re in A&E,’ said Mrs Hudson. ‘St Mary’s Hospital. John, he wanted me to call you, said you needed to know.’

‘Mrs Hudson, what happened to Mycroft? Is he hurt?’ He pulled the phone away from his ear and quickly turned it to speaker phone as he handed it back to Molly. Then he ran to the wardrobe for his clothes.

‘He’s alive,’ she said, her voice coming faintly. ‘But the doctors, they don’t know if he’ll make it.’

‘What happened!’ he asked again, pushing his arms through the sleeves and fighting the buttons.

‘I—I don’t know! He was on the pavement just outside the flat, and I thought he was dead! The doctor said something about poison, but I don’t know!’

Lestrade shoved his feet into his shoes. Molly was now moving around the room, holding the phone in one hand and grabbing her trousers and a jumper with the other. ‘Sherlock and John. Are they—?’

‘They’re here, with me. They’re okay.’

‘Okay. All of you, stay put. I’m on my way.’

Molly tossed him his coat. He took her hand and pulled her out the front door. There was no question of leaving her behind.

***

Lestrade arrived and brought with him six officers, having sent half a dozen more to Baker Street
besides, to gather evidence and question the neighbours. While four worked up a security detail in the hospital, the other two set about interviewing the doctors, nurses, and paramedics who had anything at all to do with the care of Mycroft Holmes. Sherlock and John were also asked to give report, though John did most of the talking. ‘You’ll want to look at the CCTV footage from the cameras pointed at our front door,’ he said.

‘We’ll also need to look at your phone,’ Lestrade said, closing his notebook, ‘and the text messages you received.’

Sherlock merely nodded; it was hard to tell whether he was really listening.

Molly sat with Mrs Hudson while the interviews took place, but otherwise tried to make herself available to run errands or place phone calls, whatever was needed. But there was nothing to be done but wait. And even though she had to work come morning, and even though John gave her permission to go and rest, she stayed, and she answered Sherlock’s questions about bodies that had come through her morgue who had died of this poison or that as tactfully and optimistically as she could, until John softly but firmly bade Sherlock stop. At long last, as the morning began to break, she offered to find teas or coffees, and though no one exactly accepted, neither did they try to stop her, and she returned from the hospital cafeteria bearing five steaming Styrofoam cups.

Though he wished to, Lestrade couldn’t stay. There was work to do and a manhunt to direct. He started to make his apologies for leaving, to voice his confidence that Mycroft would be all right and they’d get the bastards, but still, Sherlock didn’t seem to hear him, and at last, John said it was fine, they’d be fine, just go. So he and Molly left, though not without insisting he be contacted just as soon as they knew anything about Mycroft’s condition, hoping John understood the subtext, if Sherlock didn’t. He needed to know whether he was chasing a murderer.

John resumed his place at Sherlock’s side.

At half seven, a nurse came to tell them that Mycroft’s condition had stabilised enough for them to move him to ICU, and if they wished, they could return home and rest; she would call if anything changed.

‘I’m staying until he wakes,’ said Sherlock.

‘Mr Holmes, that may be hours or even days from now.’

‘I’m staying.’

And John would have, too, if not for Mrs Hudson. She was not yet eighty years old, and a sturdier, more resilient woman John couldn’t name; but she was fatigued. Like they, she had been awake all night, and John could see how the weariness dragged down her shoulders and aggravated her bad hip. She continually rubbed her weary eyes and struggled to read the clock on the wall, having left her glasses at home. Of course she made no complaint, and probably wouldn’t for hours more, but John couldn’t let her go on like she was.

So he shifted in his chair, leant into Sherlock, and said, ‘I’m going to take Mrs Hudson home. I’ll pack an overnight bag for you and be back.’

Sherlock raised his eyes, which shone with the same exhaustion. ‘You should sleep.’

‘So should you.’ He covered Sherlock’s hand and gave it a light squeeze before rising. ‘I’ll be back,’ he said again.

Mrs Hudson made only a token objection, and she and John left the A&E.
Thanks to Mycroft Holmes, the flat was a stronghold. Nevertheless, John reviewed with Mrs Hudson the safety features on her door, reminded her that using the panic room was not an overreaction, and cautioned her to always have her phone on hand and fully charged. Then he left her to sleep, making assurances that he would exercise all the same precautions.

Back in the flat, he thought he might kip on the sofa—no more than twenty minutes—but as he stepped toward it, his eyes were drawn to the framed photograph lying face down on the floor atop a bed of shattered glass. Slowly, he bent to retrieve it, hoping the damage was not too great. As he carefully turned it over, more broken pieces slid and tinkled to the floor. But the photograph itself was untouched. No broken chip or sliver or shard had cut the glossy finish. His Mary’s face was unmarred by his carelessness, and still she smiled up at him, eyes sparkling like light on water. For just a sliver of a moment, it was as though no time or terror had separated them at all. Grateful for its wholeness, his kissed the tips of his fingers and pressed it to her image. Then, straining only slightly, he rose to his feet and set the photo safely on the coffee table.

Sleep had fled. He didn’t like the thought of Sherlock waiting alone as his brother struggled for survival, and he was eager to get back to St Mary’s. So he got to work. He swept up the broken glass and disposed of the frame. As for the picture, he slid it between the pages of a notebook for safekeeping. Then he climbed the stairs. Once properly dressed, he unzipped an overnight bag and stuffed it with a change of clothes before carrying it to the bathroom and gathering basic toiletries. Setting it by the door, he proceeded to Sherlock’s room and packed another.

Grasping two bags at either side, he was just about to head back down the stairs when he heard a soft, musical ding, which he recognised at once as Sherlock’s text alert. Of course—he’d almost forgotten to retrieve the mobile, which Sherlock had dropped. It lay on its face at the foot of one of the tall windows.

John picked it up, unlocked it, and checked the screen, which was still open to a web browser and an online encyclopaedia page about theaconitum plant. It chilled his blood to think it, how they had alerted Sherlock to the deadly poison, let him research it and puzzle over the text, perfectly unaware that it was his brother who had been afflicted and was already dying as he sat in the quiet flat, scrolling through information while they speeded Mycroft’s body to be left on the stoop like a greeting card. That’s how it was with these people. Their ceaseless taunting was mere prelude to the devastating blows that followed.

Anger prickled the corners of his eyes and he closed the webpage, not wanting Sherlock to return to the moment too soon. He knew how it was, to be forcefully reminded.

In closing the browser, however, he saw that Sherlock had seven unseen texts waiting for him. Stacked one on top of the other were the missed calls, all from Unknown.

He knew he should ignore them, though not because it was an invasion of Sherlock’s privacy. Such things as secrets and privacy didn’t really exist between them anymore, not after all that had happened, all they’d gone through together. No, it was experience that admonished him to ignore strange texts; no good had ever come from an unknown caller. At the same time, he feared what might follow if they were left unread.

John tapped a thumb, such a seemingly innocuous gesture, and read the earliest message from Unknown, sent at half two in the morning:

I’ve not forgotten you.
John felt his heart still and his hands go numb. He tapped an arrow to move to the next, sent at 3.30.

*You took one of mine.*

And the next at 4.30:

*I’ve taken one of yours.*

And so on (5.30) . . .

*Our game is only just beginning.*

. . . and so on (6.30) . . .

*Come and play.*

. . . and so on (7.30) . . .

*You can bring your pet.*

With each new message, John felt the single flame of rage, hidden deep with inside him, flare to greater and greater light.

Now, as London clocks struck half eight, the seventh text had reached Sherlock’s phone.

*You know my number.*

John’s breath burned in his chest, trapped. The familiar sensation of panic began to edge out the anger, and they battled together inside his mind. The one cried out for him to rush back to St Mary’s Hospital and warn Sherlock: They’ve made contact; they’ve renewed their threats! But there was a different force inside him now, sharing space with his fear. Darren Hirsch’s demise had awoken something in him, something angry, something reckless. Maybe it was courage, maybe madness. Whatever it was, it claimed the greater part. And so, wrangling the panic into submission, and keeping a firm grip on the tremor in his hand, he opened the keypad and slowly punched in the digits to his old mobile.

He held the phone to his ear and listened to it ring.

A soft *click*. A breathless pause. Then, a man spoke.

‘Hello, Sherlock.’

It was a voice he’d not heard in nearly six months, except in his worst nightmares and waking visions, and with it were resurrected a thousand and one memories of horrors he didn’t even know he had buried. Silent as the grave, John clasped his free hand across his mouth, as much to stave off a shuddering gasp as to keep breath inside his body. As if he were in the very room, John saw those cold, dark eyes, heard that terrible laughter, smelt the faint odour of peppermint. His vision whitened with hatred. He knew—he knew—that if Sebastian Moran were indeed in that very room, John would murder him.

He lowered his hand from his mouth. In a steady but gravelly voice, he spoke into the receiver.

‘Try again.’

Sound was suspended, indefinitely, and he knew he had caught the man on the other end of the line off his guard. When at last he spoke again, however, a sultry kind of pleasure marked his tone,
and with relish, he answered:

‘Johnny boy.’
At eight in the morning, Sergeant Sally Donovan dropped her ID on the receptionist’s table and signed the ledger. Slow and awkward, that was her mode these days. At her insistence, and with reluctant physician approval, the plaster was newly removed, and though she was encouraged to wear a sling to keep the right elbow immobilised, she couldn’t bear to wear it while going about her professional duties. She had an image to maintain, and it wasn’t that of a maimed or otherwise vulnerable police officer.

Nevertheless, letting the arm hang was, perhaps, not her wisest choice. Every now and then, when she was in a rush or too tense, a twinge reawakened in her elbow and vibrated down her arm, resulting in a flash of pain in her hand. Nerve damage, though nothing debilitating. The therapy was helping. But it aggravated her, not having full mobility or trustworthy reflexes. Until it was fully recovered, she couldn’t carry a firearm or apprehend a suspect. It was a feeble exercise, perhaps, when she silently coached herself not to feel the pain, but she halfway believed that through sheer stubbornness and force of will, she could speed her own recovery.

Retrieving her ID and returning it to her pocket, she let one of the nurses lead her to the third floor hospital bed in which lay their Jane Smith, pulled from the Queen Mary Reservoir sometime in the middle of the night. The near-drowning victim was suffering a mild concussion, multiple abrasions on arms and legs, and a right hand broken in four places. On top of that, she was also recovering from moderate to severe hypothermia. Doctors believed the trauma had led to some temporary amnesia, which explained why she couldn’t tell anyone who she was or where she was from. But she did give one name: Greg Lestrade, a detective inspector at New Scotland Yard. It was Lestrade she wished to speak to, and so Lestrade they contacted. But DI Lestrade, detained in London on more urgent business, had sent Donovan.

‘Her name is Anthea,’ he told her over the phone. Donovan was awake and half dressed, phone to her ear as she brushed her teeth with short, hurried strokes. ‘I need you to talk to her.’

Donovan spit into the sink. ‘I can be on the road in five minutes.’

‘Quicker the better. And Donovan. Consider this one strictly confidential. Private interview. Just you in the room.’

She readily agreed, practically leaping at the opportunity to get into the field again. Having been chained to deskwork for the last three weeks, she was grateful for something to do, anything, and was not a little indebted to Lestrade for calling on her to do it. He must have known she was unhappy cooped up indoors, as well as perfectly capable of returning to her work.

It wasn’t exactly official, but given all she had seen and done in the last six months, she very much considered any matter involving Sherlock Holmes or John Watson her work, her case, or at the very least a case she should be directly involved with. She knew as well as anyone that the death of the Slash Man (Darren Hirsch, she corrected herself) did not conclude the Moriarty Mayhem. It was far from over. Even in the aftermath of John Watson neutralizing one of the worst predators the streets of London had known in recent history, and the subsequent relief, she knew it was only a matter of time before another tragedy struck or more evidence surfaced, and she intended to be at the heart of the investigation that would at last bring an end to it all.

So when the phone call concerning Mycroft Holmes came, it had been far from surprising. It was
‘Is she awake?’ she queried as the nurse pulled back the curtain. The woman in question was lying on her side, plastered hand on top of the blankets, eyes closed. But hearing Donovan speak, she stirred.

‘Sorry to bother you, miss,’ said the nurse kindly, and softly, so as not to wake the other two patients sleeping in their beds, ‘but this officer’s come down from London, if you’re up to talking.’

‘Sergeant Donovan,’ she said, stepping forward, ‘of the Metropolitan Police.’

‘I know who you are.’ With a groan, the woman reached for the controls on the side of the bed to raise herself up.

The nurse smiled at them both and left. As Donovan came around to the side of the bed, the woman resituated herself and the blankets, then folded her hands (one casted) regally in her lap, assuming an air of decided professionalism. Despite the loose, dark strands escaping its plait—a nurse’s fix for unwashed hair—and the hospital gown gaping wide at the neck to accommodate a heart monitor, she appeared every bit the professional.

‘You know me, you say,’ said Donovan.

‘Yes,’ the woman said simply. ‘I know your partner; therefore, I know you. I assume he sent you.’

‘Lestrade isn’t exactly my partner.’

The woman gave her an impatient look, like she was wasting time with technicalities. ‘Why didn’t he come himself?’

‘He’s been unavoidably detained.’

‘Tell me what has happened.’

Donovan’s eyebrows rose and her jaw jutted out a little. ‘I’ve actually come to interview you, Ms... Anthea, is it?’

The woman nodded.

‘Anthea what?’

‘Anthea is good enough.’

Donovan sniffed, a little derisively. Evidently, the victim did not need to be treated as delicately as she had initially surmised. ‘Not even your real name, is it?’

‘It’ll serve. You won’t find me in any system, Sgt Donovan, so there is no point searching for me there. My employer has made sure of it.’

‘Your employer.’

‘Like you, I have a job to do, so let’s get on with it. Lestrade should have come himself, but he sent you. You may be his most trustworthy and reliable officer—his words, not mine—but you’re still, technically, outer ring. So I am disinclined to talk to you. At least, not until you’ve told me what has happened.’

But Donovan was there to gather information, not offer a report, and she riled at the tone of
command. ‘What has happened, miss, is that someone nearly killed you. Last night, you were rescued from the middle of Queen Mary Reservoir after a pair of trespassing teenagers watched a car fall off the back of ferry, hopped in their speedboat, and found you treading water, barely hanging on. They pulled you from the water and called for an ambulance. An hour ago, Surrey Police dragged to the surface a 2015 Mercedes-Maybatch S600 registered to a Mr Adam Davenport of Central London. Incidentally, they also recovered the body of Mr Davenport, who, according to preliminary reports, died as a result of drowning. Being the lone survivor of this tragedy, we thought you might know a thing or two about why a luxury vehicle was dumped in the middle of a lake, and who is responsible for what was very nearly multiple homicides.’

The woman, Anthea, looked at her long and hard, a look Donovan returned. But what she first read as defiance began slowly to give way, and behind the veneer of trained comportment, Donovan discerned a shadow of fear. So when Anthea spoke, again, she spoke softly.

‘Is Mycroft Holmes dead?’

At this, Donovan’s own hard veneer cracked at the edges—she had not expected the woman to yield in any way. ‘Mycroft Holmes. Is that who you mean when you say employer?’

Anthea’s pained expression was her only response.

Donovan knew few of the details herself, neither his condition nor ongoing care. The fact was, she knew almost nothing about the man, other than the fact of his being Sherlock Holmes’ elder brother. Mycroft Holmes had been to the Yard a time or two, nothing more, at least, not while she was there; and she had spotted him at St Bartholomew’s back when John Watson had been in hospital following his terrible ordeal. Beyond that, she could only speculate: What his relationship was like with his younger brother she couldn’t even guess at—they both seemed so peculiar—but she had suspected for a while now that DI Lestrade had fostered something of a professional relationship with the man, though a clandestine one. Knowing that Mr Holmes was in some way connected with Home Office and MI6, and believing him to be a man of some great power and influence, she had deliberately not meddled in or questioned the true nature of Lestrade’s association.

She knew even less about this woman who apparently worked for him.

‘I’m not at liberty to disclose.’

‘If Greg Lestrade sent you—’

‘Of course he did.’

‘—if he sent you, then I can assure you, Ms Donovan, he meant for you to tell me.’ Her eyes beseeched her now. ‘Please. Is Mycroft Holmes dead?’

Sally Donovan chewed her inner cheek, debating. At last, she shook her head. ‘He is in hospital,’ she said, ‘and alive.’

‘Thank God.’ Anthea brought her hands to her mouth and squeezed her eyes closed, allowing herself to be overcome, if only for a moment. When she spoke next, her voice was a whisper. ‘What happened?’

‘He was poisoned. Doctors have induced a coma while they assess the damage. I’m sorry, I really don’t know anything more than that.’

‘Poisoned,’ Anthea repeated. She drew in a long steadying breath, composing herself. With her
unbroken hand, she wiped her cheeks free of tears. ‘Very well.’ Her breath escaped in a huff, returning her to a business-like state. ‘I need to get out of this bed. What hospital, did you say? He needs proper security detail, and if he wakes he’ll want immediate reports—’

‘Hang on there, whoa, stop. Just—’ Donovan put her hands out to keep Anthea in the bed. ‘Don’t forget, you’re in hospital yourself. And don’t think we don’t have it covered. You think Lestrade isn’t over there, right now, handling these things? You seem to trust him. If you trust him, you can trust me.’

‘Can I?’ Anthea asked with wry tone. She cocked her head to the side, evaluating her.

‘I may be outer ring, Ms Anthea, but I know how to do my job.’

‘And do you choose to remain outer ring, Ms Donovan?’

‘Pardon?’

Anthea’s eyes marked the open door at the end of the room, beyond which the life of the hospital flowed unrestrained. There was little chance they could be overheard, but Donovan picked up on the signal and moved to close the door anyway. For added good measure, she pulled the curtains closed around them, too, and when she returned to the bedside, Anthea’s look was approving.

‘I asked, sergeant, whether you mean to remain on the fringes.’

‘I’ve no idea what you’re on about.’

‘There is no use pretending.’

Donovan withheld a sigh. She was not in control of this conversation, and she needed to take it back. A more direct approach, perhaps.

‘Let’s start from the top. Can you tell me where you were when you were abducted? What time it was?’

‘Nothing I can tell you will help you find him.’

‘Him?’

‘Sebastian Moran. That’s who you’re looking for, isn’t it? It doesn’t matter. He was not one of the men who attacked us last night, who injected us with anaesthetics and wrangled us into the boot of the Mercedes. Was he behind it? Almost certainly. So this isn’t about me at all, is it? It’s not even about Mycroft Holmes. Not really.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Mycroft has many enemies, at home and abroad. It comes with the job. But attacking him—and his staff, for good measure—was just another way of going after his brother. Of sending a message to tell Sherlock just what kind of blows Moran can still deliver. With Mr Holmes laid up and myself out of commission, for the time being, Sherlock is more exposed and vulnerable than ever. We can’t have that. Mycroft won’t stand for it.’

‘Mycroft Holmes doesn’t have a lot to say about it, at the moment.’

‘He doesn’t need to say a word. The protocol is in place. Lestrade knows it, and so he will be stepping into the elder Holmes’ sizeable shoes. I’ll need you to step into mine. But I’ll not have
someone standing where I stand if she is not one hundred percent on board.’

Donovan stared, perplexed. She felt like she was being chastised, but why? And who was this woman to rebuke her, command her, when she didn’t even have a proper name, when they had never before met? Anthea let her stew and reached for a glass of water at the side of the bed, taking her time drinking.

‘If you have something to say, why don’t you come out and say it? There’s been a crime, and it doesn’t matter if the victim is Mycroft Holmes or Joe the Plumber or the Prime Minister himself—I’ll work the case whether you want me to or not, because it’s my job.’

Anthea’s eyes flashed. ‘You’re more than your job, Ms Donovan.’

‘What the hell is that supposed to mean?’

‘It means you’re a good copper. You play tough and by the book, and you get the job done. But your jurisdiction is small. And we need you to step outside of it and see that there’s something bigger going on, something greater at stake.’

‘Bigger than Moran, you mean.’

‘Moriarty,’ Anthea affirmed. ‘None of us, not even Mycroft Holmes, knew how great his influence was before his death, nor could we have predicted the chaos his network would be thrown into when Sherlock removed him. We see it now, the battle lines, the size of the armies. And it’s scaring the hell out of us. For good or ill, to our success or our detriment, we’re in it till the end. But you. You have yet to fully enter the fray. You, Sgt Donovan, get something that none of us did.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘A choice. Sherlock Holmes didn’t have one—he was marked from the start, and his brother with him. I stepped onto the field with both eyes closed. John Watson was deceived. Greg Lestrade was coerced. Others were pushed or dragged or tricked. But you, of all of us, having seen the danger, having witnessed others pay the cost of fighting in this war, can simply walk away.’

Donovan stood stiff, immovable, in part understanding exactly what Anthea was saying, but resisting understanding all the same.

‘You have the chance to serve in the interest of the greater good.’

‘That’s bullshit.’

Anthea’s eyes widened, taken by surprise.

‘I don’t buy into by-any-means-necessary or for-the-greater-good rhetoric. Those who do use it to rationalise circumventing the law to achieve their own brand of justice, which always—always—leads to corruption in the name of self-interest. People say that things aren’t always so black and white, and maybe that’s true. But what’s also true is that black and white don’t disappear in the presence of grey. People just refuse to see it. What they also refuse to see is that the law is the system serving the greater good. So that is what I serve.’

With new light in her eyes, Anthea straightened in the bed. ‘Yes, yes, and this is why we need you, Sgt Donovan.’

‘Come again?’
‘You have loyalties to the law, emotional distance, objectivity. You’re uncompromising and stalwart and oftentimes fearless. You provide an anchor to Lestrade, balance to Sherlock, and support to John Watson.’

‘The hell I do. Holmes and Watson have never relied on me for anything,’ said Donovan. ‘And Lestrade is loyal to the law, same as I am.’

‘But not above all. Already, he’s bent and broken the law in the interest of saving a man’s life, and who can say he was wrong to do it? We need people like him. But we also need people like you. More specifically . . . you.’

‘You want me to become like you, is that it? Lackey to a greater man, being sent on errands and keeping a diary and coordinating with the driver, all while keeping state secrets? You’re an intelligent human being, Ms Anthea. And yet the work you do for your employer is going to get you killed. Even now, lying in a hospital bed, only hours removed from an attempt on your life, you’re acting as though you’re on the clock.’

Anthea cocked an eyebrow. ‘Would you be any different? As I recall, you almost died yourself in the interest of helping Sherlock. Your superiors had to insist you go on leave after your accident.’

‘Right. At least I haven’t given up my own name in the interest of his work, and who knows what else besides. Was this what you wanted your life to be? Don’t tell me you no longer have a choice in any of this. I don’t believe it. Why aren’t you the one walking away?’

Rather than get defensive, as Donovan expected she might, Anthea considered her question. ‘In the beginning,’ she said, ‘before I had any comprehension of who was hiring me or why, I believed that I was entering into something significant and exciting. I had the hope of doing something great, being part of something bigger than myself, something of terrific consequence to the world. I believed I was doing something important.’

Donovan wondered how many years ago that was. Anthea still seemed fairly young, most certainly younger than she; and yet she spoke with the reflection of the aged and wise.

‘And now?’ she asked.

Her dark eyes met Donovan’s, boring into them with intensity and conviction. ‘Now I know I am. Will you?’

***

As the morning drew on and his initial state of numbing shock wore away, Sherlock’s brainpower came back online. Every shiver in the corner of his eye, every pat of a footfall, and every waft of cool air that unsettled his hair or made his skin prickle bore the full weight of his attention.

He wished he hadn’t dropped his phone in the flat. He was loath to admit it, but he felt helpless without the mobile. It wasn’t just a repository of instant information; it was his link to John, to anyone. Hours had passed, and John had not yet returned.

Mycroft had been moved from the operating theatre and placed into intensive care, where Sherlock had been allowed only a brief visit. His status remained critical but stable, and Sherlock was left to understand that the balance might tip at any time, for good or ill, which didn’t sound stable at all. They told him to keep close by. ‘Just in case,’ said the nurse, but she didn’t finish that thought. She didn’t need to. But he had no intention of leaving. Once again, he was making trips between the waiting room and the hallway. Again, he was turning an eye of suspicion on doctors and nurses and
staff. As before, he was constantly braced for pronouncement of the inevitable. *We’re sorry, Mr Holmes. He didn’t make it. You were too late.*

He knew it was paranoia. To some degree. What he was not convinced of, however, was that his paranoia was unjustified.

The lift doors at his lonely end of the hallway dinged, but a pair of nurses stepped out of them, not John. Fighting down his mounting agitation, he turned on his heel to walk the length of the corridor back to the doors leading to intensive care. As he drew near where the security guard stood just beside the double doors, a man, a stranger, a face he had not yet seen in those halls, exited the ICU. The man was old—eighties, maybe, public school-bred and business elite, judging by his gait and comportment—and wore a dark blue suit and a straight black tie. He made eye contact with Sherlock, but only briefly; then, when they passed each other at the shoulder, Sherlock saw it: the man turned his head subtle degrees away. It was a subconscious gesture. This was a man who had been seen, but who did not wish to be.

Or perhaps Sherlock was misinterpreting. Just an ordinary old man. He shook his head and stepped up to the double doors. But before he pushed them open, he turned to the guard. ‘How long was that man in ICU? What was he doing here?’

The guard blinked, as though in slow motion, as though clearing his eyes to make Sherlock out properly. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘That man, how long was he inside?’

‘What man?’

‘The one that just walked out of here, two seconds ago!’

‘Mr Holmes, no one has walked through these doors in ten minutes.’

Sherlock twisted back around, but the hallway was empty.

He threw open the doors to intensive care.

‘Mr Holmes!’ cried a scandalised nurse.

‘Who was that?’ He pointed out the door. ‘The man who was just in here. Who was he?’

‘Who?’

‘Damn it.’

He strode past her at a lumbering gait.

‘Mr Holmes, I really must insist you *ask* before charging in here!’

The officer had followed him inside. ‘What’s going on? Mr Holmes, don’t make me remove you!’

Striding purposefully toward Mycroft’s corner of the ICU room, he ignored them both. There, yanked back the curtain and found his brother lying in the hospital bed, just as he had last seen him, machines emitting their steady beep. ‘Someone was here. What did they do, what did they touch?’

He looked around, mentally scraping the details of the medical environment into a dozen Petrie dishes in his mind and sliding each under a microscope.

‘Please, Mr Holmes,’ said the officer, exasperated, ‘don’t make me call for backup.’
'Call them. Call them right now.'

'Shit, what’s going on?'

'Call them!'

The security officer swore again, pulled out his radio, and sped away, the nurse hesitating in the doorway before following him.

'Who was here, Mycroft?' he asked aloud, wishing to God he would answer. He ran a hand down his brother’s arms one by one, then his legs, feeling for something—anything—that shouldn’t be there. He dragged a hand under the mattress, dipped his head below the bed, circled and checked the other side. He examined the cannulas and instruments sustaining his life. Then his eye fell on the heart monitor. Slowly, he reached behind it, felt the foreign element, and peeled it off. Opening his palm, he looked down and saw a black transmitter, the size of a fifty-pence piece.

He dropped the transmitter into the pocket of his pyjama bottoms just as the security officer returned.

'I have men on the way—' he started before Sherlock cut him off.

'Tell them to check the security footage for the last thirty minutes in the ICU and every corner of this hospital. You’re looking for a man in his eighties, medium build, five-nine, thinning white hair, wearing a dark suitcoat and tie. And you’—he pointed an accusatory finger—‘I want you gone.’

‘You don’t give me orders!’

‘A man so easily hoodwinked has no business serving as security to the most important man in Britain.’

‘Hoodwinked?’

‘Get me the footage! Go!’

The man’s face purpled with anger, but he spun on his heel and stalked away. Sherlock threw himself into the chair besides the hospital bed. Then he reached into the pocket of his pyjamas and withdrew the transmitter. For a few seconds he examined its coiled copper and silver plates, but no amount of optical examination would force it to yield its secrets. He threw a glare at Mycroft, whose breathing machine and heart monitor were the only indications he was still alive.

‘Wake up, won’t you?’ he said bitterly.

But of course, Mycroft gave no retort.

***

Greg Lestrade sat numbly at the wheel, staring straight ahead through the windscreen without seeing the pedestrians crossing the street. His brain was divided down a dozen different paths of thought, and not one of them seemed to reside with him on the road.

A blaring horn startled him back to the present, and he saw the light was green and the pathway clear. Flustered, he threw the car into gear and shot forward, screeching the tyres and earning him more horns and a rude gesture or two at the corner of his eyes. But he didn’t give two shits about their petty annoyances. Didn’t they see it? The sky was falling.
In the passenger seat, his phone lit up, and a second later, through the Bluetooth, his speakers dinged with an incoming call. He tapped a button on his steering wheel.

‘Talk to me, Donovan, give me good news.’

‘She’s going to be fine, sir. Some contusions and a broken hand, but she’s recovering well from the hypothermia, and no lasting effects from the drug. She’s very . . . clear-headed. But the driver wasn’t so lucky.’

‘Davenport?’

There was a brief, calibrating pause. ‘Drowned. He has been recovered from the reservoir and taken to the mortuary at Ashford Hospital, but I’m having him transported back to London. Do you want Molly to take a look?’

‘Yes. That would be best.’ Damn. He struck the wheel with his hand. The man had a wife, grown sons, a granddaughter on the way. He would need to deliver the unhappy news himself. It was only right.

‘Sir?’

‘I’m here, Donovan. Look. Things are moving fast, and we need to move faster. Last night, I got a new lead regarding Moran and the St Mary’s Abduction plot, and I want you to join me on pursuing it.’

‘What’s the lead?’

‘Just a name, to start. Corporal William Murray. I’ll fill you in on the details later, but I have an address. I want to talk to him. Today. Surprise visit. Are you back in London?’

‘Leaving Hounslow just now.’

He thought. ‘Murray lives just outside of Edgware on Orchard Cres. Meet me there in an hour.’

‘Got it. And oh. Lestrade.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Is this Yard business? Or is this part of your new commission as steward for Mycroft Holmes?’

The charge surprised him, as did the bite in her voice. What, exactly, had Anthea said to her? Lestrade had known Sally Donovan long enough to distinguish between her tone of disapproval and tone of disappointment, and this time it fell into the latter category. She had expected him to confide in her, and he hadn’t. But it wasn’t that he didn’t trust her. Rather, he had believed himself sworn to secrecy. He hadn’t told even Sherlock the nature of his professional arrangement with Mycroft Holmes, though John himself had mentioned Sherlock’s suspicions.

‘Where one ends, the other begins, Sally.’

‘I’ve thrown all my chips in, inspector,’ she retorted, throwing him further off balance. Now she was rebuking him, but he couldn’t fathom why. ‘You should know that.’

‘Okay . . .’

‘And I’m holding a strong hand. But even if I weren’t, I wouldn’t fold. I’m seeing this to end. You get me?’
Lestrade smirked, but he refrained from letting his pleasure, or appreciation, colour his tone. ‘Looks like we’ve got a fighting chance then, eh? Better bring your poker face.’

‘See you in Edgware,’ she snapped.

***

The footage had been blocked. Frozen. From the moment the unidentified man entered the hospital until he had disappeared from it, every security camera froze for five to fifteen seconds at a time, as though his very proximity short-circuited the wiring long enough for him to pass by unseen. The only witness who had any memory of seeing him at all was Sherlock.

The transmitter, though a highly advanced technological gadget, seemed to be fairly simple in function: it was a one-way audio transmitter, not a camera, consisting of a simple though very tiny microphone. He had discovered all this while dismantling it in the loo. But despite his anger and paranoia, he resisted flushing it down the toilet: he had never been one to wilfully destroy evidence.

For hours—it felt like days—he vacillated between Mycroft, still hovering in limbo in the intensive care unit, and the lifts, waiting for John. All the while, he monitored the men and women, doctors and nurses, orderlies and caretakers. He couldn’t trust technology or security, not as far as he could see them himself. They had already proved fallible.

Then, at long, long last, the lift doors dinged, and John marched out into the hallway, bearing two overnight bags, his limp barely noticeable. He looked left and right before spotting Sherlock, and they rushed to meet each other.

‘A breach in security,’ Sherlock said at the same moment John began, ‘We have a problem.’

‘What problem?’

‘What breach?’

‘An unidentified man bypassed all security monitors and personnel to plant an audio transmitter in the ICU, and left without anyone’s notice. Anyone’s but mine, that is. They’re monitoring him. They didn’t kill him, so they’re looking for a window of opportunity to come in and finish the job. So far, so obvious. So we need to get him out. Sneak him out, hide him somewhere safe, leaving behind a decoy of some sort, I don’t know, I’m still working out the details, and the fewer people who know about it, the better. I think we may even be able to fool the nurses, they’re a dupable lot. Mycroft cannot stay here.’

John was nodding rigidly. ‘No, he cannot.’ Then he set one of the bags on the floor and reached into his pocket and withdrew Sherlock’s mobile.

‘Thank you, I was hoping you’d think to grab it.’ He held out his hand for it, but John was slow to place it there.

It was then that Sherlock took in the whole of him. Despite his hours of absence and change of clothes, his appearance was that of one who had denied himself sleep: his hair had the same creases and flatness as seen the night before, unaltered by resting against a pillow; the skin beneath his eyes sagged, and redness tinged the corners of his eyes, seeping into the glassy whites; and his brow was lined with exhaustion. Sherlock doubted he himself looked much better.

‘Why didn’t you sleep?’ he asked, palm still open, awaiting his mobile.
‘Something’s happened,’ said John in a low voice. He glanced over Sherlock’s shoulder to a man and young woman lingering not far away.

‘Father with his daughter, on holiday from Dublin, wife thrown through the windscreen when they got rear-ended on the A3220. Come this way.’

Sherlock took up the dropped bag, turned John around, and led him to a deserted alcove off the main hall.

‘Tell me,’ he said.

John was steeling himself, one fist clenching and unclenching, jaw tight, head lowered. But his eyes rose to meet Sherlock’s, and he said, unable to keep a quaver from his voice, ‘He’s back.’

There was no doubt who he meant, but Sherlock felt a chill rush through him. Six months, it had been. Six months of silence from the man himself while his lackeys and underlings ran about doing his bidding, devastating lives in his name, under his orders. Had he finally decided to step out of the shadows?

And how did John know of it? What had happened these past few hours that left John drained white as a sheet, as though he had seen a ghost?

‘What happened?’ he asked, reaching for John and gripping his arm at the shoulder.

‘He has your number,’ said John, at last delivering the mobile. ‘Seven texts, once an hour on the half.’

Sherlock took his mobile and unlocked it. Holding his breath, he opened his texts, and began to scroll.

But he saw nothing.

‘Have you deleted them?’ he asked.

John’s head arose. ‘What?’

‘I don’t see them.’

Taking the mobile back, John searched for himself, his fingers dragging up and down on the screen, and the faster he searched, the stronger his head began to shake. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said without breath. ‘They were . . . here. Right here. Seven of them.’

‘What did they say?’

‘They were taunts. Threats.’ Sherlock saw that John was searching the deleted texts folder. It, too, was empty. ‘Where are they!’

‘Tell me. What did they say? Everything you can remember.’

‘Uh . . .’ John’s eyes closed, remembering. ‘That he’d not forgotten you. That Mycroft was payment for what I did to Daz. That this is a game.’ His eyes opened again. ‘Come and play.’

*Come and play*. He’d received that text before. Long ago. John had been the first to read those words, too, on that morning when he had last been unequivocally happy, before Moriarty re-entered the picture, and everything was shot to hell. But those were Moriarty’s words. Not Moran’s.
Again, Sherlock noted signs of stress and enervation, the elevated blood pressure, the quick, shallow breaths.

‘John.’

Again, John’s head came up. His eyes were round and fearful.

‘You read the texts in the flat. Was Mrs Hudson with you?’

‘No, I was . . . I was alone.’

‘How were you feeling?’

It took only a second for John to understand the implication. His eyes darkened and his teeth clamped together. He took two, long breaths, nostrils flaring. ‘I’m not making this up.’

But Sherlock wasn’t so sure. ‘All I’m saying,’ he began, delicately, ‘is that I think we were both waiting for the gauntlet to fall, especially after what happened with the Slash Man. And what happened to Mycroft is a big gauntlet.’ Yes, saying it out loud made it feel more plausible. There would be repercussions for the Slash Man’s death, and John would feel it more keenly than anyone. ‘It’s been a long, stressful night, for both of us, and neither of us has slept. We’re raw at the edges. It’s not . . . unreasonable . . . that the combination of all those things triggered memories and—’

‘I’m telling you, it was not a hallucination. There were messages; I read them. I— I spoke to him.’

‘You spoke to him?’

‘Here, I’ll show you.’

On Sherlock’s mobile, he tapped and swiped, this time bringing up the screen for outgoing calls. ‘He said, You know my number. And I do, don’t I? It was my number after all. So I rang him up. I’m tired of this waiting, of sitting on my hands, not fighting ba—’

But he froze, staring at the screen. Moments passed in utter silence between them, a silence Sherlock knew better than to break.

‘It’s gone,’ John whispered.

‘John . . .’

‘I don’t . . . understand. I spoke with him. I did. I remember it perfectly.’

He could no longer hide his doubts. ‘Lestrade and his team have been trying for months to reach that number, to trace it. No one gets through.’

At last, John surrendered the phone. He squared his shoulders and cricked his neck, clearly trying to maintain some sense of composure. But his eyes gave him away.

‘So you don’t believe me.’

‘I think we both need some sleep.’

‘Go on. Say it, then.’

‘I—’ He sighed. ‘I’m looking for the evidence, John. I don’t see it.’
‘Right.’ He sniffed, looked away. The glassiness of his eyes no longer seemed due to exhaustion.
‘Fine then.’

Sherlock felt the guilt burning in his chest, a wrong he wished to amend. ‘What is it he said?’

‘Never mind, eh? Clearly, it’s irrelevant.’ He exploded a hand near his temple. ‘A fabrication.’

‘John.’

‘Forget it, I said. Tell me about this breach. How did anyone get past the security detail?’

‘I don’t know. I’m working on it.’ He slid the phone into his pocket to join the dismantled pieces of the transmitter.

‘Have you checked footage?’

‘They didn’t pick anything up.’

‘Just you then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Huh.’

‘What?’

‘Where’s your evidence for that one, then? But no, let’s not forget. I’m the crazy one. When it comes to the two of us, you’re Brains, I’m Bedlam. Glad we got that straight.’

John pushed past him, returning to the lifts, and Sherlock had no choice but to let him go. He could not leave Mycroft.

Their eyes met just as the doors slid closed. But where Sherlock expected to see pain or betrayal, he instead saw fear. Damn it all, but John Watson was cursed, for above his own convictions, he trusted in Sherlock’s. So if Sherlock said he was mad, he was mad.

And it terrified him.
A Case for Neurorehabilitation

THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2015

John didn’t know where they had come from. When he had arrived at St Mary’s, the pavement had been clear, unobstructed, and he expected no different when he left it less than ten minutes later, head bowed and eyes downcast, fighting to keep his breathing a steady five in, five out. He didn’t know where he was going, only that he had to go. But suddenly, his path was blocked. Before he had finished even one round of breaths, John found himself surrounded by popping lights, cameramen, and reporters pressing microphones into his face.

‘Dr Watson! Dr Watson!’

He stopped short—feet, breath, heart—and instinctively sought an exit point. There was none.

‘Is it true there was an incident on Baker Street last night?’

Something jostled him sideways; his elbow struck metal. A sharp pain flared from knee to hip, and he stumbled.

‘Early reports say that Holmes was taken to hospital. Is it true? Is Sherlock Holmes injured?’

‘Is it serious?’

‘What happened, Dr Watson? An accident? An attack? Was anyone else hurt?’

‘Tell us, was the attack on Mr Holmes perpetrated by the fugitive Moran?’

‘Excuse me,’ John muttered, trying to push through, angling his face away from one camera only to be caught by another. Black spots on the edge of his vision were beginning to spread toward the centre.

‘Could you say a few words about your blog? In March, you confirmed that Sherlock Holmes was not behind your abduction, but that you were in fact tortured beyond reason. Your words. Dr Watson, what happened in the convent?’

‘Was it Moran? Did you meet Sebastian Moran?’

‘Why are the details of your captivity being withheld from the public?’

John dug a hand into his pocket for his mobile, not even knowing whom he would call, what he would say. But when he brought it out, his tremor reignited and caused him to fumble. The mobile hit the pavement. He bent to retrieve it, discovering the screen had cracked.

‘Many are calling you a hero for bringing an end to the Slash Man’s murder streak. Others say you lured him to your home to kill him. What is your response?’

‘What is the connection between Moran and Darren Hirsch?’

‘Put the rumours to rest: What did he do to you?’

John put out a hand, but there were too many cameras, too many eyes, he couldn’t possibly shield himself from them all. ‘Go away. Please.’ But his voice lacked any force.
‘Sebastian Moran is the most-wanted man in Britain. Do you have any reason to believe that he is still after you?’

‘Look into the camera, Dr Watson! If Mr Moran is watching, what would want him to know?’

‘Do you have anything to say to your girlfriend’s killer?’

‘I said go away!’

John grabbed the nose of the nearest camera, perched on the shoulder of a camera man, and thrust it to the ground. He had meant only to redirect the gaze, but the operator lost control of it, and it collided with the pavement.

There were gasps of astonishment and a few people cried aloud in outrage, but the cameras never ceased to flash and roll. Having destroyed just one, John had inadvertently created a gap in the cage of reporters, and he darted through it and into the street, waving a dismissive hand at the car horns and cursing drivers. There, in the middle of the road, he spotted a taxi, which had come to a screeching halt, and held up a finger. Then he yanked open the door and hurried inside.

‘You some kind of celebrity?’ asked the cabbie, half alarmed, half excited.

‘No.’

‘Right, mate. Where to?’

‘Away from here.’

***

Lestrade spotted Donovan in his rear-view mirror as they idled at a light five minutes away from their destination in Edgware. He lifted a hand to acknowledge her, and she nodded in return.

They parked their cars in the drive, one behind the other, and stepped out in perfect synchronicity.

‘How’s the arm?’ Lestrade asked, pocketing his sunglasses.

She treated his question as nothing more than a customary greeting. ‘You going to tell me why we’re here, or am I walking into this blind?’

Keeping an eye on the front windows, Lestrade brought out a folder and flipped it open to a blow-up colour copy of the original five-by-seven photograph taken from the home of Mary Morstan and later found in the possession of a constable named Moore, who was now serving time for kidnapping, and for the death of a man named Frank Vander Maten. ‘Remember this?’

‘Of course I do. It’s the evidence that implicated that pillock Stubbins.’ Donovan took the photo, re-examining its subjects in the sunlight: John Watson and Mary Morstan in the foreground of the pub, Everett Stubbins in the background. ‘Is this to do with him? Or Ivan Moore?’

‘Likely. But more specifically, it’s to do with this man.’ Lestrade pointed a finger at the figure seated beside Stubbins at the bar, just out of focus. ‘William Murray. Who lives’—he indicated with his head—‘here.’

‘How did you identify him?’

‘John. They were in Afghanistan together.’
Her mouth fell open in astonishment, and he raised his eyebrows as a sign that he agreed.

‘C’mon. Let’s have a chat.’

They walked up the garden path to the front door of the orange-brick bungalow, and Lestrade rang the bell.

Under her breath, Donovan, who was still processing what they were doing, said, ‘Wait, are we working under the presumption this man is a conspirator? An agent of Moran?’

‘Got your stun gun handy?’ Lestrade said.

‘I’m serious, Lestrade, are we?’

‘I’m making no assumptions, one way or the other. We’re here to ask questions. Though, granted, to catch him off his guard.’

A curtain parted at the side window, and Lestrade spotted a woman’s hand. He reached into the inner pocket of his suitcoat and pulled out his identification, which he presented to the window. A second later, he heard the turning of a lock, and the door opened, revealing a plump, middle-aged woman with short-cropped, greying hair, an oversized t-shirt, and flour streaks on her jeans. The aroma of activated yeast wafted over the threshold.

‘Christ spare me,’ she said with a sigh. ‘This is about Bill, innit?’

It wasn’t the greeting Lestrade had expected. ‘Uh, good afternoon. Mrs. Murray, is it?’

‘Frances Murray, yes. I’d shake your hand, but . . .’ She showed him the flecks of raw dough on her palms. ‘Come in, then. Let’s hear it.’

Exchanging looks of surprise, Lestrade and Donovan followed the woman indoors, stepping over empty fizzy drinks bottles and around stacks of old magazines and discarded socks. The Murrays didn’t keep a very tidy house, which surprised Lestrade. All the military men he had known, John included, had all been very orderly, if not downright sparse, with their living space. Not that such kempt behaviours extended to wives and flatmates. Sherlock, for example.

Mrs Murray sat them at the kitchen table, hastily clearing it of half-eaten plates of spaghetti and half-drained glasses of milk, but leaving the newspapers, children’s colouring books, pencil cups, an ashtray filled with grey-and-white dust and a dozen cigarette butts, and a bowl of turning fruit. ‘You don’t mind?’ she asked, indicating the unlit cigarette already between her fingers. Lestrade hadn’t even seen where it came from; it just appeared. She reached for a lighter sharing a sugar bowl with half a dozen rubber bands and a tin of mints.

Lestrade, not opposed to a little second-hand smoke at the moment, was on the cusp of saying not at all, when Donovan stepped on his first word. ‘Best not. Flour is combustible.’ A white fog was practically hanging in the air. A ball of underworked dough rested on the countertop.

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The woman sighed. ‘Well, I’m gonna need something for this, won’t I? And I’m out of vodka.’

Two children ran up to the sliding backdoor, which was streaked with greasy handprints. Giggling and screeching at each other, they reached for the door but didn’t get one finger on the handle before Mrs Murray raised her voice. ‘Stay outside! Go on! Now!’ The children darted away. ‘Sorry about that. They don’t need to be here for this.’

‘Mrs Murray,’ said Lestrade, ‘you don’t seem at all surprised to see us.’
‘This is about Bill, innit? And you’re police, ain’t you?’

He nodded.

She shrugged, but her indifference was betrayed by the new shine in her eyes and the thickness in her voice. ‘So you’re coming here to tell me what happened to him, eh? So let’s get on with it. He been arrested, or is he dead?’

‘Neither,’ said Donovan, while Lestrade, both bemused and intrigued by her response, extracted his notepad and flipped to a blank page. ‘We were hoping to find him at home, actually.’

Mrs Murray’s pencilled eyebrows lifted. ‘Were you? Well, ain’t that something. Christ Almighty, what’s he done?’

Pen poised, Lestrade engaged a line of questioning. ‘Why do you think he’s done anything?’

‘You wouldn’t be here otherwise. Would you.’ She stabbed the unlit cigarette into the table top, as though she didn’t remember she never lit it.

‘I take it, then, you don’t know where we can find him?’

She shook her head, looking tired. ‘No, sir. That’s a question I haven’t known the answer to for a while.’

‘How long is a while?’

She shrugged. ‘Months.’

‘Have you reported him as missing?’

‘He’s not missing, detective inspector. For reasons of his own—reasons he’s not bothered to share with me—he’s just not living at home anymore.’

‘But you suspect he might be in trouble.’

‘Until I saw you on my doorstep, I figured it was an affair.’ She snorted. ‘Just another one to add to the lot, the ruddy wanker. But affairs don’t bring the police, do they? Usually. Yet here you are. So you going to tell me what this is all about, or what?’

Lestrade hedged. ‘We believe he may have information.’

‘Information.’ Her voice was gruff, sceptical.

‘Related to a case we’re working. That’s all I can say.’

When Mrs Murray continued to regard him with a chary eye, Donovan stepped in to keep the ball rolling. ‘Mrs Murray, when’s the last time you had contact with your husband?’

‘He calls. Now and again. Doesn’t talk long, never answers my questions, but he’ll ring the house phone once in a blue moon. Asks after the kids. Asks how I’m managing. The bastard.’ She put the cigarette between her lips, sucking lightly.

‘And when was his last phone call?’

‘Been a few weeks.’ She craned her neck to see the wall calendar. ‘Early March, it would’ve been. Let’s see. It was morning. That’s right, morning before the big snow storm. Next day, I couldn’t
get the car out the drive, and I remember thinking, what good is a phone call? A phone call doesn’t shovel my snow. A phone call doesn’t salt the stoop or scrape ice from the windscreen or keep these two brats from tearing apart my living room, being cooped up inside all day.’

Lestrade noted the date with gravity. ‘What did you talk about?’

She shrugged. ‘More of the same. Wanted to know if I was all right, if the kids was all right. Said he loved me. That was a new one. Hadn’t heard that in a while. I told him to get his arse home and take care of his kids, like a proper father. And what does he say back to me? Kiss my babies for me, Fran. That was it. Hung up on me.’

‘Did he say where he was calling from?’ asked Donovan.

‘Never does.’

‘Do you have a number where we can reach him?’

But Mrs Murray was shaking her head halfway through Donovan’s question. ‘It’s always blocked. Unavailable. Buys one of them disposables, you know? Probably, I mean. I don’t know. I just figured he was afraid I’d call and his floozy of a mistress would answer and find out he was married.’

‘When did you last see him? In person, that is?’

‘January.’ She was now rolling the cigarette between two pinching fingers, rubbing it down until the ends began squeezing out and flaking off. She was anxious. ‘Maybe I shoulda seen it coming. Him going AWOL, that is. He hadn’t been right for ages, but recently, it had just been getting worse and worse.’

‘What was getting worse?’

‘His moods. Episodes. PTSD, whatever the hell it was, he never saw anyone about it.’

‘What do you mean? What was he like?’

Mrs Murray drew up her defences. ‘You have to understand, detectives, I know that man better than anyone. Knew each other as teenagers. Even back then, I knew I was going to marry him. And things were good. We were good. I didn’t want him going to Afghanistan—he was a CMT with the RAMC, see—and I told him so. His father had just died, and he inherited some property and a little windfall, and I told him, now we can start a future, a proper one. Get a job in a surgery or hospital, right here at home. Ride high on the wave, you know? But Bill, he had his mind set on going. And he said when he shipped out, he said we were strong enough to last the distance. Come what may. So he comes home, and we get married, and I get pregnant, and I think it’s all going to be good, you know? But war messes with a man’s head. I didn’t let myself see it, let alone say it. But when he came home, I knew he wasn’t the same man who had kissed me goodbye.’

‘Was he violent?’

‘God no. Not with me, not with the baby. Not when the second one came along. He just got into these black moods sometimes where he wouldn’t talk, couldn’t stand to be in the house, just closed me out completely. Early on, he tried to hide it behind this mask of false cheer, it drove me insane. Bill can’t fake a smile. Eventually, things seemed to be getting back to normal. Like he was getting over it, or through it, or whatever it was he needed to do.’ She sniffed. ‘Then I found out he was just looking for comfort somewhere else. With someone else. Lots of someone elses.’
The cigarette was practically disintegrated, leaving behind a yellow stain on her fingertips.

‘Jesus, it was months and months of that. But we were working through it, you know? He made me promises. I thought he was keeping them. Then, last year, he started getting, I dunno . . . jittery again. Couldn’t sleep. In and out of bed all night, it drove me mad. Didn’t eat much. He was biting his nails down so much his fingers were raw and bleeding all the time. Started drinking like a sailor. I kept saying, Bill, you’re killing yourself, you need help! But when had he ever listened to me?’ She fixed Lestrade with an imperious eyes. ‘So is it really so strange I would think him dead when coppers show up on my doorstep?’

The page of Lestrade’s notepad filled, and he flipped it to keep going. ‘I’m going to need you to be a little more specific about the time line here, Mrs Murray.’

‘Frances. Please.’

‘Frances. You said, last year he started getting jittery. When last year?’

She thought, closed her eyes as though to see better, but shook her head. ‘I dunno. Summer? Early summer? I dunno.’

‘What do you mean by “jittery”?’ Donovan asked.

‘Nothing crazy, nothing to call a paddy wagon about. But you know. Little things. Like I said. A woman has a keen sense for when something’s amiss, and holy hell, the house reeked of it. Something was wrong. But I couldn’t tell you what. Then he disappeared for two days in October, and I really thought he had offed himself. I did phone the police on that occasion. But he came home on his own.’ She snorted and looked out the window. ‘Yelled at me for calling the coppers, said I was overreacting.’

‘October,’ Donovan repeated, and the significance wasn’t lost on Lestrade.

‘That’s what I said.’

Mrs Murray leant two elbows into the table, massaging her temples with her middle fingers.

‘And he didn’t disappear again until January?’

She nodded. ‘He was already in a bad way. All throughout Christmas, he was hell. Snapping at me, snapping at the kids. The slightest upset would set him off. Then an old army buddy of his died. I think that’s what cracked him. It was on the morning news. Suddenly, he was out the door and . . . that was it.’

Lestrade scratched the words death of colleague into the pad. ‘Died in combat?’

‘Worse. Bloke was murdered.’

His pen stopped scratching. ‘Oh?’

‘Awful thing. Strung up in a tree, I heard. One of those Slash Man killings.’

Donovan started. ‘Sam Jefferies?’

Mrs Murray gave an affirming nod. ‘Shook Bill pretty badly. I saw it on his face.’

‘Your husband knew Sam Jefferies?’
‘That’s what I said. Mate from his army days. Why?’

Lestrade quickly reviewed everything he knew about Sam Jefferies of Hackney. He knew the man had also been CMT. Upon returning from Afghanistan in 2008, he had worked as a paramedic, but mental instability had eventually led to homelessness. Jefferies fitted the profile of other men Moran had selected as victims or perpetrators, but loosely, and eventually it had been revealed that, more than anything, he had been chosen to die because of his name. His initials. Other than that, there was no apparent connection to ex-soldier Moran. Nor, he had believed, to John Watson.

But now, Bill Murray. How did he fit this strange picture?

He sidestepped Mrs Murray’s question with one of his own. ‘Did Bill ever talk about John Watson?’

Mrs Murray seemed to sense larger schemes at work—Lestrade could see it in her eyes. Mention of Sam Jefferies, and in the next breath the Slash Man and John Watson?

‘Oh lord,’ she said. ‘Something has happened to Bill, innit?’

‘Was he aware of what happened to John last October?’

‘Well, I—’ She looked distressed, and at a loss for how to answer. ‘It was all over the news, wasn’t it? You’d have to be blind and deaf not to know about it.’

‘But did Murray talk about it? He knew John, after all. He must have talked about it.’

‘Not with me, he didn’t. They were friends, back in the day, but as far as I knew, they weren’t close. I never even met John, and I don’t think Bill had seen or spoken to him for years.’ She paused, then seemed to remember something. With closed eyes, she shook her head. ‘But when he went missing . . . I read about it in the paper, you know? And to Bill, I says, you don’t think that’s the same John Watson, do you? And Bill, he says, no, no, there are dozens of John Watsons. But then it comes out that it is the John Watson he knows, and I told Bill, I says, it’s John! Your mate John Watson! And before you know it, we’re reading about what had happened to him, you know, things like kidnapping and torture and Sherlock Holmes, and Bill, he doesn’t say much, but he says, I should have let the bastard die.’ She rushed to explain. ‘That is, when he was shot. In Afghanistan. So he wouldn’t have had to go through all that. You know. You know what I’m saying? That’s all he meant.’

‘I’m sure it was,’ said Donovan.

They continued to probe for details about Murray’s behaviour and activities, to suss out information about past haunts or offhand but meaningful comments. They tried to link Murray to Moran. But when it became clear that Mrs Murray had nothing more to offer, they conceded that it was time to go.

‘Thank you very much for your time, Mrs Murray,’ said Donovan, rising. ‘We should let you get back to your baking. Lestrade.’

Mrs Murray stood too, anxiously wringing her hands. ‘Is he in trouble, then? In danger?’

Slowly, Lestrade put the notebook away. ‘Let’s not jump to the worst. I’m sure he’s fine.’

‘Because he’s dead. The Slash Man, yeah? He died.’

‘That he most certainly did.’
'But will you still be looking for my Bill?'

Pulling a card from his pocket, he passed it over to her. ‘If you think of anything else. Or if you hear from him. You just give me a call, okay?’

She nodded numbly, a flour-dusted hand accepting the card. Lestrade wondered how long before it was lost in the detritus.

***

The server stole the bowl of sugar packets and creamers from an empty adjacent table and placed it between the two steaming mugs of coffee. ‘Anything else?’

‘This is fine, thanks,’ said Lestrade, helping himself to a creamer, and the server flashed the obligatory smile and left them to themselves.

‘Well,’ said Donovan, leaving her mug to cool, ‘if she wasn’t suspicious as all hell.’

‘Mm.’ Lestrade stirred the creamer into the coffee.

‘What are you thinking?’ she pressed, never one for small talk. ‘This Murray fellow, victim or perp?’

‘Too early to say.’

‘My money’s on perp.’

‘Oh?’

She nodded sharply, then rested arms on the café table and leant in. ‘Man appears in a photograph with Everett Stubbins, a known conspirator. He’s a former military compadre, but he doesn’t say a word to John that whole night. Then, he pretends not to know or care about a missing John Watson —’

‘Pretends?’

‘Of course, pretends! I hear that a John Smith has disappeared and it makes the news, and I think about every John Smith I ever met! For months, the man is jittery, unsettled, moody, distant. Sounds like guilty behaviour to me.’

‘Or fear.’

Donovan’s jaw set squarely, but she didn’t reply. It was her way of acknowledging an alternative.

‘Whatever he is, he’s connected. The question is, how? How? What does he know? Why won’t he say? Why did it take Sam Jefferies’ death to scare him into hiding?’

‘And how do we pull him out?’

He pointed his spoon at her and gave her a meaningful look. ‘Exactly.’ Then he set it down on top of his serviette, blew over the rim of his mug, and sipped. The heat scalded the tip of his tongue. ‘Make it a priority, yeah?’

‘Just me?’

‘I need you running point on this. Assemble a team, delegate tasks, the whole tamale. The sooner
we find Bill Murray, the sooner we get answers. Probably to questions we haven’t even thought to ask.’ In his mental list of priorities, he moved a review of the Sam Jefferies murder to the front of the queue.

Donovan placed a finger alongside the mug, gauging the temperature. ‘And you?’

Lestrade was going for a sugar packet now. ‘An attempt was made on the life of one of the most powerful men in Britain. I think I’ll have my hands full.’ He ripped the packet and poured the crystals into his coffee. ‘Ultimately, I think we’ll find we’re still working the same case, just from different angles. So keep me up to date, yeah?’

‘I expect the same from you.’

‘Of course.’

‘Good. Let’s start with this mystery woman, then. Anthea.’ Donovan at last picked up her mug, and over the rim her piercing stare matched the shade of her unsweetened coffee. ‘Everything you know about her, and what you think happened last night.’

For a few seconds, he let the silence drag out. It was no longer a question of how much to share. Not with Sally Donovan. This was a woman who had proved herself more capable and trustworthy than any other officer he had ever worked with. She was smart and tenacious, discreet when he needed her to be discreet, and bold when he himself did not feel bold. He felt lucky to have her at his side, especially now that Mycroft Holmes was out of action. It was as though the general had fallen, and before he was ready, he was thrust at the head of the army to lead the assault, only to find that Donovan had followed him to the front line, musket at the ready and awaiting the order to charge.

He picked up a menu.

‘This may take a while,’ he said. ‘Might as well order a sandwich.’

***

She was almost to the lifts—juggling jacket and satchel in one hand a coffee and keys in the other—when she heard her name shouted from the conference room.

‘Michaela!’

Nearly dropping her coffee, Michaela Warner stopped short and spun around, angling back the way she had come. From outside the conference room’s large window-walls, she could see Larry Heinrich standing hands akimbo, watching the mounted TV screens, along with three other reporters. Dodging interns and copyeditors, she pushed into the conference room to join them.

‘Why are we only hearing about this now?’ Mr Heinrich threw an arm at the TV.

Michaela took a few seconds to get her bearings. CTV News London on one screen, the BBC on another, ITV on the third, all running footage of the same event: John Watson being hounded on the street by reporters, John Watson trying to turn his face away from the cameras, John Watson losing his temper and attacking a cameraman’s equipment. And at the bottom of the screen, scrolling by at an urgent pace, the breaking news: *Attack on Baker Street lands Sherlock Holmes in hospital*. Snippets of the report struck Michaela’s ears:

. . . *Sherlock Holmes fighting for his life* . . .
‘The Sherlock Holmes story is *your* story, Michaela. Breaking news, and you’re still in the building?’

Her mouth fell open, not sure what to say. This was the first she had heard about an attack on Baker Street! ‘I was on my way out the door,’ she protested. ‘I’ve an interview scheduled with one of the jurors, Matilda Wil—’

‘Oh no, you haven’t!’ barked the editor-in-chief. Mr Heinrich’s face had gone purple, a mixture of aggravation and excitement that only a news chief could express to its fullest capacity. ‘You’re getting on this story! You pull your magic strings and get the real story, the story no one else is getting. Tap your contacts. Talk to whoever you have to—police, doctors . . .’ His eyes brightened with a thought. ‘You get a statement from John Watson himself, and I’ll promote you to senior reporter before next pay day.’

‘I—’

‘Don’t just stand there looking like it’s your first day! Get out there! Go! Get me that story!’

Having no more need of caffeine, she dropped her coffee on the conference table and near as bolted to the lifts, using her freed thumb to start scrolling through the news briefs on her phone. Two minutes old, twelve minutes old, twenty-one. Still new, still fresh, all repetitions of each other. She wasn’t too late. There was still time to claim the story.

**Friday, April 17, 2015**

The doctor had just finished giving his orders to the nurse for the next twelve hours of care. At last, he addressed Sherlock, who stood anxiously on the other side of Mycroft’s hospital bed.

‘One of our primary concerns,’ he said, ‘is getting him to breathe on his own. The cardiopulmonary bypass was successful, and he seems to be responding well to the charcoal haemoperfusion. His blood pressure, heart rate, and oxygen levels are still being controlled for, but I’m optimistic on those counts.’

‘How long until he wakes?’ Sherlock was trying not to fidget, but he ceaselessly drummed his fingernails into the skin of his palms.

‘We’ll start weaning him off the sedatives and opiates after a full seventy-two hours and see how he responds. But it may be longer, especially if he’s not breathing on his own. The damage may be more extensive that we originally assessed. Like I said, Mr Holmes, I’m optimistic. But I make no guarantees. It would be best if you were prepared for, well, all possible circumstances.’

All possible circumstances shimmered before his face: full recovery was dimmest, overshadowed by the likelihoods of brain damage, paralysis, and—

‘Do you know if your brother has an advance directive?’

Sherlock blinked. ‘What?’

‘A living will. There’s no need for it just yet, or for a while. But if it comes to it, we should know how to proceed, and you’ll need time to prepare.’
‘Prepare,’ Sherlock snapped. ‘You want me pull the plug on my own brother?’

‘I don’t, Mr Holmes.’ The doctor nodded to the insensate man between them. ‘But would he?’

***

It had been forty-two hours, and Sherlock hadn’t slept. Instead, last night he had paced, and waited, and wrestled with his guilty conscience for having landed Mycroft in hospital and driven John away. Now, he sat glaring, arms folded and one leg crossed over as he waited impatiently at Mycroft’s bedside, where he had been since morning, when the nurses had allowed him back into the ICU.

‘You’re an arsehole, you know that? A moron, to land yourself in here, and a bastard to stay. An utter arsehole.’

He lifted his eyes to the monitors but detected no change. The machines continued their mechanical tune, uninterrupted.

One of the nurses had suggested he talk to Mycroft, despite his vegetative state. It wasn’t that he was unfamiliar with the literature. Neurorehabilitation was a well-established therapy in which, it was believed, the sound of loved ones’ voices registered in the long-term memory and language centres of the brain, stimulating awareness and speeding recovery. In other words, waking up. Since studying it in recent months, at a time when he was curious about the effects of one’s voice on a sleeping individual, Sherlock had even indulged the foolish belief that it was hearing Sherlock’s voice that had brought John out of his post-convent coma. It had certainly helped with the dreams.

So he did not doubt, necessarily, that it might be effective now. It was just, he hated doing it. Like this. He hated talking to those he loved as they lay defeated on his account. Too often, he found himself at the bedside of the dying.

He wanted Mycroft to quip back, roused by his insults and ready to spar. Instead, he lay insentient, pale and poisoned, a poor visage of the hale, indestructible demigod Sherlock had both resented and strived to impress for the whole of his recollection.

‘Bloody barmpot,’ he tried next. ‘Corpulent codger.’

Nothing.

The day was aging. Visiting hours had expired, but they hadn’t asked him to leave. It was understood that his was a special case. There was security and surveillance of higher calibre than there’d been twelve hours ago, and Sherlock had not slept properly since his midnight arrival, but there was no removing him. So when they weren’t testing Mycroft’s blood for traces of the aconite or changing the catheter bag or recording the monitor readings, they left Sherlock alone at his brother’s side.

‘You know,’ he said, bringing joined hands to a point just above his chin, ‘you should never have left your lofty tower to dabble where we mere mortals play. How imprudent. You were supposed to be the smart one.’

Quite unaccountably, his lip began to quiver, and he covered it with a hand and squeezed his eyes shut until the moment had passed. Then he lowered his hands to his lap where one latched itself to the other and began to scratch. He noticed, wrenched his hands apart, and shot to his feet.

‘Damn you, Mycroft,’ he seethed. ‘You’re better than this. You’re better than her! You don’t get to
leave now, not like this. I need you. There. Are you happy? I said it. I mean it. I can’t fight them on
my own, I’m not clever enough. I’m not strong enough. I’m not enough. I thought I was, and I was
wrong. You said . . . you said I should have come to you. When I was dead. For help. And I said I
didn’t need your help. But it was a lie. I knew it even as I said it. I just . . . I couldn’t, Mycroft. I
was dying out there, Moriarty was defeating me every day, and I couldn’t turn to you, I couldn’t
tell you I was alive, I couldn’t show you just one more way I had failed and disappointed you. I
know I’m not . . .’ He shook his head, regretful. ‘I’m not who you wanted me to be. I don’t know if
I can ever be that. But I still . . . need you.’

His hand was on Mycroft’s arm, just above the wrist and mindful of the cannulas and blood
pressure monitors. The skin was cool and dry, no longer fevered, but there was no reaction to his
touch, no jumping skin, no twitch of a nerve. But beneath his fingers, Sherlock thought he felt a
ridge along the skin.

He looked down. A line of red looped Mycroft’s wrist, chafed red as though by thin, metal wire.
His eyes snapped to the other arm and found the same redness, the same swelling. It had not been
there before. Hurrying around to the other side of the bed, he took up the arm to examine it more
closely, but his vision was blurring with tears. ‘No,’ he breathed. ‘It can’t be. It can’t.’

He looked at Mycroft’s face to find his lips cracked and scabbed, nose off-centre, bruises scattered
across the skin. And then a spot of red, bright and wet, in the centre of his chest. It bloomed larger,
rapidly soaking through the hospital gown, until it revealed a pattern: the letters IOU, bleeding into
one another, one great crimson stain.

Sherlock thrust his hands over his brother’s chest to stop the bleeding and cried out, ‘Help! A
doctor, now!’

The door flew open, admitting first the security guards, then a nurse, and at last the on-call doctor.

‘He’s bleeding! He’s bleeding!’

‘Please step back, Mr Holmes.’ The doctor rushed to Mycroft’s side, and Sherlock fell back several
steps as the nurses crowded in.

‘God, help him,’ he whispered.

‘Where? Where’s the bleeding?’

Sherlock blinked. ‘What?’

One of the nurses turned from the monitor. ‘Haemodialysis readings are stable, Dr Freiburg.’

‘Ventilator output normal,’ said another.

‘Any new brain activity?’

‘EEG pattern holding for the last five hours.’

Sherlock looked down at his hands. Dry. Uncoloured. And then at Mycroft again, surrounded by
nurses and doctors—still wan and ghastly, but otherwise . . . untouched. There were no marks on
his face, no chafing of his wrists, no blood smeared across his chest. It hadn’t been real.

‘I thought . . .’ he began.

‘Mr Holmes, you look unwell.’
One of the nurses took his arm and started walking him to the door. In a stupor, he allowed himself to be led away, but he watched Mycroft over his shoulder until the door swung closed behind him, and the guarding officers resumed their positions.

‘Have you eaten today?’ she asked him, guiding him out of the ICU.

‘No.’

‘Drunk water?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘When was the last time you slept?’

He couldn’t think well enough to answer. The wrists, the blood, the scars—how could he have imagined all that?

‘Mr Holmes, I’m going to ask your boyfriend to take you home so you can eat and rest up. Okay?’

Her words jarred some of the dust from the shelves. ‘What?’

‘He’s been in the waiting room for hours. Said not to bother you.’

‘John? He’s not exactly . . .’

‘Excuse me,’ she said, correcting herself. ‘Partner.’

They reached the waiting room, and she let go of his arm. John was sitting alone. The overnight bags were tucked under a chair, and the cane was back. Sherlock was sure he hadn’t brought it with him the first time. He must have returned to the flat.

John’s head came up, and his eyes widened when he saw Sherlock’s face.

‘Sherlock?’ Rising swiftly to his feet, he limped over, looking anxiously between Sherlock and the nurse. ‘Mycroft, is he—?’

‘He’s fine, Dr Watson,’ the nurse said, giving Sherlock’s arm a gentle pat to reinforce for whom the reassurance was really meant. ‘We’re taking real good care of him. But I think it’s time Mr Holmes went home and slept.’

John nodded once, and she took her leave of them. Sherlock watched her go, wanting to follow after. It wasn’t right that he should leave Mycroft alone, nurses or no nurses, guards or no guards. It was too risky, he was too vulnerable, and what if something were to happen while he was gone? What if he slippéd away suddenly, or what if he awoke and needed to tell him something? What if the stranger returned, an assassin, and no one saw him in time, no one stopped him?

‘Sherlock.’

John touched his arm, drawing his attention, a slow turn of the head.

‘What happened? You don’t look so good.’

‘I . . . I don’t know. I’m just . . .’

With a soft look of understanding, and without pressing him for more answers, John nodded again. ‘Okay. We should go. Yeah? Unless . . . Do you want me to stay? I’ll stay.’
But he flinched against the thought. He couldn’t articulate why, exactly. Leaving John behind was logical, practical even, and an answer to why he had not allowed himself to leave. Mycroft wouldn’t be alone. Someone he trusted would be here, just in case. And yet . . . Sherlock needed John, too.

Without his saying a word, John understood. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘I’m going to call Lestrade. He’ll make sure Mycroft isn’t on his own, that he’s safe. And you and me . . . We need to go home.’
The Last Domino

SATURDAY, APRIL 18, 2015

When the knife plunged and the blood burst from a slit throat like a fountain, John awoke with a jolt.

He flung the smothering duvet so far it landed to the floor. Then he swung his legs opposite, planting them apart and doubling over, feeling the need to vomit, a powerful wave of nausea traveling from toes to gut to throat. His mouth stretched and stomach clenched. He retched, but nothing happened. Again, and the same. Chills replaced the flushing heat in the space of a racing heartbeat. Trembling, he clapped a hand across his mouth and waited for the images to recede and the fit to pass.

John breathed.


The front and back of his t-shirt were both soaked in hot sweat, and though his skin was still feverish, the sharpness of night air against his wet skin made him shiver.


John made two attempts before he managed to stand, legs still shaking. Glancing at the clock, he read the early morning hour: 02.29. He hadn’t been asleep for very long, then. But he should have anticipated this, exactly this. A new attack, a blatant threat, stressful encounters and reignited anxiety—it could only lead to nightmares.

The pain in his leg also reignited, but he ignored it and didn’t go for the cane. Instead, by the glow of the night light plugged into a power point near the bedroom door, he hobbled over to the sliding door, twisted the handle, and stepped out onto the fire escape where a rush of fresh air cooled his skin and cleared his airways. Again: one, two, three, four, five. And again, deep breaths, born in the belly. He let the chill wash over him and dispel the nausea, and only when it had passed and he could no longer keep the shivering at bay did he return indoors and close the door again, twisting the lock. Then he tugged the cord to turn on a dim lamp.

It still startled him, sometimes, the room as it now was. It was like living in a hotel room, a stranger’s room, not his own. But he supposed the sensation that it didn’t belong to him would pass, in time. It was half welcome, half not. He was grateful, he really was, for Dr Thompson’s solution and Mycroft’s redesign, joint efforts to keep him from reliving the nightmare attack that had taken place within these four walls not six weeks before. For the most part, it worked. He had not been driven from his home by the memory of the man who had abused and beaten and degraded him so thoroughly, and he felt empowered whenever he spent a night here without incident. But he still stopped short upon crossing the threshold, its unfamiliar arrangement and colour palette reminding him of exactly why it was unfamiliar; that is, why it was made to be so.

More importantly, Mycroft couldn’t redesign the inner walls of his mind, and in sleep, he returned there. And if not to his memories of the Slash Man throwing him upon his own bed and looming over him, then to the convent, and the hellish things that had transpired there. When he closed his eyes, blood flowed liked a river.

He kept them open. His anxiety was a strong five on a ten-point scale. He didn’t want to push into
the red zone.

Above the dresser, he caught sight of himself in the mirror, and beside the mussed up hair and haunted eyes, he noticed the wet ring darkening the collar and spreading to his stomach. The jersey cloth stuck to his skin, in front and in back. That’s when he felt the perspiration dripping down his chest and dampening his armpits. Turning away from the mirror, he pulled the sweat-soaked t-shirt over his head and tossed it to the laundry. Then he padded barefoot to the wardrobe for a fresh one, but waited to put it on until his skin dried.

He was incredibly thirsty.

Mycroft had fitted his bedroom with a mini fridge, and John stocked it with water bottles. He grabbed one now and sucked it down so fast he was gasping for air by the time he had emptied it. His thirst was slaked, for the moment, but sleep had fled. He was wide awake, restless, and needed to calm himself down to a four at least. He couldn’t do that here. So he left the room for the kitchen downstairs. Three o’clock wasn’t too late, or, for that matter, too early, for a strong cup of tea.

He half expected (or maybe hoped) to find Sherlock in the sitting room when he reached it. A single lamp had been left on, but the room was empty, and silent, the violin tucked away in its case and the computer screens dark. It was unfair of him to wish Sherlock were not sleeping, when it was Sherlock who so badly needed it. But John couldn’t deny that he wanted the company, just now. Just to dispel the ghosts.

Letting the sitting room lamp serve as his light, he proceeded to the kitchen, still counting his breaths, as he silently set the kettle. He stood at the sink, rubbing his eyes, breathing into his hands, and listening to the hiss of the electric kettle as the water began to steam. But something distracted him. From the direction of Sherlock’s room, he heard an arrested shout, a high-pitched moan, like a whimper or a shaky sob. His head snapped around.

Swiftly, he limped bare-footed across the linoleum and down the hallway, looking for the thin line of light outlining the door to indicate that Sherlock was awake, but the hallway was as pitch. He didn’t knock, didn’t call out, just reached for the door knob and pushed into the bedroom.

Sherlock lay in bed, swathed in blankets. Curled on his side with his back to the door, he appeared to be sleeping. But then John saw his leg jerk beneath the covers and his shoulders cringe, and from his mouth, pressed into the pillow, he heard the fearful shout again. Dreaming.

John hit the light, but when the sudden change in environment didn’t snap Sherlock awake immediately, he switched the light off and tried again. He flicked it three times before Sherlock gasped and flung himself onto his back, eyes wide and wakeful. Only then did John fully enter the room.

‘You’re all right,’ John said soothingly, coming to the edge of the bed. ‘Just lie still a moment. Catch your breath.’

Sherlock’s wraithlike skin shone with sweat. He flung an arm across his eyes to block out the light while he struggled to maintain deep, even breaths. He licked his lips, then pursed them together to keep them from trembling. Though half his face was obscured, John watched the colour in his cheeks change from white to red. He was ashamed to be seen like this.

‘Water,’ said John. ‘One second.’ And he left to give Sherlock a moment to recover himself.

When he came back, a tall glass of water in hand (he had turned off the kettle, deciding he had no
need for tea after all), Sherlock was sitting on the edge of the bed, hands on knees, bracing. But he accepted the water and drank it all down.

John took the glass back, set it on the nightstand. Then, judging Sherlock would not object, he sat beside him. The dip in the mattress leant their shoulders together.

For a long moment, neither man spoke. It was enough to just sit side by side, while the visions that beset them drained into memory where they belonged. But then John noticed that Sherlock’s gaze was fixed on John’s hands, his wrists, which rested in his lap. He resisted the urge to cover them, and when he didn’t, Sherlock hesitantly reached a hand over and traced the scar with a thumb. John let him. Then, almost inaudibly, like he didn’t mean for John to hear, Sherlock whispered, ‘Just a dream.’ Then he withdrew his hand.

‘You want to talk about it?’

‘No,’ said Sherlock softly. His gaze fell away, and his hands slipped to hang between his knees, hiding.

‘Okay.’

‘John.’

‘Yes?’

But Sherlock seemed not to know what to say. In the ensuing quiet, John wondered whether he should say something himself, question him, press him, or just leave. It was hard to know what Sherlock wanted, or needed, most.

From personal experience, he thought he understood the conflict. After terrible visions and waking nightmares had done their damage and slunk off again to the shadows, John craved both solitude and company, and for a long time, he had believed those two things incompatible. But they weren’t. Not really. When it came to Sherlock, somehow, inexplicably, having him near at hand, and only him, rendered John both solace in solitude and comfort in company, all at once. Sherlock’s presence didn’t disrupt his privacy, and yet it was still a presence. He supposed, in a moment like this, just maybe, he was the same for Sherlock.

Nevertheless, Sherlock had yet to reach such a realisation. After several long, quiet minutes, self-conscious, he murmured, ‘You don’t have to stay.’

‘Would you rather I go?’

‘No.’

‘Well then.’

‘You changed shirts.’

John smiled, just a quirk. Of course, Sherlock would have noticed.

‘You too, then.’

‘Yeah. Me too.’

‘Look at us. Messes, the lot.’

‘That we are.’
But again, Sherlock had nothing to follow it up with. There was a question in there somewhere, a conversation waiting to happen, but he couldn’t seem to find the way forward. Maybe he didn’t want to give it a voice. Or maybe he didn’t even know what it was. But then, after another long silence, Sherlock ventured to speak, though softly, like he was treading through broken glass.

‘What was it like for you when Harry died?’

John should have anticipated this, enough to brace. But as it was, the question rocked him. He tried not to let it show, and the only evidence for the strike to the solar plexus was the heart that forgot to beat. A long, slow sigh of air pressed from his lungs. Of course, such a thing would be on Sherlock’s mind tonight. Maybe he should have brought it up first. But it was never easy, talking about Harry.

‘It was,’ he began, fumbling helplessly for a word that could capture it all; but failing that, he ended up stuttering the most obvious of them all: ‘hard.’

‘How did it happen?’

Sherlock knew the broad strokes of it. A night drinking. A car crash. But, John supposed, that wasn’t really what he was asking.

‘Oh, you know how it was with Harry,’ he said with a sigh. ‘She’d been fighting depression for years. Not to mention alcoholism. The two are so often bosom pals. But she wouldn’t let me help. She wouldn’t let anyone help. She never had. The last time I saw her . . .’ He hung his head, remembering. ‘She was coming off a bender, the kind where she drank everything in the house and started throwing things at the walls, breaking glasses, screaming, crying. Neighbours called the police. Thought it was domestic abuse. Turns out, they were right, in their own way. *Family of one, hurts self.* When the police showed up, she was so far gone she hit one of them, so they arrested her. Then they called me.’

He remembered where he had been when he got the call. He should have been asleep, but he wasn’t sleeping much those days. It had gone two in the morning, and there he was, in his scarcely furnished bedsit, sitting in the dark by the window and looking out into the black world. He didn’t remember what he had been thinking about, maybe because he hadn’t been thinking at all. Harry hadn’t been the only one fighting demons back then.

‘They didn’t tell me what she’d done,’ John continued, ‘only that they were holding her on bail. I caught a train to Bristol first thing in the morning. She told me she’d had friends over. It was a lie, but that’s what she said. That there’d been an argument, it got out of control, one thing led to another. She swore she hadn’t had a drop, that she was four months sober. But I could smell it on her, the sour breath, the body odour. Drunks don’t know that their sweat reeks of alcohol, too, but it does. She smelt like a tankard. But I didn’t call her bluff. I should have, maybe. Let her sit in jail and sober up, but I didn’t. I emptied my savings, paid her bail, and took her home. God, I even offered to stay. I was ready to leave London behind for good in that moment, and I would have done, had she let me. But she didn’t want me. That’s what she said. We argued, and she wanted me out of her life. So I left. I . . .’

His voice strained a little with emotion, and he cleared his throat to keep on going. ‘That was October, the October after you . . . And well, I tried to see her at Christmas, but she wouldn’t answer my calls. She didn’t have anybody, you know? Her final Christmas in this world, and she
didn’t have anybody. Neither of us did, and she still wouldn’t see me, her own brother. When New Year’s rolled around, I swore that I was done with it. I told myself—’ His voice closed off completely for a moment. He grunted, like restarting an engine. It was important that he get through it. ‘I promised myself that if she wanted my help, she would have to come begging for it, because I was done putting myself out there for her, only to be buffeted away, time and time again. It was my goddamn New Year’s resolution, to cut off my sister, the only family I had left.’ He let out a humourless huff of laughter.

‘John, I—’

‘Six weeks later, I got that damn phone call.’

He might as well have been living his life on repeat. Once again, he had been awake in his lonely bedsit, looking out the window. Snow was the on the ground this time, but that was the only thing that had changed. And this time, it wasn’t the police station, but the city morgue.

‘Harry had been out drinking, per her usual. And as usual, she was alone. No one to stop her, say she’d had too much, take her keys from her. So she got behind the wheel. Less than a mile later, she sped through a red light, and a lorry smashed into the driver’s side door. Legs, pelvis, ribs, all crushed to splinters, and a skull lacerated from the frontal lobe down to her ear. They tried to save her in surgery, but she didn’t stand a chance. Not with how bad she was. Didn’t last fifteen minutes on that table. That’s what they told me. I made them tell me.’

‘How do you live with it?’ asked Sherlock. ‘Knowing . . .’

John looked at him, not fully understanding. ‘Knowing what?’ That he had failed her? That had he tried harder or loved her more, he might have saved her in the end?

‘That you’re the last of your family.’

He winced at a pang deep down inside, but he couldn’t talk about that. For now, he’d said enough. Besides, in the end, this wasn’t really about Harry.

‘I’m so sorry I wasn’t there,’ Sherlock continued. ‘I should have been. I should have . . .’

John reached around Sherlock’s shoulders to splay a hand across his back. ‘He’s still here, Sherlock. Mycroft is still alive.’

‘I’ve destroyed them all. They’re all dead because of me.’

‘Stop. You have to stop this. You can’t think that way.’

Sherlock’s shoulders quaked and his head fell into one hand. John tightened his arm around his body, and with his opposite hand squeezed Sherlock’s leg, drawing him closer.

‘You’re not the last. He’s fighting!’ John whispered fiercely. ‘The aconitine is gone, out of his system. The body is healing itself, because that’s what bodies do. He’s already made it through the worst of it. He just needs time. Do you hear me, Sherlock? She doesn’t win.’

Sherlock nodded, but it looked like a tremendous effort, a desire to believe John’s words against inner storm clouds that blackened his hope.

‘You’re not alone in this.’

There’s something wrong with me.’

John was on the cusp of denying it, or reassuring Sherlock that this was normal. Normal people feared for their loved ones. Normal people grieved when tragedy struck. But the platitude rang hollow, even to him. Flat words of comfort, that’s all they were. Empty. Such sentiment wouldn’t have helped him when Harry died. It still wouldn’t. So it sure as hell wouldn’t help Sherlock. In fact, he doubted very much that anything he could say would help.

‘I think we’ve put this off long enough, don’t you?’ John said.

Sherlock didn’t answer.

‘In the morning, I’m going to make that call. Is that all right?’

Again, no response.

‘You have to tell me whether that’s all right.’

Sherlock closed his eyes, but he nodded. ‘All right. Make the call.’

**Sunday, April 19, 2015**

The Sam Jefferies files were stacked at the corner of Lestrade’s desk. It was Sunday morning, and he was making every member of his team work through the weekend, himself included. Somewhat surprising, he hadn’t heard a word of complaint about it, which was a tad unfortunate: he was in the mood to shout at someone. He’d read through these files twice already today, made three phone calls to the chief superintendent, and checked in with all his officers who were trying to put the pieces of Mycroft Holmes’ attempted murder together: the testimony of the doorman at Home Office, CCTV of the drop on Baker Street, the ferryman who had been paid off, and so on and so forth. But they were still miles away from zeroing in on Moran.

First thing that morning, he had stopped by St Mary’s for an update and to evaluate the security details he had reinforced the night before, as a special request from John. Now that it was day, he half expected to find both Sherlock and John there again, but instead, to his surprise, he found Anthea. Despite the plaster on her hand and other cuts and bruises, she seemed to be doing remarkably well, and was even dressed in a pencil skirt and matching jacket with her hair twisted into a severe knot at the nape of her neck. She told him in no uncertain terms that she was in charge of Mr Holmes’ safety and recovery.

‘I’m moving him to a more secure location,’ she announced. ‘I’ve already arranged for private medical staff and state-of-the-art equipment.’

‘Is it safe? Is he well enough to be moved?’

‘Well enough.’

‘Where are you taking him?’

‘I’ll contact you when the relocation process is complete.’

With a measure of uncertainty, he asked, ‘And the doctors are okay with this?’

‘It’s not their decision. But all are sworn to the strictest measures of secrecy. The official record is that Mycroft Holmes was never here.’ She seemed entirely unperturbed by the extraordinary circumstance she was proposing. She might as well have been ordering a get-well balloon.
Lestrade kept himself in check; balking didn’t look good on him. ‘You think that will fly?’

‘This isn’t the first time I’ve run an operation, Mr Lestrade. The press is already complying with the new narrative.’

He let out a rush of air and pushed a hand through his hair.

‘But we will need to talk soon,’ she said gravely, and he nodded because he understood. There were protocols in place. For both of them.

Now, he sat in his office at the Yard and worried a pen cap between his teeth, wondering how long they could stand to wait before putting those protocols into action.

Then Donovan flung his door wide, eyes alight with urgency, and his heart skipped excitedly. He dropped the pen, spit out the cap, and sat forward in his chair. ‘Got something?’

‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you. Unless you knew she was coming.’

‘She? She who?’

‘Angela.’

‘Angela?’ The respite of confusion vanished in a microsecond. Lestrade gasped so hard his chest hurt. ‘Angela Moss?’ Donovan’s forward-thrusting, hard-edged jaw was confirmation enough. ‘What the hell, what is she doing here!’

‘I’m just the alarm bell,’ said Donovan. ‘Ten seconds, boss.’

She pulled the door closed behind her, leaving Lestrade reeling.

He shot to his feet and looked wildly around his office. He had the bizarre urge to clean something. That, or barricade the door. But his seconds, just as Donovan promised, were ticking away, and suddenly, he saw her silhouette on the other side of the glass. Next moment, a sharp rapping, which proved to be mere precursor, not a request for permission.

Without waiting for an invitation, Lestrade’s ex-wife opened the door herself and strode into the room like it was her office, not his. Lestrade’s spine went rigid, and he tried to affect the look of one who hadn’t been thrown completely off his guard. Damn, he wished he hadn’t risen to his feet. He should have stayed in the chair, leant back, folded his arms, lifted his chin, narrowed his eyes, called security—

‘Hello, Greg.’

He shoved his hands in his pockets, trying to play it cool. ‘Angela.’

‘Surprised?’

‘Not at all. Weatherman did say we were in for gusting winds from the west.’ He tried to hide a smirk; she couldn’t know how pleased he was with himself for that one.

‘Cute.’ She swung her purse around in front of her body and invited herself to sit. Feeling foolish being left standing, Lestrade, too, resumed his chair, which, being on wheels, tried to slide away from him. He gripped the edge of the desk and forced himself still.

Angela tossed her wavy blonde hair over the shoulder of her severely cut burgundy blazer. ‘You’re looking well.’
‘Thank—’

‘For pushing fifty.’

‘—you.’ He bit his tongue. He was forty-seven, and she damn well knew it. And at forty-six, she was hardly one to talk.

‘Losing more colour on top, I see.’ With a finger, she indicated the silver streaking through his hair. ‘Stress of the job? I’ve seen your name in the paper an awful lot these past months. Ghastly stuff.’ She seemed not the least bit sincere. ‘Sounds like the Yard is struggling more than usual to keep its ducks in line.’

‘How did you get through security?’

She was wearing the visitor’s badge, but protocol dictated that he be contacted if a guest arrived, unannounced and without an appointment. He’d been sitting at his desk all morning, and the phone hadn’t rung once.

‘Matthew at the front. He knows me. Thinks we’re still married, and I let him think it.’ She simpered. ‘Getting on in years, isn’t he? Been here almost as long as you.’

Finally! He was going to get to shout at someone after all: a long, heated discussion with head of security about Matthew. After all, it was dangerous to let a harpy fly into the Yard without shackles.

‘I’ll make the staff aware of your concerns regarding security. And rest assured, it will be corrected so nothing like this’—he gestured to her, head to toe—‘will happen again.’

‘Charming, darling. You always were so charming.’

‘Why are you here, Angela?’

‘I’m here’—she dug into her purse and produced a folded manila envelope with a torn flap—‘because of this.’ She waved it in the air like a flag announcing her territory.

He knew what that envelope contained, exactly what. It was the document detailing the terms of their divorce. He couldn’t imagine why she had brought it, but she didn’t leave him to wonder long.

‘You’ve violated the terms,’ she said.

‘Horse shit. How?’

‘My solicitor has been keeping a close eye on my assets, as a good solicitor does, and on those belonging to my ex-husband. Fifty percent of everything, we agreed.’

His jaw dropped open in stunned imitation of a fish. ‘I already gave you fifty percent. Of everything. Bank accounts, savings, the car, furniture, even the DVD collection—’

‘Not the house.’

Lestrade blinked, taken aback. ‘You didn’t want the house. It’s right there in black ink, signed and notarized. You didn’t want the house.’

‘I don’t want the house. But word is, you’ve sold it. Liquidated. And I’m entitled to fifty percent of all assets acquired during the course of our marriage. We bought the house together. That means I
get fifty percent of its proceeds.’

He gaped even wider; he needed to regain control of his jaw. ‘You can’t be serious. The court determined that spousal maintenance was to last only two years. So as of last March, I’m done. You can’t wring any more money from me.’

‘This isn’t maintenance. This falls under divisible assets jointly owned during the marriage.’

Shaking his head in stupefaction, he could only say, ‘You said you didn’t want it.’

‘The only reason you ever had that property to begin with was because of me. Excellent condition, prime location, regular upkeep—that all came down to me. If it had been left to you, we would have thrown away money renting a grisly flat in the city. It’s only fair I get half the sales.’

‘But I paid for it! I paid for all of it, Angela! Fifty percent of what you took was fifty percent of all my earnings over twenty-five years! You never worked one damn day!’

Unruffled, she reached inside the envelope and produced a single sheet of paper. ‘A letter of intent from my solicitor,’ she said, ‘insisting on your compliance. You pay me what you owe me, and this doesn’t go to court. Then you get the clean break you always wanted. You should be glad you sold it under market value, or you’d owe me a lot more than this.’

She slid the letter across the desk. At the bottom of the page, bolded so as not to be overlooked, was a grand total of £347,689.24.

He held the sheet numbly in his hands. ‘I can’t afford this.’

‘Of course you can. You just sold a whole house!’

‘And what, you think I’m living on the streets?’

‘How you live is not my concern.’

‘Angela. Angela, please. Don’t do this. Don’t make this messy. You don’t need this.’

She returned the manila envelope to her bag and clipped it shut. ‘As you like it. Keep your phone handy, Greg. You’ll be getting a call from my solicitor shortly.’ She pushed to her feet.

‘No, come on now, sit down. Let’s talk about this. Let’s work it out, like two adults.’ God, he was pleading. He sounded so pathetic, and she was loving it.

She ignored the plea entirely and continued on as if he hadn’t said a word. ‘Oh, and one more thing.’ She unclipped the purse and pulled out her phone. ‘I stopped by the old love nest earlier today. Nostalgia, you know. Met the new tenants. They’re having the place cleaned again—you did leave it in quite the reprehensible state—and wouldn’t you know it, they found something in the crawlspace in the larder. Funny. I didn’t even know we had a crawlspace in the larder.’

Lestrade vision narrowed to a tunnel, and his heart sank like a town car in a lake.

She turned the phone for him to see a photo of a box, plated steel and about the size of a shoebox, locked on three sides. The blood drained from his face.

‘That’s mine,’ he said, voice strained, trying not to give anything away but already knowing his expression doomed him.

‘If it was found in that house, it’s mine too,’ she said snidely.
'No. Angela, you don’t understand. It’s . . . it’s . . .'

'Something you were hiding from me, clearly. How interesting. All those accusations during our hearings about all the secrets I kept from you, painting yourself as the golden boy of openness and fidelity, and yet’—she shook the phone at him—’you had your own secrets all along.’

'No—'

'What is it, Greg? Sex tapes of other women you shagged? Keys to a safety deposit box or storage locker you never reported on your taxes or disclosed during our settlement? Records of illicit activities? Coppers really are shady buggers.’

'No.’

'With new evidence of ways you failed me as a husband, I can demand a new settlement. Maybe I want sixty percent. Seventy-five. Courts really do hate emotionally abusive men.’

'Don’t be absurd, that thing has nothing to do with you, or us. Give it back to me.’

'Oh! You want it back?’

'Don’t play with me, Angela.’ He rose to his feet and pointed a stern finger at her. ‘Tell me where it is.’

'I don’t think I shall. Not until I see my three hundred and fifty thousand. In the meantime, I’ll keep fiddling with those locks. They’re serious business, those.’

'It’s not your business, and it’s not personal. It’s a police matter. Highly confidential.’

She laughed. ‘Going to play that card again, are you? You just love pulling that one. I’m an officer, Angela, I have a duty to the law. I’m a detective, Angela, and London needs me. Heh. Like you’re some bloody superhero. Fine. You want it, get a warrant, and then we’ll see.’

'I’m not fooling.’

'Neither am I.’

'Blackmail is a serious crime.’

'Then arrest me, Greg.’

She shoved the phone back inside her purse and abruptly left his office. Lestrade felt like he’d just been delivered a blow to the jaw. Slowly, he sank back to his chair and dragged his hands down his face. Then he spun toward the window, sweeping his arm across the desk and sending the Sam Jefferies files flying as he cursed with frustration.

'Fuck!’

**Monday, April 20, 2015**

'Good afternoon, Mr Holmes.’

Still wrapped in his Belstaff, collar high and buttons closed, Sherlock paused at the reception desk and read the nameplate: Naomi Mosaku. Their last encounter, he remembered, had not been exactly friendly, given his abruptness and state of panic, and he had left her scandalised. Today, however, she was all smiles as she handed him a clipboard.
'If you’d like to take a seat, just over there, and fill this out. Dr Thompson will see you shortly.'

His eyes raked the page quickly. On the first page, boxes for basic biographical information, including NHS number and alternative insurance providers, as well as emergency contact information. Flipping the page, though, revealed a survey: two tight rows of fifty-eight Y or N questions, everything from Do you have trouble falling asleep? to Do you often skip meals? to Have you ever thought of ending your own life?

‘No,’ he said, handing it back to her.

Naomi’s eyes widened with surprise. ‘It’s a standard form.’

‘You already have my name and phone number. That will do.’

‘It’s confidential, Mr Holmes. Only Dr Thompson will see your answers.’ Seeing the hardness on his face, she conciliated the standard requirements. ‘You can skip some of the questions, if you prefer.’

‘Tell her I’m here so we can get started.’

Then he stood there and waited, ignoring the cosy waiting area with its inane magazines and potted fern. Dr Thompson might have chosen a two-hundred-year-old apartment, modernised it, and refitted it for business with the hope of retaining something classic and homey to put her clients at ease, but Sherlock wasn’t fooled. It was unmistakably a backdrop meant to serve as veneer and distract from the true purpose of the therapist: to crack into one’s mind and rummage about for loose bolts. This wasn’t his first demolition site.

‘Mr Holmes is ready for his appointment,’ Naomi whispered tightly into the phone. Pause. Then she replaced it in the cradle and smiled forcibly up at him. ‘If you’ll follow me.’

It was entirely unnecessary to be escorted. The door was six feet away, and Dr Thompson was already expecting him. But with the blank pages in hand, Naomi stepped away from reception and led him anyway, knocking twice before turning the handle.

Ella Thompson was standing to greet him. She smiled and extended a hand, welcoming him, and he shook it to be polite. As he moved guardedly into the room, she took the clipboard from Naomi, and he watched their silent exchange—Naomi’s apologetic frown, Dr Thompson’s never-you-mind head shake—and closed the door. She set the clipboard on the desk also bearing the bust of Nefertiti in exchange for a notebook and pen.

‘There’s a coat stand by the door,’ she said, indicating with a nod.

‘I’m fine.’

She took a seat in a modern leather armchair near the tall, curtained windows and crossed a leg over. ‘I insist you remove your coat.’

His eyes narrowed. ‘Why?’

But she met his challenge with a frankness he did not expect. ‘To slow you down if you decide to run.’

Grudgingly, he removed his coat and scarf, and hung them on the rack.

Be decent to her, John had said. I like her.
'Thank you for seeing me so quickly,' he murmured. He unbuttoned his suitcoat and sat in the empty chair. He wondered passingly how many hours John had spent in this very chair, the things he had said, the things he couldn’t.

'It was kind of John to give up his appointment,’ she said. ‘But we’ll find a schedule that won’t compete with his.’

‘Mm,’ Sherlock grunted, noncommittally. He’d rather just give John back his hour and be done with it.

‘Now then. How would you like to begin?’

He blinked, almost flinched. Wasn’t that her job, to choose the entry point? ‘Excuse me?’

Ella waved her pen over the blank page of her notebook. ‘There are a few approaches we could take, although you’ve already ruled out the first. The questionnaire usually gets the ball rolling, easing us into the waters, but I see you would prefer a more direct methodology. So. Would you rather tell me what brought you here? Why now? Or would you prefer we talk about goals, what you want to get out of this session or in the long term?’

Sherlock took care not to shift and expose his discomfort. The visceral responses to even the thought of ever talking to a psychiatrist again were beginning to manifest, as he feared. Why had he sat? Why had he taken off his coat? Why had he let John make that phone call? Why the hell was he giving up so much of his power? Sure, she was ‘allowing’ him to choose the focus, the point of entry for the session, but he could imagine no conversation he was willing to have. If he explained about Mycroft being in hospital fighting for his life, she would want him to talk about the relationship between him and his brother, and pry until he got to the root of their mutual antagonism, which meant he would have to talk about their childhoods, which was very high on his list of topics to be left unexplored. If he mentioned the dreams, she would play interpreter of maladies and unravel the knot that would expose the true psychopath within. If he tried to deflect altogether and talk about John’s own touch-and-go recovery, she would put up roadblocks and cite client privilege, and they would be left at an impasse.

‘Mr Holmes,’ said Dr Thompson, once the quiet had dragged on for some time. He’d barely been aware; he was slowly retreating into his mind, a place that had once been a sanctuary but now seemed only a prison. ‘Sherlock.’

‘What?’

‘Why don’t you want to be here?’

Ah. One he could answer with fluency. He began with a scoff. ‘I don’t like psychiatrists.’

She registered no offence. ‘Why not?’

‘Psychiatry is soft science.’ He fixed her with a steady glare he knew others found intimidating. ‘I have no patience for it. Its study is the safety net of students who can’t hack it as medical doctors or chemists but are too proud to admit they really belong in the social sciences or liberal arts. Furthermore, it is the only branch of the so-called “sciences” that does not directly examine the object of its inquiry—the brain. It is the lesser cousin of neuro-science and the dressed-up aunt of fiction writers and advice columnists. It constantly changes theories, and its practices ride on cultural fads and political waves, and so in time are always proven false or ineffectual, thus illustrating that there is no true scientific method at work. Furthermore, all its data points are highly suspect when placed under scrutiny of more rigorous methods to establish proof. It is
difficult to muster respect for such a discipline.’

He waited for her to launch into a defence of her profession, to cite the advancement of psychiatry since its (horrifyingly recent) development, and to list off her own personal therapeutic successes. He was already preparing to continue his argument. It might be rather fun. A good distraction.

‘You didn’t answer the question,’ she said at last.

He furrowed his brow in consternation. ‘Of course I did. With devastating succinctness.’

‘You just told me you don’t like psychiatry. I want to know why you dislike the practitioners.’

Oh. She thought he was insulting her personally. He had meant to insult her only in broader terms. ‘I do not disrespect you,’ he amended. ‘I . . . appreciate how you have helped John.’

‘But you don’t believe I can help you.’

His teeth clacked together. This conversation was getting away from him.

‘So I’m not the first,’ she concluded. ‘How many have you been to, before me?’

‘Not relevant.’

‘How long since the last one?’

‘A long time.’

She stopped asking questions. She wrote nothing down.

*Don’t be a twat. She can’t help you if you’re being a twat.*

Sherlock felt a little mite of guilt nibbling away at him. He was being obstinate, and he knew it. And it was entirely unfair. After all, it wasn’t as though she had wrangled him into the chair. Not even John had done that. He had come to *her*. And yes, he was afraid of the things he might say, or discover, but he had come willingly. He needed help. He wanted it. His life couldn’t go on this way, not with someone else in control of his mind.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember John’s breathing exercises.

‘When I was a young child,’ he said, quickly, as though to get it over with, ‘there was a death in the family. An uncle. I’d never met him. The wake was . . . boring. Too many adults, too much civility. I ran away.’ It was strange saying these words. He’d never spoken them aloud before. Though sometimes, he thought about that day. From time to time. He didn’t know why, it was no big deal. Just a child’s memory of a day in the life. ‘Everyone left for the night, and they forgot about me. Mycroft too, which is the surprising part. I crawled into the closest thing to a bed I could find—a display casket. That’s where they found me. It upset them. *Them.* So that’s the first time I was taken to a shrink. Child psychologist. To make sure it hadn’t affected *me.*’

‘Had it?’

‘I was not a child easily spooked.’

‘I don’t mean sleeping in a casket. I mean, being left behind. Forgotten. Did it bother you?’

He shrugged. ‘Why should it?’
'It is not usual for feelings of abandonment to have a profound effect on a child. Repeated instances, especially in the formative years, have been linked to internalised beliefs of being unwanted and unloved, which can translate into isolation behaviours, or a tendency to disconnect, or an unwillingness to make meaningful attachments. Not an exact science.’ Then she gave him a knowing grin. He couldn’t help but smirk in return. Nevertheless, her words were burrowing themselves inside his brain.

‘How old were you?’

‘Four.’

‘That’s quite young. Yet you remember it well.’

‘My memory has always been sharp.’ It was an understatement. ‘But I do not count it as a significant event. And more to the point, neither did the therapist. He told my mother not to fret. I suppose I didn’t mind him all that much. Of the six, he was the most tolerable.’

‘Were you ever left like that again?’

Sherlock frowned as thoughts arose, unbidden: When Mycroft left. When Father left. When Mother sent him off to school in a hired car and told him she didn’t want to see him again until Christmas or she’d send him even further.

When he left John.

‘No,’ he lied.

‘Tell me about Mycroft.’

He felt his face blanching. Had she heard what had happened? ‘What?’

‘You said that Mycroft forgot you, too, and that it surprises you, even now. Why is that?’

Oh. Well, yes, he had said that. And he supposed that she knew who Mycroft was. Likely, his brother’s name had surfaced a time or two in her sessions with John. He wondered what all John had said about him.

‘Mycroft isn’t the sort to forget something.’

‘You mean you?’

‘In this context, I suppose yes.’

‘How old would he have been?’

‘Eleven. Seven years my senior.’

‘Did he look after you as a child?’

Almost exclusively. ‘I suppose yes.’

‘What about now?’

Sherlock opened his mouth to give a terse reply, something to express annoyance at how Mycroft always hovered just out of sight, unable to mind his own business; or a quip to suggest that Mycroft wasn’t the sort of brother to care about the goings-on in the lives of lesser mortals. But he couldn’t
say either of those things. His usual disparaging remarks about Mycroft were stoppered by a constricting throat as he thought about where his brother lay at that very moment, a battlefield of Sherlock’s own making. He fought to contain his reaction. Closing his mouth, shutting his eyes, he focused on his breathing, but he knew Dr Thompson had already seen enough.

‘Take your time,’ she said gently.

Sitting still was killing him. He pushed swiftly to his feet and began to pace. But his booted foot clunked with every step, aggravating his already volatile state. His breaths felt hard in his chest, and he scratched the backside of his hand.

‘I don’t want to talk about Mycroft,’ he said.

‘All right.’

‘I’m here because I need to get him out of my head. He’s there. Right there. He dug furiously at his temple with three clawed fingers, as if he could burrow deep enough to pluck out the tumour enlarging inside his mind. ‘Growing bigger. Stronger. Taking up all the space, he’s a cancer. In every nook and cranny, throwing his shadows on the walls and burrowing into the floorboards and staining the rugs and curtains and everything, everything. When I fall asleep at night, he’s there. When I wake in the morning, he doesn’t go away. He’s taken control of my mind—my mind. My greatest weapon, the only way I can defeat him, and he’s taken it!’

‘Mr Holmes, tell me who you are talking about. Who is “he”?’

He spun, eyes flashing. ‘James Moriarty. The infection. The virus. The parasite. He thrives on me—my thoughts, my ideas—and what can I do but keep playing host to him? I can’t cut him out. I can’t burn him out. Unless I destroy myself, how do I stop him? Because of him, people have been killed. John almost died, and Mycroft may be next. And he’s laughing at me, always laughing, because he’s winning, and I can’t stop him.’

He was panting now, as though he were being chased and he couldn’t outrun his pursuer for much longer.

‘I’m not mad. I know the real Moriarty is a rotting corpse in a lab, soon to be reduced to dust. I know that. But he’s still too much alive. And sometimes, I can’t tell the difference.’

‘Between what, Mr Holmes?’ asked Dr Thompson.

‘Between where I end and he begins.’

His shoulders sagged. Only now did he feel the sting in the back of his hand, where he had left deep tracks, scraping away the skin.

‘That’s why I’m here. My mind is sick. Infected. That’s what you do, isn’t it? Treat sick minds? Rehabilitate the insane?’

He expected her to recast his words, to say not exactly and it’s more complicated than that and we don’t use the word ‘insane’ anymore. A more sophisticated definition, a more nuanced explanation of ‘treatment’ and ‘mind’.

Instead, she nodded. ‘That’s what I do.’

He liked that she didn’t mince words. That alone seemed to calm him somewhat. He didn’t return to the chair, but he stopped pacing, opting instead to stand by the window and imagine the lives of
the blissfully ignorant passing below.

‘I have some questions for you, Mr Holmes, if you wouldn’t mind answering.’

He allowed his silence to serve as concession; he didn’t even turn around.

‘When do you believe you were first infected, as you say? How long since Moriarty took residence in your mind?’

Sherlock had tried to answer this himself, once, tracing it backwards to its origin, the initial bite. He knew when he had first become aware—fully aware—that there was an uninvited presence in his head, a dark, unmoving shadow, ready to spring. At the time, he had been unusually susceptible—under the influence of a fear-inducing drug. There was enough in his past to draw from to create a monster, but what form had his fear taken? In the face of another man, he had seen none other than James Moriarty.

The visage had startled him almost as much as the raw emotion itself. Why should Moriarty, of all things, inspire in him such dread and panic? There was no cause for it! Naturally, he had wondered, in his idle time, what the genius consulting criminal had been up to since their first encounter at the pool, and of course he expected to have second, one way or another. But wondering and anticipating was not fearing. Nor had Irene Adler’s casual mention of Moriarty following the jumbo jet fiasco raised any such sensations like fear, or even alarm. Had it? There had definitely been a kind of jolt to his system, and he had convinced himself that the racing heart that followed had been a result of the stimulus to the brain and the sudden, rapid deductions that followed. Exhilarating, he would have said. Not terrifying.

Or maybe it had been. Maybe Sherlock had feared him for longer than even he knew. After all, he could pinpoint the day, the hour, nearly the very moment when James Moriarty had shifted out of mere intrigue and into his spider form. No longer just an opponent or an exciting case to be solved. Yes, he had killed already, but Sherlock was used to hunting down killers. No, it was when he saw John, wrapped in Semtex, when the precision laser from a sniper rifle settled over his friend’s heart. That was the moment. John was one finger’s twitch away from death, and Moriarty was the master designer of his annihilation. And in that arrested breath, Sherlock knew pure fear. Since then, his worst fears had been synonymous with Moriarty. Only, it had taken too much time to realise it.

But was that midnight hour at the pool the same hour he had first been infected? Or had the virus already entered his system, unannounced and so unobserved? Because the thing was, Moriarty already knew him. He had been following Sherlock’s work. He had named himself a fan. What, because of the website? That couldn’t be. Before John and his blog came along, Sherlock’s internet presence had been minimal (he would now admit) and his reputation for brilliance had been restricted to a small client base and the Yard (where few officers would have chosen brilliance as a descriptor). Moriarty was aware of him because he already knew him. In fact, it was Moriarty himself who explained how:

Carl Power’s missing shoes.

Sherlock had been a child. A thirteen-year-old child. And in noticing the oddity of the missing shoes, and saying something, he had inadvertently been caught in a web.

‘If I’d not engaged him as a boy,’ Sherlock said to Dr Thompson, ‘none of this would have happened. Every step since then has been one step closer to my utter destruction. I’ve been dragging it in my wake this whole time.’
He still stood at the window, but now he turned to her, though he could scarcely believe the words coming out of his own mouth. He had never related his history to another person, not like this. He couldn’t understand why he was doing it. How long had he been infected? Twenty-six years. A full two-thirds of his life. He told her so.

Dr Thompson regarded him thoughtfully. Then nodded, and recast his explanation in a tight summation. ‘Then, you believe that your writing a letter to a newspaper as a thirteen-year-old boy initiated a chain of events that has led to everything that has happened since, from your faked suicide to John’s abduction to Darren Hirsch’s final hour.’

‘It’s not an unreasonable line of logic,’ he said. ‘If one can identify the effect and relate it back to its cause, one can discern patterns or trace a causal path to the first falling domino across years, even generations and centuries. It’s a foundational practice for historiographers and even evolutionary biologists.’

‘Yes, we soft scientists have a term for it, too,’ said Dr Thompson. ‘We call it a causal nexus. But the thing is, it works only in one direction.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Mr Holmes, you are a self-described man of logic.’

He nodded stiffly.

‘And yet you subscribe to a fatalistic superstition.’

‘It isn’t superstition. It’s reasoning.’

‘And it’s missing a key component of reality. You’ve effectively denied yourself control over any events. One of the strategies of cognitive therapy, which I would like to try with you, is one in which we restructure closely held but ultimately problematic personal beliefs about ourselves and the world by challenging our assumptions. So let us challenge the causal nexus. If these events you describe were destined to unfold because of this action taken so long ago, if that fallen domino made it inevitable that the next would fall, and the next, we should be able to anticipate the next domino, and the next, and therefore accurately forecast the end of that chain: we should be able to calculate that the final domino will fall.’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock. ‘The final domino will fall.’

‘No, Mr Holmes. The analogy is faulty.’

‘Why?’

‘Can you predict the future?’

There was no sense in answering the ridiculous question. They both knew that he could not.

‘Can anybody?’ she pressed.

‘No.’

‘No. Because the events of our lives are not dominos waiting to fall. Yes, you can look backward and trace the chain, but you cannot look forward and follow it to an inevitable conclusion, because there is no inevitable conclusion. Your premise is fallacious because you have ignored the key component.’
‘Autonomy.’

‘Autonomy. You are an independent agent, presented with choices and empowered with decision-making. You cannot always choose the consequences of your actions or others’, but you can choose your own actions.’

‘I don’t know how. Every action I take seems to end in devastation.’

‘We start by giving you back control over your own mind. Therapy is a good place to start. And maybe, if we decide together that it will help, perhaps some sleep aids or anxiety medication, just to better manage—’

‘No drugs,’ said Sherlock sharply. ‘I’m an addict.’

She nodded respectfully. ‘I promise you, Mr Holmes. Even now, you have the power to influence or alter the course of your life. As well as the lives of others you care about.’

The hour expired. Sherlock was surprised by how quickly the time had passed. He left Dr Thompson’s office, gave a brief but cordial nod to Naomi, and was soon back in his coat and out on the street. He didn’t look for a taxi right away. Instead, he decided to walk, and think. But he had not gone very far before he received a text from John, who must have been watching the clock.

Well?

His fingers made aborted movements over the keyboard, not sure what it was he wanted to say. At last, he texted back.

*She’ll do.*

***

Upon receiving the text, John closed his eyes and sighed with relief.

‘Inspector Lestrade,’ said the prison officer, opening the door. ‘He’s ready for you.’

John nodded and took back the detective’s badge from the processing officer, sliding it into the pocket of his blazer, beside his wallet. It was the closest thing he had to a suit, and he needed to look the part: a dark blue blazer over black trousers, and a white, collared shirt. He still felt conspicuous, but a few things he had learnt from Sherlock over the years: nine times out of ten, confidence trumped evidence. If he said he was Greg Lestrade, they would believe it, and so wouldn’t look too closely at the nicked ID, which John had found in Sherlock’s sock drawer. His greater fear was that one of the corrections officers would actually know the detective inspector, personally or from the news, and the game would be up before it even started. But Sherlock’s trick worked. Nobody so much as a batted an eye. They accepted his stolen credentials and honoured his request.

He followed the officer through two high-security locked doors and down a long hallway. It had taken him an hour to arrive at HM Prison Belmarsh, giving him plenty of time to change his mind and turn back. But he hadn’t. Now, it was too late, and he intended to see it through.

The officer paused before a door with a small window. ‘He’s just through here. You want an officer in there with you? He’s not violent, and he’s cuffed to the table, but if you would feel more secure—’

‘Nah, I’m good,’ said John, hoping to pass as blasé and composed, which was another lie he was
telling himself.

‘Right then. I’ll be just out here keeping an eye on things. Give me a signal if you want me to come in.’

John nodded. Then he braced himself.

The prisoner was seated at a stainless steel table, chained and wearing green and white prison garb and looking bored. But when Everett Stubbins saw John walk through the door, the colour drained from his face. Then the door slammed shut, leaving them alone.
The first time John heard the name Everett Stubbins had been while in hospital, sliced back still raw and burning from infection. He remembered the pull of stitches in his skin as he struggled to swallow solid food. Nor could he even sit up under his own power.

‘Do you know him? Have you ever seen him before?’

Lestrade held the officer’s photograph in front of John’s non-swollen eye so he didn’t have to touch it with his own broken fingers.

The man himself was unremarkable. Brown hair, brown eyes, white, ordinary, a regular joe. But John stared long and hard. So this was the man who had been watching him for untold weeks and months, who had been reporting everything to Sebastian Moran before the abduction, and who, afterward, had done everything in his power to misdirect the police and keep Moran invisible while Mary was killed and John remained imperilled.

‘No,’ he answered, throat rasping, needing water. ‘Never.’

He saw the same photograph just one more time, when it was printed in the newspaper to accompany an article regarding his prison sentence.

‘Hello,’ said John.

The door was closed behind him. Five feet and a metal table separated him from the man who had pled guilty to feeding information about Lestrade’s investigation to John’s kidnappers. And it was because of that plea deal—alongside police failure to adequately protect him when an unknown assailant had attempted to kill him—that he had not been charged for far more heinous offences. Like murder.

‘You’re not allowed to be here,’ Stubbins said. At John’s appearance, he had drained pale, like a fish, and his eyes bulged like one, too. As an ex-officer of the law, he knew damn well how visitations went, and this wasn’t right. John was not just a civilian, but a victim. If he were allowed in there at all, it should have been under the escort of a detective, at the very least, and perhaps a solicitor or security officer as well. But he was alone.

John slowly advanced toward him. Pulled out a chair. Sat. Not once did he break eye contact.

‘I’ll call the guard.’ Stubbins shifted anxiously. His cuffs rattled together like loose teeth.

On the train, John had thought of a thousand things he wanted to say to the man who, for ten days, had played stupid while just five miles away John was being beaten and brutalised, while Mary was murdered. And he knew. Oh god, he knew. Stubbins had seen the photos, heard the reports, recovered Mary’s body. He had arranged for it to happen, all of it. He had actively impeded the investigation. He had let Mary die.

John wanted to kill him.

‘One shout, that’s all it’ll take.’

‘You’ll do nothing of the sort,’ John said.
It would be so easy, grabbing the chained man’s head and smashing it into the table. A broken nose, at least. At least. How much more damage could he do, before they rushed into the room to stop him? An arm around the throat, and with one powerful squeeze, he could crush the trachea flat like a pinched pipe.

‘Won’t I?’

But Stubbins’ voice was weak, not defiant. Being a prisoner for six months had taught him to be wary of attack. He had turned skittish. John knew a thing or two about what it felt like to be constantly looking over your shoulder, let alone staring down a madman. But he had no pity.

‘Not until you’ve told me what I want to know.’

‘Everything I’ve got to say, I’ve said to the police. I’m not telling you jack shit.’ His eyes darted past John’s shoulder. He licked his lips, sucked in a breath.

‘Scream, and I smash your face so hard into this table you’ll need rhinoplasty to get something back that looks like a nose. No one can get in here fast enough to stop me. And don’t think for one second I give a shit about an assault charge. Either I leave this place with what I came here for, or I get the satisfaction of breaking your nose. Either way, I’m a happy man.’

Stubbins was perfectly still, but the dilemma danced in his eyes.

‘You have two seconds to decide.’

‘This isn’t right, this isn’t fair. Dr Watson, you’re not a violent m—’

In one swift movement, John shot to his feet and made an aborted lunge at the table separating, and Stubbins gave a shout and threw himself backward. But the chain snapped taut, keeping him within easy reach.

‘All right! All right! Just don’t . . . !’

With both hands planted solidly on the table, John gave a glance to the door and nodded sharply at the eyes that had appeared there. When they disappeared again, he lowered himself back to sitting.

Stubbins laughed shakily. ‘God, look at you, playing bad cop. You having fun on that side of the terrorist game? You feel strong, going after a man in chains, a man with a wife and children who pray every night that he’ll be safe . . .’

‘Stop snivelling. You’re not a victim.’

‘Well. Not the kind that spends most of his time down on all fours.’ John’s jaw locked tight and Stubbins, emboldened by this reaction, inclined forward in the chair and dropped his voice. ‘Don’t forget, Johnny, I’ve seen you trembling in the Pit, the skin of your back slashed like a carving board while you cowered like a bitch.’

But John schooled his reaction to a single twitch of the eye. ‘I’ve a message for you,’ he said.

‘I’m sure you do.’

‘From Colonel Moran.’

The two men stared at each other, unbreathing, unmoving, waiting for the other to blink. John’s words had sent a shockwave through Stubbins’ whole body; he waited for the reverberations to
subside.

‘Bullshit,’ said Stubbins, with barely any breath at all.

‘You answer my questions, you get your message.’

‘I don’t believe you have any message.’

‘Does he scare you, Stubbins? I don’t think he likes it very much, when his thugs get caught. They might talk. Then someone has to shut them up.’

This time, it was Stubbins who twitched, and his teeth snapped together.

‘Are we paying attention now?’

Stubbins quirked his neck, licked his lips. ‘You’re lying, Moran didn’t send you. You overheard something in the Pit, that’s all. Moran didn’t send you.’

John didn’t reply. He didn’t need to. That was twice now Stubbins had called the convent basement ‘the Pit’. He’d never heard it himself, not from Moran, not even while he’d languished there for endless hours and days. Had Moran called it that after the fact? Or was this a term that had sprung up among the horde of voyeurs to another man’s torture, the same onlookers who had been privy to the photographs? John had a sudden cramping dread that somewhere, in some dark online forum, they gathered to laugh.

Focus. Focus.

Stubbins shifted anxiously, throwing a glance at the door and likely weighing his odds. Was it worth screaming for help? ‘What’s your game, Watson? Why are you here? And where’s Lestrade? Where’s your precious detective? They say he’s back. Everyone says it.’

‘Damn right he is.’

‘So Moran was right. I mean, I knew it. You tell him. You tell the Colonel. I trusted him from the start. I was loyal. Always loyal. I helped ferret the bloody murderer out of hiding. If not for me . . . You tell him. I’m loyal still.’

‘Trying to worm your way back into his good graces, are you? You’re still a Moriarty man, through and through, even though he tried to kill you. How noble.’

‘That wasn’t Moran. He wouldn’t.’

John scoffed. ‘You gave him up. You named names. Of course he would punish you.’

‘He wouldn’t, he wouldn’t.’ Stubbins gripped his hair on both sides of his head. Then his fist came down on the table, hard. ‘Don’t forget it, Watson. When he sinks his claws into you again and drags you back to that dark place where you gasp your last breath, don’t forget: It was me who put you there.’

‘Are you finished?’

Stubbins grimaced and glared, apparently upset that he had failed to intimidate. ‘What’s the fucking message?’

‘First,’ said John, ‘you’ll tell me about Bill Murray.’
In the silence that followed, Stubbins appeared to be chewing on his tongue, like he was debating whether to fess up or play stupid. Then he shook his head, slowly, and closed his eyes. ‘So. You’ve finally drawn the line to that old cog. I wondered when you would.’

John felt something wrench in his stomach. Since seeing his old friend’s face in the photograph, he hadn’t had time to give it much consideration, not with Mycroft’s imminent attack. But whenever he did, he felt a well of denial rising up inside of him, and he hoped to God that Bill being there, in the pub, beside Everett Stubbins, had just been a coincidence. Chance. Maybe Stubbins really didn’t know him after all. Maybe Bill had nothing to do with Moran whatsoever. But now, against his most ardent hopes, Stubbins was confirming it, and John wanted to scream.

‘Was he arrested, then? Think they’ll assign him my new bunkmate?’

‘Talk,’ John said through gritted teeth, not sure if he trusted himself to say more just then.

Stubbins laughed tiredly. He put both elbows on the table and rubbed his eyes. ‘He’s still out there, isn’t he? The son of a bitch.’

‘Get on with it.’

‘What do you want me to say?’ But he couldn’t hide his mounting anger or disguise his fear, and Stubbins was cottoning on. ‘Oh wait. I know what you’re hoping I’ll say. That it was all happenstance. That Bill didn’t know what he was a part of, or that his actions may have been rotten but his intentions were pure. Sorry, John.’ His arms fell; the cuffs cluttered noisily against the metal table. ‘That’s not how things went down. Bill knew everything, right down to the last fuck.’

*You bastard. You lying bastard. Not Bill. Bill is the reason I’m still alive today. He wouldn’t. He wouldn’t.*

‘You want me to tell you about Bill Murray?’ Stubbins set his shackled wrists in his lap, looking resigned. ‘I’m telling you right now. You won’t like it.’

‘Stop running your mouth, and talk.’

Stubbins lifted his hands in feigned surrender. ‘You’re not the police. And this isn’t a statement. Hear-say won’t hold up in court, and I’ll deny I ever—’

‘I said talk, you miserable cud.’

*Stop. Don’t get emotional. That’s what he wants to see—that he’s getting to you.*

‘Put on your thinking cap,’ Stubbins said, ‘and you’ll see how easily it came about. My orders were to tail you, learn your patterns, your habits, everything about you. In short, gather *information.*’ He shrugged. ‘I’m a police officer. Was. It should have been easy. But you, Dr Watson, were not an easy cockroach to pin. As a citizen, you were . . . unremarkable. No family. Barely any friends. Boring job. And your military record? Sealed.’

John’s eyes narrowed. *Sealed? What for?*

‘I combed for dirt, but reading your emails was like watching paint dry, and your criminal record turned up nothing more interesting than a couple of ASBOs.’ Then, out of nowhere, he chuckled. ‘But that damn blog of yours. That’s how I found Bill, if you want to know. He used to leave comments all the time, didn’t he? Until Sherlock rolled over and played dead. If not for that blog . . . So, in a way, I suppose you could say that *you* led me straight to him. In time, he led me straight back to you.’
A dull roaring was beginning to sound in his ears, and once again, John fantasised about throwing his fist across the table and crunching Stubbins’ nose so hard blood burst out his ears. Instead, he planted his feet solidly on the floor and worked to control his breathing.

‘I caught him in a pub, thinking I’d have to, you know, coerce him. But he was already sloshed to the eyeballs, his wheels already greased. I had barely said the words John Watson before he went off on how you should have died on the battlefield.’ He shook his head, correcting himself. ‘How he should have let you die.’ He must have known the effect his words were having on John, how it felt like getting shot all over again—the shock before the pain—because he leant into the table to drive the point home. ‘Bet you didn’t know this: He was ordered to let you die.’

John’s teeth were gritted together so hard he spit as he spoke. ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘As you like it. I’m just telling you what he told me.’

‘I don’t believe you. That kind of order doesn’t happen. Sure as hell not for the medical corps, and Bill was a CMT. Class 1 Standard Corporal. Every single person in the medical field is in the business of saving lives, by any means necessary. Even in the most extreme of circumstances, or the most dire of cases, even when resources are low or time is running out—’

‘Deny it all you like, captain. It doesn’t change anything. Bill defied orders. He saved you, and he’s regretted it ever since.’ Stubbins smirked. ‘Practically leapt at the chance to right his wrongs.’

‘How?’ John asked, though he had lost all will to hear the answers.

‘Oh, just keeping tabs. Providing intelligence. A bit of legwork. I couldn’t dog your steps twenty-four seven, now could I? I had appearances at the Yard to maintain. No, there were half a dozen of us with eyes on you. Bill was one of them. And let me tell you: he was a good little soldier. Some of the most thorough notes I’ve ever seen. Without those, we would have had a devil of a time arranging your kidnapping.’

John’s vision was swimming. It didn’t add up, it didn’t make sense. He needed Sherlock there to make sense of things, to ask the questions he couldn’t think of and put together the puzzle pieces that painted the truer picture, not this corrupted story. But he was alone, and the world had ceased to make sense. The lights above his head seemed to dim and grow bright again. He needed to leave. He needed air. If he didn’t get it soon, he was going to throw up.

‘My question for you is, why aren’t you asking Bill all this yourself? Why come all the way down here, to jolly ol’ Belmarsh? Don’t tell me Bill’s gone AWOL.’

John pushed back the chair and stood. The blood rushed from his head, but he managed not to sway as he turned toward the door, where he gave the sign to the officer that he was ready to go. He needed to go.

Stubbins slammed a hand back down against the steel table. ‘Wait, you can’t go yet! What about my message? Is Moran coming for me? What does he want me to do?’

As the door screeched open, John turned and looked over his shoulder. ‘Down comes the rain.’ He shrugged. ‘He said you’d understand.’

Then he left. As he stepped out into the hallway, however, he chanced one more glance back and saw that Stubbins had gone as still as stone. His hands were flat on the silver table, and his eyes were round with horror. John had seen that look before, in faces of soldiers who knew they were about to die, and nothing he could do could save them. This time, though, he didn’t even want to.
John left on foot and walked as far as he could before he couldn’t walk anymore. His chest was too tight and his leg was on fire. In his haste to get away, he had pushed too hard and was now suffering the consequences. So he found a bench at a bus stop and rested, but the tremor in his hand was acting up. Sweating, he opened his coat and fanned himself with the flap. Because no one was around, he allowed himself a whimper, then a hard sniff, then a sharp exhalation.

‘You’re okay, you’re okay,’ he said to himself. ‘Dammit, you’re okay.’

But his mind was awash with images of the attack near Kandahar.

He had been unprepared—they all had been unprepared—and suddenly the air and the ground shook with explosives. The cacophony of gunfire punctuated his eardrums, and sand jumped skyward beneath a hailstorm of bullets. He remembered running, nearly blinded by dust and debris. He remembered falling to his knees beside a fallen soldier, and the gore that burbled up from what used to be an eye socket. But the boy was moaning. Still alive, still alive, he had a chance. But the men were screaming at one another, screaming at him, orders to Take cover! Take cover! And he remembered Corporal Murray, taking cover behind the Land Rover Pulse battlefield ambulance. They locked eyes. And then—

He shot to his feet, breathing hard. Walk, he needed to walk.

John didn’t remember much else. Enemy fire speared him straight through. My heart. He remembered that much. He believed the bullet had lanced his heart. In that moment, his medical reasoning abandoned him. As the blood poured from his body and mixed with the sand, he was certain he was dead. Not dying, but dead already, and in death he found not relief but pain. He had most surely been cast into hell.

And yet, it wasn’t until much later that he had met the devil.

Suddenly, his phone vibrated in the inner pocket of his jacket, close to his heart. John gasped sharply and fumbled for the phone, fearing to see the familiar and dreadful phone number on the caller ID. But it wasn’t his old number.

‘Hey.’ He closed his eyes and covered them with a hand, trying to calm himself.

‘St Mary’s wasn’t secure. He’s been moved.’

Though John’s heart was racing, his mind felt sluggish, and it took him a moment to cotton on. ‘Is he okay?’

‘No worse.’

It was strange. Sherlock hadn’t said much at all yet, and yet just hearing his voice had the same effect his violin so often produced, and pacified his anxious heart.

‘Where is he?’ John asked.

There was a pause. ‘Somewhere with nine rooms. You once had a shave there.’

John squinted in thought. What was that supposed to mean? Was it code? Why would Sherlock be speaking in code? Unless . . . unless he thought he might be overheard. For one, he hadn’t mentioned Mycroft by name. He was definitely being cautious.
Presented with a puzzle, John put his mind to the task, and the fog from the onset of a panic attack began to dissipate. Somewhere with nine rooms where he’d once had a shave? But he only ever shaved himself. He began to cast his mind back, but then it suddenly clicked, and he didn’t have to remember back too far at all. After the attack in the flat, after he’d been released from hospital, he hadn’t returned at once to Baker Street. Instead, he and Sherlock had stayed a few nights with Mycroft. In a two-storeyed flat with nine rooms. There, Mycroft’s barber had attended to them both.

‘Is that wise?’ he asked.

‘It’s safe,’ said Sherlock simply. ‘The assistant has arranged everything. Machines, drugs, medical staff. Everything.’

He was avoiding saying Anthea’s name, too.

‘Where are you?’ John asked.

‘Almost there. I want to check it out myself.’ Another pause. ‘Will you come?’

John calculated quickly. Taking the Tube would cost him over an hour, which would raise Sherlock’s suspicions, and furthermore, he didn’t believe he could abide the crowds. Not right now. A taxi would cut the time in half, but only if he caught one from here. But the thought of taking a taxi, given his current state, seemed equally unwise. Even though he knew it would take the better part of an hour, he would have to phone Smalls.

‘John?’

It seemed he had no course but to lie.

‘Quick shopping run. I’ll be about an hour or so. But I’m coming.’

He waited for the farewell, and when it didn’t come, he thought maybe Sherlock had hung up on him without bothering to say goodbye. He checked his screen, but the call timer was still running.

‘Where are you?’ Sherlock asked, a note of misgiving in his voice.

‘Chemist’s,’ he blurted out, then winced, wondering where that had come from. ‘Just, erm. Stocking up. We’re low on plasters and . . . surgical spirit.’ Was that true? It might be true. Dammit, he’d have to make a stop after all.

‘Right,’ said Sherlock. Yes, that was almost certainly scepticism in his voice. Or maybe John was just being paranoid.

‘Right, so. See you soon,’ he said.

He hung up before Sherlock could manage to work out that he wasn’t even in Central London anymore. Even so, before he looked up the number for Julian Smalls, he glanced down at his feet to see if he’d picked up any mud particular to Thamesmead. Don’t be a fool. He’s a genius, not magic. He jerked his tie loose and shoved it in the pocket of his jacket, hoping only that Sherlock would be too distracted by Mycroft’s new facilities to notice John’s uncustomary choice of blazer, or at least to think anything of it.

***

Molly Hooper was reconstituting the body of Adam Davenport. His organs—following removal
and examination—were placed in plastic bags and returned to his torso, including the lungs and heart, which had served as her primary indicators of cause of death. Though unconscious, Mr Davenport had inhaled water into his lungs, leading to haemolysis and dilution of the blood. He had an increased blood volume of about two litres. Additionally, his heart had been overtaxed, as in approximately three minutes of suffocation and drowning, he had suffered pulmonary oedema, a sodium deficit and an excess of potassium, and consequently arrhythmia. All textbook signs of drowning.

With the organs returned to the torso cavity, the body lined with cotton wool, and the ribs and breastbone replaced, Molly was now sewing shut the Y-incision with her well-practised baseball stitch. Once the police released the body, there would be a wake, and a burial service, and a grief-stricken family would begin the long, seemingly insurmountable challenge of pulling their lives back together. At sixty-four years old, a mild-mannered man with a quiet job as a private chauffeur was dead. His wife and children would never understand the war he had been caught up in, or why such violence had come to someone so innocent.

The door to the mortuary creeped open, and Donna Ure, a mortuary technician, poked her head inside.

‘Now a good time?’ she asked.

Molly waved her in with the needle, accidentally tugging the skin of the right breast. But it didn’t tear. ‘Did you run the comparative bloodwork?’

Donna came into the morgue and stood on the opposite side of the table from Molly. ‘It was the exact same stuff as from the Jane Doe: sodium thiopental. Same brand and everything. Just a higher dosage.’

‘Yes, it would have been.’

‘So was he, you know, awake when it happened? When the car hit the water?’

‘The evidence suggests he was still unconscious.’ Molly accepted the bloodwork and toxicology report from Donna and reviewed it herself. ‘A small mercy.’

Leaving the needle and thread for a moment, Molly pulled off her gloves and moved toward a table to sign off on the report.

‘News isn’t giving us any more answers than when the story first broke,’ Donna continued. ‘Like, who did it? Why? All they’re saying is, Sherlock Holmes is still in hospital. But he wasn’t in the car, so it doesn’t make a lot of sense.’

She was fishing for answers, and Molly knew it. As a low-level technician, Donna was not privy to many particulars about anything, but she had a thirst for details about anything regarding the mysterious Sherlock Holmes. Molly, she seemed to have concluded, was her ticket to a sort of insider’s celebrity gossip, and since Molly’s reinstatement following the April attacks, Donna had been particularly cosy and confiding with the woman who was such a close friend to Sherlock and who also happened to be dating the lead detective on the case. Molly didn’t appreciate the faux friendship.

‘The police are still piecing it all together,’ she said vaguely. ‘And we here are bound by confidentiality strictures.’

‘Oh come on,’ Donna whined. ‘You know more than that, you have to.’
'You know I can’t say anything, Donna, even if I did know something.'

'You do know something. Don’t tell me there’s no late-night pillow talk with the detective.'

Molly closed the file and handed it back without a word. It was a funny thing, her so-called friendship with Donna. She didn’t have many work friends, and the last few months had strained her once-cordial though always professional relationship with most of them. From false accusations about a romantic connection with Sherlock, to her temporary suspension on account of the documents she had falsified to help Sherlock fake his death, they watched her with a wary eye. And that was before she had come to work with a battered face and stitches in her scalp. Donna was sympathetic, but she wanted information. Storytelling. And she believed that getting close to Molly was the way to get it.

'The city’s in danger, you know,’ said Donna. ‘You know that better than anyone. No one in London is safe, not if an ordinary driver and some Jane Doe can get caught up in a Sherlock Holmes attack. That’s terrorism, is what it is. Those others, the homeless people. It was terrible, of course, but they were, you know’—she put up air quotes, as though she were not adopting the words as her own—‘the dregs of society. But this man had a family and a job. That could’ve been any one of us.’

'I need to finish up with the body,’ said Molly, returning to her needle.

But rather than feeling dismissed, Donna continued prattling on. ‘I mean, I get it. I do. Don’t think I don’t! You’re dating a detective. You’re friends with Sherlock Holmes. You know what really happened to Watson.’ She pretended to not care, but left a pause in case Molly wished to elaborate on anything. When she didn’t, Donna switched tracks. ‘How are things going, by the way? With the detective?’ She winked.

'Good. Fine.’

But if Donna had been any sort of true friend, she might have said that she was actually a little concerned. Not about their relationship, which she knew Donna was asking about, but about Greg himself. The attack on Mycroft had shaken something deep inside of him that, even after all that had happened, had hitherto been left untouched. Now something was wrong. Still, after the attack, he had thrown himself to work, which is just what Greg Lestrade did. He didn’t wallow. He felt no self-pity. No, he faced his problems head on, and even when he didn’t know where to go next, he kept putting one foot in front of the other. Last night, however, he’d come home in one of the worst moods she’d ever seen him in. The slamming cupboards and swearing under his breath kind of moods, and when she ventured to ask him what was wrong, he snapped at her: ‘Don’t ask.’ They’d barely talked again the rest of the night.

But Donna didn’t need to know even a fraction of that. No one did.

‘Still house hunting,’ she added, trying to sound agreeable, or at least not so chilly.

‘Do I hear wedding bells in the distance?’ Donna teased.

Molly wished she’d kept it chilly.


‘No, it’s perfect. No more landlords nosing about, we can paint and do renovations—’

‘Yeah, but . . . not something you can easily walk away from.’
‘Who’s walking away?’

‘Yeah, but.’ Donna’s head bounced from shoulder to shoulder. ‘You gotta lock that down.’

Uncomfortable with the trajectory of this conversation, Molly just laughed.

‘Any talk of a ring?’

‘I don’t think that’s something Greg is interested in.’ Unaccountably embarrassed, Molly bent further over the corpse to hide her face as she worked on the final stitches.

‘Sure, but are you?’

Molly tied the knot and snipped the thread on her baseball stitching with a sharp jerk, and the skin tore, just a little. She would have to use the clear glue to patch it properly. ‘I need to get back to work,’ she said shortly.

Recognising her defeat, Donna put up her hands as though in surrender. A little sulky, she turned to the door. ‘Take care of yourself, Molly,’ she said as she left. ‘It’s dangerous out there.’

***

‘Matilda? Hello, this is Michaela Warn— I’m doing just fine, thank you. You? Lovely. And the kids? Lovely. Look, I hate to do this again, but I’m going to have to resched— I do apologise. I know it’s not the first time you’ve cleared your calendar for me. But I promise you, your story is important, and people need to hear— Yes, I understand. Yes. Yes. No, I realise that. It’s terribly unfair. Mrs Williams, I sincerely believe that what you have to tell me has great bearing on the present Sherlock Holmes situation, I do. And it’s not that I feel no urgency. I think it’s appalling that the police aren’t . . .’

As Mrs Williams continued to voice her disappointment on the other end of the phone, Michaela, who was sitting at her desk littered with sticky notes, empty paper cups once brimming with coffee, stacks of old Guardians, and scraps of tissues in her fight against hay fever, she looked down at that morning’s headliner:

Baker Street Attack: Sherlock Holmes Not Hospitalised

Special Report, by Michaela Warner

London – Initial reports got it wrong: Sherlock Holmes was not attacked at his residence on Baker Street late Wednesday night. Instead, both Holmes and his partner John Watson have been spotted coming and going from the nearby St Mary’s Hospital, quite unimpeded but for injuries sustained during previous attacks. Though they acknowledge an attack did take place, both police and hospital workers have declined to release the name of the actual victim, and have requested that the privacy of Mr Holmes and his family be respected. Therefore, any assertions as to the identity of the victim are, at this point, pure speculation.

Which leads one to wonder: Why the knee-jerk impulse to hasten the facts, to the point of invention? Journalism has become a game of spicy insinuation and baiting, and news outlets have become, first and foremost, a vehicle of amusement, not factual reportage . . .

She had carried on in that vein for another two hundred words, and after its printing, she had received her first official dressing down by Mr Heinrich. Yes, he had approved it, and mostly out of haste to reach the deadline, but—
‘You’re not writing editorials anymore, Michaela. A column on the first page of this paper is not space we are giving you for your platform.’

‘The story was thin,’ she said in her own defence. ‘If anything, it was an absence of story. I was just trying to, you know, pad it out.’

‘So pad it out with facts. This is journalism at its most basic: Who saw what? When? Where? Are you not a champion of facts?’

She saw his point, and, chastened, promised that her next story would be a reflection of the serious journalist she aspired to be.

‘I’m telling you,’ he said, waving her out the door, ‘John Watson. Get me John Watson. That’s your story.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she mumbled, making a certain effort to keep her head held high as she retreated from his office.

And indeed, John Watson was on her list, but bold as she was, she felt funny trying to approach him, like doing so was less than inconsiderate but downright rude and invasive. Maybe that was why she was distracting herself with side stories, like that of Matilda Williams. It was a loose thread of a story she wanted to follow to its conclusion, but was that all it was? A curiosity?

‘Yes, yes, I’m still here,’ she said to Matilda Williams, refocusing. ‘I was just checking my calendar. If you can make Wednesday . . . No? Well, what about Thursday? Anytime Thursday after five. I’ll come to you. Oh, yes, if you’re more comfortable, a café. Yes, that’s fine.’ She jotted down the address. ‘Thursday at . . . half five? Lovely. I will see you then. Yes.’ She forced a laugh. ‘No more cancellations. I promise. Good day, Mrs Williams.’

***

Putting into practice one of his many underappreciated talents, Thomas Dryers returned home whistling ‘Killer Queen’. With a little dance in his step, he slid the key into the lock, twirled inside, tossed his keys into the air, and shut the door behind him with his foot. That’s when the whistling stopped.

‘Mr Dryers, take a seat.’

Dryers still wore his uniform: a white collared shirt and tie, a black, zippered, tight-fitting jacket emblazoned with the logo of the Metropolitan Police, and the com device attached to his shoulder. At his side, in the holster of his belt, he carried both cuffs and PAVA incapacitating spray.

‘Don’t touch it.’ The warning came with the little waggle of a pistol aimed at his stomach, a reminder of who had the upper hand.

Slowly lifting his hands in compliance, Dryers’ gaze followed the point of the pistol to the wooden kitchen chair that had been set in the middle of the room, just for him.

‘Look, mate,’ he said, pretending his heart hadn’t just plonked into his stomach, ‘you’re just inviting a world of hurt for yourself. I’m a police officer. I got buddies down at the Yard. Lots of them. And you do not want to cross my girlfriend.’ He lowered himself gingerly into the chair, hands still raised to show he meant no funny business. ‘Well, I say girlfriend. For the moment, she’s unequivocally refusing the classification.’

‘I talk. You listen.’
The man was old. Quite old. A pensioner, Dryers would say, if not for appearing so well-to-do in a sharp dark suit and a haircut worth at least three hundred quid: every alabaster strand trimmed to perfection. But Mother Nature had staked her claim, and his age-spotted skin wrinkled and sagged around the eyes and below the chin. But he levelled the pistol with a steady hand, and Dryers, who knew a thing or two about firearms, recognised it as a Swiss Arms AG, attached with a silencer. Perfect. So if the old codger shot him, his neighbours would be none the wiser, Sally would figure he was wilfully ignoring her and write him off completely, and no one would find him until morning, at the earliest, when he failed to report for work.

‘I’m not here to kill you,’ said the old man. He spoke like an old man, something wet and phlegmy in his throat.

‘Just to talk to me,’ Dryers repeated.

‘Yes. But first.’

The old man fished inside his suit coat pocket with gnarled hands and withdrew a little foil packet, which he tossed to Dryers.

‘Fluni—’ He sounded it out carefully. ‘Flunitrazepam. Wait, are you serious? You’re trying to roofie me?’

‘Take the pill, Mr Dryers.’

‘Who the hell are you?’

‘The sooner you swallow, the sooner I talk. The pill will take effect, and once you’re incapacitated, I’ll take my leave.’

‘Incapacitated. You mean, collapsed on the rug, face-planted in my own drool?’

‘I’m not unreasonable. You may relocate to the sofa.’

Dryers laughed to cover his fear. ‘This is barking mad, you know that?’

‘Don’t test my patience. Swallow the pill.’

‘And you’ll shoot me if I don’t?’

‘Are you familiar with a certain man by the name of Sebastian Moran?’

Quite outside of his control, the hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention as his mouth ran dry. He liked to think of himself as cucumber-cool, self-confident bordering on smug, and never easily ruffled. But in that moment, he could not deny that he was scared. When it came to Moran, no police officer was immune from the passing thought: he’d rather end up a Tony Pitts than a John Watson.

‘Of course,’ he managed to reply.

‘I’m worse. Mr Dryers: Take the pill.’

‘You know this causes amnesia. Don’t you? So whatever you have to say to me—’

‘You won’t remember me leaving. But you’ll remember this. Now, Mr Dryers. I grow impatient.’

He knew what would happen to him. He had seen cases in young men and women all over the city,
especially as a beat officer assigned to patrolling streets outside of clubs. As one of the most powerful sedatives on the market, he would soon fall into a state of complete muscle and skeletal relaxation and become irresistibly somnolent. And he would remain that way for hours. Eight, ten, twelve. He didn’t know. He’d never been roofied before. He was just familiar with the reports. But at the moment, he couldn’t recall if any of those cases had resulted in death.

‘This is by far the stupidest things I’ve ever done,’ he said, as with shaky fingers he tore into the foil and extracted an olive-green pill. ‘I can’t believe this, I just can’t believe this,’ he repeated to himself under his breath. It was like he was standing outside of his body, watching a man just like himself become an absolute idiot as he stuck out his tongue, placed the pill at the back of his throat, and tossed his head back, swallowing mightily.

The old man wasted no time.

‘When Tony Pitts was murdered on New Scotland Yard’s front doorstep, he left behind extremely sensitive information linking him to a host of conspiracies and the most dangerous and felonious organisation of the current century. It must be removed.’

‘Say what now?’

‘Naturally, your people have spent months dismantling his computers and phones, and examining every scrap of evidence in search of anything that might link him to Moran. But you are looking in the wrong place, and for the wrong evidence.’

‘Then what—?’

‘An unresolved case file from an incident that occurred October 4, 1996. Detective Inspector Pitts, as he was back then, is listed as the lead detective on the case. Only a hard copy of the case exists. The file must be found, and removed from the Yard.’

‘You want me to steal files. From New Scotland Yard. That’s . . . not something I can do. I don’t even have access to cold case files.’

‘I didn’t say cold, I said unresolved. But in either case, you’re just the messenger. Your access is limited. That’s why you’re going to convince Sgt Donovan to do it for you.’

Dryers felt like the gun had gone off, and he recoiled.

‘If I am not mistaken—and I know I am not—she does have access.’

‘No.’ Dryers shook his head, which was already beginning to feel heavy, and the movement made him a bit queasy. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Maybe if he’d eaten something, the drug wouldn’t be taking effect so quickly. ‘No, I can’t ask that of her.’

‘How quaint. A white knight.’

‘Hardly that. I mean, she’d never—’

‘You’ll convince her, Mr Dryers. That is your only worth to me. It’s Donovan I’m interested in, not you. You’re merely a means to an end, given that I cannot approach her directly. So besides your utility in mobilising her to action, I consider you utterly disposable. That is why you will do as I say, and why you will mention this conversation to no one save her. Not Greg Lestrade, not Luke Gregson, not your ailing mother in Soho. No one. Not if you value your life. And if Sgt Donovan values it equally, she’ll also keep silence. Won’t she?’
‘Well shit,’ said Dryers. His vision was starting to blur. If he knew one thing about Sally Donovan, it was that she would see justice done at whatever cost, even at great sacrifice. And she would never betray NSY. Dryers was as good as a lamb for the slaughter.

‘October 4, 1996,’ the old man repeated. ‘Say it.’

‘Four-ten-ninety-six.’

‘Tell Sgt Donovan to resolve the case. That’s her new assignment. Bill Murray is inconsequential; she need not waste her time with it.’

‘Bill who?’

‘Impress upon her the urgency of her solving this case.’

‘A nineteen-year-old case?’

‘You won’t be hearing from me again. Not if you do your job.’

‘And if I don’t, you’ll just come back to kill me. Is that it?’

The old man smiled. He pulled the trigger.

Dryers jolted in the chair and his body twisted wildly.

But he was unharmed. The gun wasn’t even loaded. All the same, being startled had unseated him: too groggy to regain control of his muscles, Dryers felt himself slumping out of the chair and falling to the floor, barely able to brace for the impact. Then, as he settled his head and body, the room spun around him.

‘You see, constable. I did not come to kill you. I never even had the chance. But I know how to get men to do as I command. In the interest of the greater good, of course.’

‘Wazzat s’posed to mean?’ Dryers mouth rubbed against the rug. He was so tired, he thought he might sleep for days. Maybe a week. He couldn’t fight it much longer. ‘You sayin’ you’re one of the good guys?’

‘Oh no, Mr Dryers,’ said the old man, as he faded from sight, and his voice became muffled as though Dryers had cotton shoved into his ears. ‘I am certainly not that.’
Sally Donovan knew she had a jealous streak. She was possessive of her rank as a detective sergeant, her specially assigned cases, and her personal life. Her mother and father called her protective, like when she had sicked the dog on her uncle’s first post-divorce girlfriend, not because Sally disliked the woman, exactly (though she did find it categorically difficult to bond with other women), but because this intruding stranger was keeping her uncle away from Sunday dinners and after-school football in the park. It wasn’t protectiveness at all, but downright, unadulterated jealousy.

It was an aspect of her personality she despised and so tried to smother, particularly after her affair with Anderson, about which she was deeply embarrassed. She was determined never again to play the role of ‘the other woman’, or to expect that anyone—any man, especially—owed her any of his time or attention. Inevitably, she would fail to receive it, and the bitterness and self-deprecation would begin to roil and froth. She would look after herself and demand nothing of anyone.

However.

She had grown accustomed to Thomas Dryers’ evening text messages, the ones she responded to with curt glibness or exaggerated disinterest, but which she never ignored. They had been out on what might be called a date only twice: the first because he had weaselled a favour out of her by playing on her guilty conscience for (mildly put) accusing him of treason. It had been awkward, given that her arm had been in plaster and she had to consent to his cutting her steak into bite-size chunks on her behalf. The second date had been a mistake altogether when, after a long night of paperwork at the Yard, it had happened that she glanced up and saw that it was just the two of them left in the room. After mutual confessions of hunger, they ended up at a twenty-four hour café where they shared a stale pork pie and cold chips, and chatted long into the night.

Since then, it had been text messages every night, with Dryers angling for another date and Donovan hedging, not sure what she wanted at all.

But when no text lit up her phone in the evening, and then into the night, she felt the all-too-familiar and unwelcome sensation of jealousy begin to peck away at her. She sat at home on the sofa watching telly, her phone on the armrest, screen up, and pretended she wasn’t waiting for it to buzz. It never did. Had he given up? Had she dangled him too long? Was she relieved by the silence, or disappointed? God, she was behaving like an adolescent moron.

At half eleven, she started to ready for bed and was halfway through brushing her teeth when she threw the toothbrush down, marched to the phone, and sent off a quick text of her own:

Don’t forget, Lestrade moved the debriefing to 8 sharp.

Pathetic. Dryers didn’t need the reminder; it was just an excuse to nudge him.

He didn’t nudge back.

She smashed a hand to the wall to turn off the lights before crawling into bed. When she couldn’t get comfortable, she punched the pillow and rolled onto her side, then the other side, then her back, staring up at the black ceiling.
At one in the morning, she threw the covers off and sat on the edge of the mattress, annoyed with Dryers, annoyed with herself, annoyed that she was annoyed. But something more than annoyance was niggling at the back of her mind. The thing was, it just wasn’t like Dryers to play that kind of game. Oh, he played games, certainly. And some of them went to the tune of Come and Get Me. But the silent treatment just wasn’t his style. And if his interest really had waned (the thought did something funny to her stomach), he wasn’t the kind of bloke to be evasive and hope things just fizzled.

She was dedicating far too much brainwork to his motives. And Donovan prided herself on being forthright. So despite the late hour, she pulled the charger cable out of her phone and called.

_This is Tom Dryers. I’m off doing better things. Leave a message at the beep, and maybe you can join me next time. Beep!_

‘Nob,’ she muttered, ending the call.

She abandoned the bed and padded down her short hallway to the kitchen where she’d left her radio. She found the right channel and clicked the call button.

‘Kim, this is Sgt Sally Donovan, do you copy?’

‘Loud and clear, sergeant, what’s your status?’

‘Off the clock. I’m trying to reach Constable Thomas Dryers, badge number 02891, unresponsive. Do you have him on radio?’

‘Attempting to contact Thomas Dryers. Stand by.’

Donovan waited.

A couple of minutes later, the radio crackled again. ‘Sgt Donovan, come in.’

‘I’m here.’

‘Sergeant, that’s a negative on Dryers. No response. Would you like me to issue a MISPER?’

She scraped her teeth along her bottom lip, thinking. ‘No, dispatch, I’m en route to his flat. I’ll verify his status within the hour. Over and out.’

***

The flat was silent, dark. Donovan knocked twice and rang the bell three times without response. But when she pulled out her phone to call, she heard it: a ringtone on the other side of the door. She pressed her ear to the door and listened as it carried on for twenty seconds and faded away.

She pounded on the door for the third time, insistently. ‘Dryers!’ Again, with a solid fist. ‘Dryers!’

The door to the adjacent flat cracked open, and a woman poked her head out. ‘Oi there, people are trying to sleep! I’ll call the police on you!’

Donovan unclipped the badge from her belt and thrust it in the woman’s direction. ‘I am the police. Now get inside.’

The woman eeped and slammed her door.

‘Shit,’ she muttered under her breath. She pulled out a small torch, walked to the other side of the
window, and tried to press the light through the blinds. After a few seconds’ examination, she saw, on the floor, the unmistakable shadowy form of a body. ‘Shit!’ she said again. She pulled out her radio.

‘Kim, I need an immediate dispatch and medical team sent to Henry Wise House on Vauxhall Bridge Road, flat 11A. Officer down. Repeat, officer down.’

‘Copy, sergeant, dispatch is on its way.’

Donovan returned to the door, wondering how she was going to break it down, wishing she had brought a gun, when she simply grasped the handle . . . and pushed. The door swung open. She rushed inside, hitting the nearest light she could find.

Dryers lay senseless on the rug, fully dressed in his police uniform, with no obvious signs of injury. A kitchen chair was set in the middle of the room. She reached down and checked Dryers for a pulse: it was strong, and she let out a great sigh of relief she hadn’t known was in her.

‘Dryers,’ she said firmly. ‘Dryers.’ He was unresponsive.

She quickly checked the rest of the flat and found it clear; then she returned to the front room to wait for the ambulance. Her thumb was poised to call Lestrade when she spotted a torn foil packet on the floor, on the other side of the chair. Snatching a tissue from a nearby box, she carefully picked it up from the floor and read its label: Flunitrazepam.

She grinded her teeth. ‘Oh, you son of a bitch.’

Red and blue lights flashed through the window.

***

Lestrade cancelled his early morning debriefing. Instead, he found himself at the hospital. Bart’s, not St Mary’s. And not to see Molly.

He was in a dour mood, the kind that made him uncharacteristically churlish and seeking a fight. On top of everything else—Mycroft’s attack, scrubbed CCTV footage at the hospital, an out-of-commission consulting detective, the mess down at Belmarsh, and his horror of an ex-wife—he now had to deal with an idiot constable.

‘I’m suspending him, the little shithead,’ he spat when he met up with Donovan in the waiting room. She had stayed the night in the hospital, but when Dryers had woken, she claimed no interest in seeing him, let alone talking to him.

Her arms folded and her chin lifted. A hard glint of steel flashed in her eyes. ‘What’d he say?’

‘Self-administered. He bloody well admitted it. Said he was curious, said he got it off of some kids on the street, said he thought it would be harmless.’

‘Will you book him?’

‘I don’t have a choice, do I? It’s a Class C drug offence. Suspension is only the beginning of his problems. I’m sending a drug squad to his flat right this minute to strip it to its bones and look for anything else. And if I find something, just one illicit pill, he’s sacked.’

She nodded sharply, but otherwise didn’t move a muscle.
'So anyway, he’s all yours,’ Lestrade said tiredly. He threw a thumb over his shoulder. ‘Have at him.’ He would take some satisfaction in knowing that, no matter the dressing down he’d already given, Donovan would punch twice as hard.

But Donovan made an about face and powerwalked in the opposite direction, toward the exit.

‘Donovan!’ Lestrade called. ‘He asked for you specifically!’

Feigning deafness, she didn’t so much as look over her shoulder or lift an offensive finger. But she betrayed herself enough when she reached the door and threw it open with a bang. Then she disappeared.

Lestrade sighed. Perhaps she was right. They had jobs to do. Donovan needed to get to Baker Street, and Lestrade to Belmarsh. Thomas Dryers could go to hell.

***

Donovan was halfway through punching in her initials in Morse when she remembered there was no more need for it. Baker Street now had a security system to rival the Bank of England.

They let her up, but she found them both on their feet, John zipping a jacket and Sherlock by the window, already in his coat, studying the street. He must have seen her come up and fumble with the buzzer.

‘We’re heading out,’ he informed her without bothering to turn around. ‘If this is to do with a case —’

‘It’s to do with your case. As ever. But you’re free to go, Holmes. It’s Watson I need to talk to.’

Sherlock slowly rotated from the window to regard her with an air of surprise. As if anything to do with John Watson had nothing to do with him!

‘Regarding?’

‘It’s about Bill Murray.’ John’s hands fell from the zip. ‘Isn’t it?’

Donovan gave a curt nod. ‘We’ve initiated a nondisclosed manhunt to police agencies throughout the country, and Lestrade’s assigned me as primary. I’m here to gather more information.’

‘A manhunt,’ Sherlock repeated, casting a side-long glance at John.

‘You think he’s a criminal,’ said John tightly. ‘Like Moran.’

‘We’re trying to establish his connection to Moran with something more substantial than that photograph. But he’s gone underground. His wife hasn’t seen him in months.’

‘Then are you sure he’s even still alive?’ Sherlock asked.

In her periphery, John stiffened and looked to the door.

‘He’s alive,’ she said. ‘He still makes contact with his wife, from time to time. But she doesn’t know how to find him.’

‘Do we have to do this now?’ John asked impatiently. ‘We’re on our way . . . out.’

Sherlock frowned, and Donovan shook her head. Sympathetic, their intent to visit Sherlock’s
brother. Reasonable, the suggestion that Murray might be dead. But neither sympathy nor reasonable objection had priority over the task at hand. ‘You’ll appreciate, I’m sure, that ferreting out Murray is already long overdue.’

Conceding, though not happily, John slowly began to remove his coat.

Sherlock casually unwound the scarf from his neck. ‘Then you might want to start by interrogating the man who has refused to name him.’

Digging her hands into her jacket pockets, she shook her head. ‘Stubbins is done talking. He’s dead.’

John froze, halfway out of his sleeves.

‘How?’ Sherlock demanded.

‘Belmarsh corrections officers found him dead in the showers. Toothbrush whittled down to a shiv was found in a drain. He bled out before he was discovered.’

‘When?’

‘Just a few hours ago.’

Slowly, John rotated away from her, and from Sherlock, apparently shocked by the news.

‘Who—?’ Sherlock persisted.

‘No witnesses. No suspects. Yet. No particular motive, either. Stubbins wasn’t a known target of any gangs or prisoners.’

‘He was a target in an attack last autumn.’

‘We know.’

‘I should—’

‘We’re looking at all angles,’ she continued. ‘Meanwhile, we have other irons in the fire, so to speak. And we never know just how time sensitive these things are, do we? Therefore.’ She nodded to John. ‘We need to talk.’

‘I’ll meet you there, Sherlock,’ said John.

‘I’ll stay.’

‘There’s no need,’ Donovan began.

‘Of course there is. You’ll miss something.’

She scoffed, grossly affronted. Lestrade might put up with such casual insults, but Donovan sure as hell didn’t have to. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Sherlock, you should be with Mycroft,’ said John, to ease the tension.

Quite unexpectedly, Sherlock went from placid to enraged in the blink of an eye. ‘Mycroft is a vegetable!’ He punched a closed fist down by his side. ‘I don’t know why we were even bothering to go in the first place!’ He balled his scarf and threw it aside; it landed in the ashes of the hearth.
John winced, and Donovan cringed, and in the ensuing quiet, Sherlock, who seemed to sense he had crossed some sort of line, took a harsh breath and sigh. But he didn’t appear any calmer when he said next: ‘Tea, sergeant.’

‘No, thank you,’ she murmured.

‘Water then. Sit.’

And he stomped off toward the kitchen.

John looked at her apologetically and extended a hand to his own armchair, which Donovan knew perfectly well was his, so often she had been in the flat. So she ignored the hand and pulled a chair from the table. Soon, Sherlock returned with a pitcher of water and three tumblers, and he proceeded to pour.

‘You may commence at any time,’ he said thinly as he passed her the glass.

Fighting against the impulse to snap at him that she knew damn well how to do her job, she accepted the glass and took a small sip. Sherlock settled himself in his own chair and crossed a leg over.

‘Let’s start with the last time you spoke to Bill Murray.’

‘Wrong.’

‘Holmes, I swear to God . . .’

‘Start at the beginning, John. The first time you met Bill Murray.’ He flashed a tight, fake smile at Donovan. ‘It’s the only logical place to start.’

John’s eyes spoke his apologies once again as he conceded to Sherlock’s request, not hers. But he seemed to be steeling himself, and his left hand was balled tightly in his lap. Then he began:

‘I’ve known Bill for years, even before we served together in Afghanistan. But Bill and I, we travelled in different circles, so it was a wonder we met before deployment. I did training at Sandhurst, he went to Pirbright. They’re only ten miles apart, but at the same time, when you’re in training, it’s like you’re in a bubble, and the world beyond the perimeter of the camp didn’t even exist. But sometimes, on the weekends, to escape the hell of training modules, the lads from both centres often met up in Frimley. There was a hospital there where we sometimes did rotations to keep our skills sharp, but more importantly, there was a pub. The Old Wheatsheaf. A bit posh for army boys, but as doctors and CMTs, we were tolerated well enough. That’s where I met him. He’d come with his lads, I came with mine. And we got on. He even met Harry a few times because, well, when she found out we were frequenting a pub . . . Anyway, Bill was a laugh. And God, that’s exactly what . . . That is, it was a time in my life when I needed a laugh. Anyway.’

He reached for his water and drank it half gone, and Donovan realised then that Sherlock hadn’t brought water for her benefit at all. It was for John.

‘Did he talk much about himself?’ she asked. ‘Family? Hobbies? Politics?’

‘Back then? No. Really, we didn’t know each other all that well. We were weekend mates, and all we talked about was sport and women. He had a girl waiting for him, like half the men there. That didn’t stop him from chatting up every skirt that walked past the table, but as far as I knew, he was faithful to his girl. We’d both played rugby, once upon a time, and we both pretended to still care about the English Premiership. He’d mentioned that his dad had passed, so we had that in
common, too. But really, we didn’t get personal. We were there to relax and have a good time. Med-speak was forbidden, army concerns were left at the barracks, and personal matters weren’t welcome at all. We were young, practically kids. We wouldn’t have known how to talk about that kind of stuff anyway. Just seemed like a regular bloke, same as any.’

‘Did he seem to take any interest in you, specifically?’

John shrugged. ‘Like I said, we got on. I’d say we were fast friends, but there was nothing particularly, you know, remarkable about it.’ His eyes met Sherlock’s for a moment, then fell away as he returned his glass to the side table. ‘Look. Bill’s a good guy. Always was. Not malicious, not conniving, not—’

‘What about easily manipulated?’ asked Sherlock.

John’s mouth opened, ready with a quick denial. But he closed it again.

‘What?’ Donovan pressed.

He shrugged, but it was the action of a man trying to convince himself more than anyone. ‘We were soldiers. We followed orders, no questions asked. And you do that long enough, you stop even thinking the questions. You just do. Obedience is drilled into you from day one. If you call that being manipulated . . .’

‘Trained to follow orders,’ she repeated. ‘Like those coming from, say, a colonel.’

John frowned. ‘Chain of authority, Sally.’ His voice hardened. ‘And he is not a colonel. Not anymore. Moran was stripped of his title and authority when he defected.’

She wasn’t convinced. ‘Trained is trained. And loyalties shift.’

Again, John’s eyes flitted to Sherlock, and away again just as quickly.

‘Let’s move ahead to—’ She cut off when her phone went off in her pocket. She had forgotten to silence it and muttered a quick apology while she dug her hand into her jacket and extracted the mobile. Her gut twisted when she saw that it was an incoming call from Thomas Dryers. A tendril of anger flared up and she smashed her finger against the button to silence him. She put it on vibrate and shoved it back into her jacket pocket.

‘Sorry. Moving on to when you were both deployed. Did you work closely together from the start?’

John shook his head. ‘My roulement unit was deployed first, about six weeks before Bill’s. I was with the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, first stationed at Camp Bastion in the Helmand province. This was 2006, and things were heating up. The Taliban attacks were becoming more violent, and the death toll was rising. Plenty of work for an army doctor, believe me. Thirty-nine of our troops died that year, the civilian count was in the hundreds, and it was only going to get worse. Every day, if we weren’t in the infirmary, we were in the backs of Land Rovers to collect the casualties and treat them either on site or transport them back. Sometimes we were caught in the crossfires; sometime we had to administer emergency aid in the sand. I remember falling asleep with my ears still ringing with the punch of gunfire or the whistle of rocket launchers. I smelt of other men’s blood even after showering. In that world, you either spend a lot of time thinking of loved ones back home, or you forget you ever had them. I was the kind to forget. It was easy. With my parents dead, I had no one to write me letters, drop the occasional email, send me birthday cards. Other men, for their wives’ birthdays or their kids’ first day of school, video chatted via satellite. I tried
that, a few times. With Harry. But she never remembered we had set a date.

‘That’s when I met Bill again. Private Murray, as he was. End of 2007. At that time, he’d nearly completed his specialist trauma course and would become a lance corporal by January. I had the hour to call home, in the com room, but Harry wasn’t answering her damn phone, so I was just sitting there, half listening, half not, to the conversation on the other side of the cubicle. Bloke talking to his girlfriend, laughing, teasing her about something or other, and in time, I realised that I recognised the voice. I’m surprised I didn’t pin him sooner: his voice is quite distinct. It’s not quite a lisp, just a thick tongue and a bonded retainer along his upper incisors. He used to joke that if he was ever blown to smithereens, they would identify him right away by those God-awful teeth. Anyway, he’d been reassigned to Camp Bastion because of our need for more CMTs, and that’s when we started working together, in and out of the camp. Traumas and surgeries and the like.’

‘What was your opinion of him?’ Donovan asked. The phone buzzed in her pocket. She pretended she didn’t notice.

‘As a professional? I would have given him a strong recommendation. Highly competent in his field. Quick learner. Reliable. The kind of CMT you want to have at your right elbow, you know?’

‘And aside from his professional capacity?’

‘Again,’ said John, ‘I considered him a friend. I don’t know what more I can say about that. Until I saw him in that photograph, I never had any reason to think anything else. Even now I’m not sure what to think. I know you want me to point to something murky in his past, something that says he’s been untrustworthy, that he’s been in league with the devil all along. You don’t think I haven’t been wracking my brain for days, trying to find something? Questioning everything he ever said or did, everything I ever knew about him? But still, still, I can’t see Bill as the kind of man who would do me deliberate harm. Any man harm. One thing I know for certain: he saved my life. He saved me. He’s the reason I’m alive today, right now, sitting in this flat, in this chair.’ John stared meaningfully at Sherlock now, and this time his eyes didn’t fall away. ‘I don’t forget a thing like that. I owe my life to any man who saves it.’

Holding her peace, Donovan sat as silent observer as the pair of them looked at each other, and if she weren’t a natural sceptic, she would have assumed a kind of telepathy transpiring between them. It was communication on some level at least, and for a moment, just a moment, she envied whatever bond held those two men together. Holmes and Watson. A stranger pair she couldn’t have named. And yet it made all the sense in the world.

It was Sherlock who broke the quiet.

‘The truth of Bill Murray,’ he said, his voice mellow but backlit by fire, ‘will come to light only when we find him. That is the point of this interrogation, is it not, sergeant? So let’s move on.’

Any envy of being the close compatriot of one Sherlock Holmes disappeared. Good lord, if she had to put up with that every day!

She controlled her face so as not to scowl. ‘When were you invalided home, John?’

‘October of 2009,’ said John. ‘Four days after I was shot, when it was safe to move me. I was in a military recovery ward for two weeks, here in London. That’s when they told me I would not be returning to active service.’

‘And Murray? When did he return?’
‘Um,’ said John, thinking. ‘Late November, it would have been.’
‘So soon after you?’
‘Might have been early December.’
‘Was he wounded in action?’
‘No no, nothing like that,’ said John. ‘It was medical.’ He cleared his throat. ‘DVT.’
Sherlock’s eyebrows lifted and he leant forward, elbows to knees. ‘DVT,’ he repeated.
‘What’s—?’ Donovan started.
John cut her off, glaring at Sherlock. ‘Deep vein thrombosis. A blood clot. And I know what you’re thinking, Sherlock.’
‘What’s he thinking?’ Donovan asked, ears pricked and senses alert to the suspicious charge emanating from the amateur detective.
Sherlock leant back again, and his fingertips joined together as he entered lecture-mode. ‘Untreated, DVT is potentially fatal and grounds for an honourable discharge from the service. It’s also notorious for being difficult to diagnose, often exhibiting few to zero symptoms, and accounting for the majority discharges based on documented but unproved medical complications.’
‘You’re saying he faked it?’
‘No,’ said John.
‘Possibly,’ said Sherlock.
‘Sherlock.’
‘He was a CMT, John. He would have known how to do it.’
Donovan nodded, intrigued by the theory. If Murray was indeed keeping an eye on John, even back then, he would need to find a way to get himself back to England to continue the job. The timing of his discharge was too suspicious, being so soon after John’s. But that would have meant a connection to Moran from at least six years ago, and that just didn’t make sense!
‘How did you find out about his blood clot?’ she asked.
‘He told me,’ said John, a little defensive now. ‘He was in London and we met up for drinks, and he mentioned that he was taking blood thinners for the DVT. And one does not take blood thinners for non-symptoms!’
‘Might have been lying,’ Sherlock murmured.
‘When was this?’ asked Donovan.
‘Uh, January, I guess. Mid to late Janu—’
‘Thursday, January 28, 2010,’ Sherlock rattled off, like a computer.
John huffed a short, bemused laugh. ‘How would you know that?’
‘You blogged about it. January 28, the day before your strange meeting with an arrogant, public school, though strangely likeable madman.’ The corner of Sherlock’s mouth drew up a tick.

‘Got that thing memorised, do you?’ John said, returning the grin.

‘Filed away.’

‘All right, boys, let’s stay on track,’ said Donovan.

John cleared his throat and conceded to the expert. ‘Late January, then.’

‘And how often did the two of you meet up? See him, or talk to him?’

‘Three, maybe four times, whenever he happened to be in London. He got married, started his family, so he had plenty to be going on with. And once I’d moved to Baker Street, life got busy for me too. I was working at the surgery, and when I wasn’t, there were Sherlock’s cases. Bill and I, though, we kept in touch. Mostly through the blog, I guess. He invited me to visit him in Edgware once or twice, but I never made the time, and he never insisted. But I know he read the blog. He commented frequently.’

‘During those three or four times, did he talk to you about any of his affairs?’

John started. ‘His what?’

‘Or perhaps mention any of the other women in his life, even just a name, someone he had a particular liking for or might go to if he were in trouble?’

‘God no. I thought . . . He was happy with Fran. Jesus, I can’t believe . . .’

For the third time, her phone buzzed insistently. Sherlock’s eyebrow rose. ‘Answer it, why don’t you?’

‘I’m working,’ she snapped. ‘Go on, John. Did Murray ever mention to you that he was struggling with PTSD?’

This seemed to surprise him, too. ‘No. Shit, that is, I didn’t know. I wouldn’t doubt it, but I didn’t know.’

‘Why wouldn’t you doubt it?’

‘We were in a war, Sgt Donovan. The things we saw and did every day is enough to give any man nightmares.’

‘How do you know Murray had PTSD?’ asked Sherlock. ‘And affairs?’

‘His wife,’ said Donovan. ‘She seemed to know for certain about the infidelity, but the PTSD was never diagnosed, as far as she knows. She just suspected.’ Why was she telling them this, as if they were part of her investigation? Berating herself, Donovan course-corrected. ‘So the last time you had any contact with Murray was when?’

John took another drink. ‘Not for years. Not since I last maintained the blog.’

‘March 16, 2011,’ Sherlock supplied. It was like he had studied for an exam. ‘Incidentally, the same day Jim Moriarty hacked your blog.’

‘March? Isn’t that when—?’ Donovan started, but her question was anticipated.
'When that spider broke into the Tower of London and stole the Crown Jewels? That was the 17th. Trial—and acquittal—was in April, and—'

'Your disappearing act was in June, yes, I remember,’ said Donovan.

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow, but she couldn’t tell whether he was insulted by her flippant characterisation of his faked suicide, or amused.

‘What did he say? Bill Murray. In his final comment on your blog?’

John shrugged. ‘Just some bad puns about the hound.’

‘And since then? He hasn’t left any comment on your last post? You know, the’—she searched for the most befitting word and could only settle on one—‘tribute?’

Sombre, John shook his head no.

‘No phone calls since last October, no emails, no post?’

‘Nothing, Sally.’

‘And since identifying Murray in the photograph last week, have you attempted to contact him?’

His chest swelled slowly with a long inhalation before he spoke. ‘I’ve been busy.’

‘Good. Don’t.’

‘Why not?’ asked Sherlock mildly, like goading a schoolteacher.

‘Like I said, he’s gone underground. No one has seen him since January, and the last time he called his wife was in March. He doesn’t know we’ve identified him in that photograph alongside Everett Stubbins, so he’s likely ignorant that we’ve connected him to this case at all. We don’t want to give him the heads up, do we?’

‘When?’ Sherlock pressed.

‘When what?’

‘When in March? What was the date?’

Donovan shook her head and closed her eyes, hating to give the answer. ‘If Mrs Murray remembers it right, it was the morning of March the 8th. No one has heard from him since.’

‘March 8,’ John whispered.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Sherlock. ‘What did he say!’

‘Sounded to me like a farewell,’ said Donovan.

‘He’s not—’ But John’s voice caught, and he couldn’t continue. His trembling hand reached for the tumbler on the table, but he seemed to think twice and retreated, lest he slosh water over his lap.

‘Exactly what efforts are being made to find him?’ Sherlock asked tightly.

‘Every effort. We’ve got eyes on his house twenty-four seven, and we’re tracking all incoming calls, monitoring his credit cards, using facial recognition software with CCTV. We have eyes on
the day nursery his oldest son attends, in case he tries to see his children. We’ve been to his last place of employment and interviewed colleagues and supervisors . . .’ She trailed off, realising she was actively reporting her progress. ‘We’ve got it covered, and Bill Murray is my number one priority. I’m going to ferret out this bastard.’

‘You’re making a mistake,’ John whispered. His voice was strained with emotion, quavering as though out of fear but fuelled by anger. ‘You think he’s a criminal, but he’s not. He can’t be.’

‘I hope that’s true.’ But Donovan knew her sad attempt at appeasing him rang hollow. ‘But his name is embroiled in too much suspicion. I cannot imagine him an innocent in all of this.’

‘He’s missing, goddammit, like I was missing. Isn’t it more likely he’s being held against his will? What if they’re hurting him, starving him, torturing him, like they did to me?’

‘And letting him call home?’ Donovan said dubiously, but Sherlock’s challenge was more to the point.

‘What for, John? What would be the point?’

‘To get to me! To get to you! That’s what all of this has been about, every bit of it! They’re going after what few friends I have left.’

‘You’re not thinking rationally. Bill’s involvement stretches back to last summer, at least. The photograph proves it. He went missing only last January.’

‘That doesn’t mean he was free. They may have been threatening him otherwise, making him . . . do things. Against his will. I can’t believe he’s complicit in any of it. I just can’t.’

‘Well, we won’t know until we find him, will we?’ said Donovan. ‘Victim or not, we need to find him. On that, I’m sure we can agree.’

John glared, but through misty eyes. His conceding nod was curt at best.

‘So like I said’—she rose to her feet—‘don’t make contact. But if he contacts you, for whatever reason, you’ll tell me, won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock, but he was looking at John, whose pale face made Donovan think maybe he was about to be sick. She should leave.

She was buttoning her jacket and had turned toward the door, about to offer a cursory thank you for the water, when Sherlock said, a little softly, ‘John.’

Donovan turned back, thinking the conversation was still ongoing. Only, with the intensity of the stare Sherlock was directing at John, and the way John was looking back at him—head bowed and fists clenched, but looking back all the same—she realised that, as far as they both were concerned, she was no longer even in the room.

‘Guilty or not, Murray will lead us to Moran. You know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ John said, or at least tried to. His breath struggled to bypass the thickness of his throat.

Donovan didn’t—couldn’t—understand it, whatever it was that made it work. Them. Their friendship, bond, co-dependency, whatever it was. She didn’t understand how John made an insufferable Sherlock Holmes tolerable, or how Sherlock made a broken John Watson whole. It was incomprehensible, to her at least, why either of them would gravitate toward the other to begin
with. At the start, they had seemed utterly incompatible. So why did they make sense now?

And it was with a stroke of horror that she realised she wanted . . . that. Well, whatever the hell it was they had. Not that she bought stock in the rumour mill down at the Yard about what they were, or ever had been. Nevertheless, it was something enviable, their partnership, and some version of it, she wanted for herself. She was tired of being, well, alone.

Quite unwittingly, she thought of Dryers, and as she did, the phone yet again vibrated against her hip. Furious, she squeezed it through the fabric to shut it up.

Abruptly, Sherlock rose to his feet. ‘Thank you, Sgt Donovan, that will be all. Give the impatient caller in your pocket my regards.’

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‘Curious, isn’t it, John?’

Sherlock watched Donovan stride away from the front door, glance once at her phone, and ram it back into her pocket without taking or making a call. Behind him, John was reaching again for his coat, but Sherlock made no move to do the same.

John made an inquisitive hum.

‘Less than a week after Bill Murray is identified, Everett Stubbins, the one man we know can give us information about him, ends up dead before he can be questioned. Let us think. Why should such a thing happen? How many of us knew Murray was the man in the photograph?’

There was a long pause. Slowly, Sherlock rotated from the window. John stood stock still, face blank, eyes cast downward at his shoes.

‘There was me and you, Lestrade and Molly—’

‘Lestrade would have told the Yarders,’ said John.

‘Yes.’

John shifted his weight, lifted his head. A small light of defiance shone in his eyes.

‘Perhaps another spy,’ Sherlock suggested mildly.

John quirked his head. ‘Perhaps Stubbins just got unlucky.’

‘Pity.’

‘Yes.’

Another long pause followed as Sherlock waited for John to contribute something greater to the conversation. A little more concern, a touch more horror, or something more specific. But there was nothing. Instead, John said, ‘We should get to going . . .’

‘Mycroft isn’t going anywhere,’ Sherlock said shortly. ‘You and I. We have work to do, wouldn’t you say?’

‘What work?’

‘Bill Murray. We’re going to find him.’
At last, John’s expression broke, revealing exasperation. ‘We just promised Donovan—’

‘I said that only to appease her and circumvent a pointless row. In fact, let’s make this a game. First one to Murray wins.’

‘Sherlock. This isn’t a game.’

‘Oh come now, John, I should think you would jump at the opportunity. You think Murray’s above reproach? Let’s find him first and verify it for ourselves, before London’s finest get the wrong idea and haul him away with flashing lights. What do you say?’

John pursed his lips and half turned away to hide his expression, but Sherlock didn’t need to see it to know what was really behind his objection. He was afraid to find Murray and discover that he was not, in fact, above reproach. But if that were the case, then didn’t John deserve to be the one to know it first?

‘Please, John. I can do this. I can find him.’

‘Why does it have to be you?’ John asked. His throat was tightening again.

‘Because I haven’t—’ He stopped, not quite knowing what he was trying to say, or rather, how to say it. ‘I haven’t had a win for a long, long time. But I can solve this one. Please. Come with me. Let’s solve it together.’

The cool flint melted from John’s eyes, transforming into the soft grey Sherlock had grown to rely on. ‘We sure could use a win,’ he said.

‘So you’ll come with me.’

‘Of course. Of course I will.’ He nodded, not for Sherlock’s sake, but for his own. ‘Let’s go find Bill.’

***

‘Are you sure you want to do that?’

Sherlock’s eyes lifted from the board, only to see a sinister grin and two black eyes staring him down. Pointedly, he lifted his finger from the white knight, his turn completed.

Moriarty tsked. ‘Risky, Sherlock, quite, quite risky. Foolhardy, even, exposing your knight like that.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Ooh. Rather cocky today, aren’t we?’ Moriarty leant back and stretched out his legs, elbows bent and hands behind his head serving as a headrest. ‘I like cocky-you. Hubris, is what it is. You know what that leads to, don’t you?’ He tipped his head back and whistled a high-pitched note, which gradually descended a sliding scale as his head slowly fell forward.

‘Not this time,’ said Sherlock, before Moriarty could reach the end.

‘The wheel turns. Nothing is ever new.’

‘The last domino doesn’t have to fall. I can stop it.’

‘You’re not a hero. And he’s not ready.’
‘He’s stronger than you know.’

‘A wildcard. He’s gone rogue.’

‘I’ll join him.’

‘You don’t control his fate, sweetheart.’

‘I should never have tried.’

Moriarty smiled his devilish smile. ‘You’re kidding yourself. You do know that. He’ll end in disaster, Sherlock. He always does.’

Sherlock leant into the table and fixed Moriarty with an unwavering glare. ‘Not this time.’
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2015

Sherlock had his suspicions, but he had to make sure.

His sock drawer was tidy, just as he’d left it. But he dug around in the back, fingers scraping for the filched IDs, and returned with three. He knew perfectly well that he had stolen four. He also knew that only one other person (well, besides Lestrade) knew of it: not only the count, but where he stashed them. For emergencies, of course.

John was out for his appointment with Ella, but Sherlock still double checked the street before climbing the second flight of stairs to John’s bedroom. He didn’t want to go snooping, but really, what choice did he have? It’s fine, he thought. What’s good for the goose, etcetera.

As ever, John’s room was immaculate. He was sleeping here again, dressing here, but not much else. It wouldn’t take long to search the place, assuming the pilfered identification was within these four walls. And Sherlock was confident that it was. John wouldn’t have destroyed it, or tossed it in a bin, or left it carelessly somewhere downstairs. Nor would he have kept it in his wallet, just in case he was for some reason caught with a copper’s ID. All that, added up, meant it was in the bedroom. Sherlock just had to find it.

First, he turned to the wall, where hung a replica of Gilbert Rogers painting of an RAMC stretcher-bearer from 1919. It had been at Mycroft’s urging that John purchase something for this wall, a mirror or poster, but more properly a piece of artwork, and shortly thereafter John had placed an order online for this painting and its wooden frame. Carefully, Sherlock lifted it off the wall and set it aside, revealing the metal plate to the safe built into the wall. He ran his thumb over the reader and spoke clearly: ‘Bluebell.’ The safe door clicked open.

Inside were the two pistols, eight boxes of ammo, and five knives Mycroft had stocked him with, along with John’s additions of a taser, emergency kit, matches, lighters, candles, backup charger, canteen, binoculars, and a passport for someone named Joseph Conan. But no copper’s ID.

Sherlock replaced the painting and turned next to the desk, methodically checking the two side drawers. In the top, notebook paper and pens and some torn envelopes containing a handful of sympathy cards. He flipped through the papers quickly and put it all back as he found it. In the second drawer, a short stack of medical books, journals, and folders. Having failed to find his quarry in either drawer, he turned to the long drawer beneath the sliding surface for a keyboard.

Along with pens and pencils, a few old receipts, and psychotherapy pamphlets and exercises, he found a spiral-bound notebook. The page count was 150, but Sherlock could tell, just by picking it up, that it fell quite short of that number. Furthermore, the wire spiral was filled with stripped, ragged paper edges, from the dozens of pages that had been torn from the notebook.

He didn’t intend on reading anything, he really didn’t. His only purpose had been to flip through
the pages quickly in search of the ID. But Sherlock couldn’t stop his eyes from seeing any more than he could stop his ears from hearing. The pages were filled with John’s untidy scrawl, some of it crossed out or scribbled through, but much of it still legible, and the words floated up to him:

Most nights, while trying to fall asleep, I wonder what it would feel like,
a silver scalpel slashing my throat. I think I know. Did she feel much pain?
Did she know she would die, even before they brought her to me?
I think she knew.

Not wanting to read further, Sherlock flipped the page so hard he almost ripped it, but John’s words continued.

. . . when we die? If I knew I’d see her again, would I kill myself and speed things along, knowing I’d see her within the hour? But maybe that’s not how it works. What if, instead, you meet not loved ones but those you wronged in this life. First you have to face the fact that you’re the monster. Maybe that’s the difference between heaven and hell.

He flipped again.

Ella won’t let me forget the details. There is no healing in hiding, she says.
It’s just so hard, and she says she understands, but I don’t think that’s possible.
I’ve told her that what I remember is pain. Just that. She says I need to write out the sources of the pain. I’m trying.

Sherlock continued flipping pages, faster now. Some had been torn out, presumably destroyed, but what was left behind was haunting. The word Mary rose off the page like champagne bubbles, but so did the words blood and scalpel and Moran. A few pages on, and the words became rape and Daz and

. . . didn’t care that I was crying. He had me on my back this time, and his hands were around my throat. Lex was laughing. I don’t remember what Pete was doing. But Moran wasn’t even in the room. He gave Daz permission and left. Daz was so heavy. Every thrust was like being crushed . . .

. . . I want him dead. Dead. It isn’t enough that he be arrested, tried, convicted, imprisoned. Not enough. He needs to suffer. Agonising pain, that’s what he deserves. A slit throat, a slashed back. I owe him . . .

. . . God, who have I become? These dreams. They’re not like the old dreams.
I’m scaring myself . . .

He stopped reading, and slapped the pages closed. These were private writings, and he was sorry he had intruded upon them. For a second, he regretted coming into the room at all. If there were things John didn’t want to tell him, then there were things Sherlock didn’t have a right to know. But he was torn. He had already observed the missing ID from his sock drawer. He had already deduced John had been to Belmarsh. He felt compelled, still, to find the final proof.

So he proceeded, returning the notebook to the drawer. Then, in a perfunctory sweep, he dug his hand to the back of the drawer and found just two items resting together. The first was a crystal ashtray Sherlock hadn’t seen in almost five years. He’d nearly forgotten it, and it stunned him to see it now. And sitting in the bowl of the ashtray was a gold key. He picked it up and held it before his eyes. It was the key to the front door of 221B, from before they had changed the locks, the same key Sherlock had left John on Porters Avenue.
The items gave him pause. While John had made it clear how he felt about him, Sherlock had
never taken him for nostalgic. His brand of sentiment was for people, not things, and he hadn’t
seemed the sort to keep keepsakes. John didn’t carry childhood memorabilia or have a drawer or
box of knickknacks collected over the years. He didn’t display photographs of his family, with the
exception of Mary: the photograph Lestrade had given him rested in a new frame on the
nightstand, beside the lamp. And the only physical object Sherlock could name from John’s past
that possibly held any emotional significance was the RAMC mug he’d brought with him to Baker
Street the first time, and then again the second. The mug was currently downstairs, beside the
laptops. But now, there were these.

Sombre, Sherlock replaced the key inside the crystal ashtray, and the ashtray in the drawer. Then
he gently shut them away.

He turned the pillows and checked under the bed and between the mattresses. At last, he turned to
the wardrobe. There, in the inner pocket of John’s nicest suitcoat, he found it: Lestrade’s
credentials, including photo, badge number, and the title of Detective Inspector of New Scotland
Yard, London.

‘Dammit,’ he muttered under his breath.

His suspicions were confirmed: John had been to Belmarsh. Under the guise of detective inspector,
he had visited Everett Stubbins, talked to him, asked him questions. Those things didn’t bother
Sherlock. In fact, he admired it. What did bother him, however, was that John had gone alone. And
lied.

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‘No cane?’

John flashed one of his tight smiles as he gripped the armrests to lower himself into the chair. ‘Dr
Harper reckons I should go a few hours a day without it. Rebuild muscle strength, increase
flexibility, restore balance. That sort of thing.’

Dr Thompson nodded approvingly. ‘Physiotherapy going well, then?’

‘Well enough.’ He grinned tightly again, but he knew she deserved a more thorough answer.
Brevity, she had told him on more than one occasion, was a form of self-deceit, and he wasn’t
doing anyone any favours by lying to himself. So he considered what she was really asking him.
‘In two days, it will be six months exactly since the night I was shot. Six months, and sometimes
it’s like it’s been only six days. On and off, a sharp pain jerks me awake in the middle of the night.
Most mornings, I still wake up with nerve numbness up and down my leg, sometimes all the way
down to my foot, sometimes along my hip and groin. I do Dr Harper’s home exercises to restore
feeling. I massage the skin and muscles. I get the blood flowing and the muscles oxygenating, and
sometimes it works, and sometimes I’m stiff for hours. I don’t want that cane. I hate it. But I need
it. I think I’ll always need it.’

‘What does Dr Harper think?’

‘Nine to twelve months.’ He sighed. ‘Then he’ll reassess and tell me what he really thinks.’

‘Has that sixth-month mark been weighing on your mind?’

‘Yes.’ The answer left his mouth before his brain had fully considered the question, so he knew it
was true. He didn’t like the fact that a calendar always seemed to hang before his eyes. Six months
ago, he was dying in the basement of a convent. Twelve months ago, he and Mary had taken a short holiday to Stonehenge. Only the month before that, he had moved to Porters Avenue. It was the same day and month he had posted his defence of Sherlock to the blog for all the world to see. Four months from now, he would be alone in commemorating the day, two years ago, he had met her. Six months from now, he would remember the day he had lost her.

Two months from now, he would remember the day he had lost Sherlock. But Sherlock had come back. He had lost Mary, and Sherlock had come back. He supposed he would remember that day, too, for the rest of his life.

‘Talk to me, John. You’re retreating again.’

That’s what she called it. Retreating. He doubted she meant to conjure in his mind the image of a soldier on a battlefield, outnumbered, outgunned, and fleeing from the fight. But every time she said it, that’s precisely what he thought. So he shouldered his rifle, took aim, and breathed.

‘I wish I were healing faster,’ he said. ‘Six months, and I’m still having the same nightmares. And adding new ones to the rotation.’

‘We’ve talked about—’

‘I know. I know. And I’m tired of hearing that these things take time. I know that. I just hate hearing it. I mean, when do we get there? When is the healing done? When will I be . . . happy again? What if I’m, you know, stuck? Maybe I’ve reached the end. This is my end, this state. A wonky leg and a twisted mind, and that’s it until the day I die. So no matter how badly I want to get better, no matter how hard I work on the leg or how many hours I spend in this chair, this is it. This is as far as it goes.’

Ella smiled softly. ‘You really don’t see it?’

He shook his head. ‘See what?’

‘John, it wasn’t that long ago that you sat in that very chair and told me why you had come back to me.’

‘I had to. If I hadn’t . . .’

‘You were afraid of yourself, and of what you might do. To Sherlock, for one, but also to your landlady and friends. You were also afraid that, if you didn’t get help, then all they did to save you would have been wasted effort. You were living for them.’

‘Aren’t I still?’

‘Yes, but you’ve added yourself to that list. Not long ago, you couldn’t see beyond tomorrow. Now you’re looking further down the road, into the distant future, and wondering what life will be like. Not long ago, you told me that happiness was not a priority for you. Now you’re asking, when will I get there?’

‘Will you be recommending me to a tarot reader, then?’ John asked, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips.

Ella laughed. ‘You don’t need one. I can tell you myself: you’re already walking the path. You’re learning to smile again. Your appetite is back. Your sleeping is more restful.’

*Some nights*, thought John.
‘So no, you may not be one hundred percent, but don’t count your progress as nothing. In only six
months, you’ve made incredible strides, because you’re the kind of person who keeps moving
forward, no matter how hard things get. You may still be in the thick of it, but that’s exactly why
it’s so hard to see how far you’ve come. And that’s why you have me, to show you.’

‘It’s true, though, isn’t it?’ said John. ‘PTSD is a life-long affliction.’

‘A lot of factors influence one’s recovery. But yes, for many, the disorder is one that must be
managed over a lifetime. I can’t promise you that you’ll never find yourself in the basement again,
in your dreams. I can’t promise that you’ll ever be entirely at peace with your body, or the scars in
your skin. Or that you’ll ever want to have sex again.’

John sniffed and winced, pulling his eyes away.

‘But you can manage these things, John, and live a very happy, very fulfilling life, all the same.
Your past will always be yours, and the bad sits alongside the good. The future will be much the
same, with both good and bad. But there can be so much good.’

Forcing another grin, John nodded. He didn’t disbelieve her. But he didn’t fully believe her, either.
That was progress too, of a sort.

‘So today,’ she said.

‘Today.’

‘You choose.’

This was a new tactic they were trying. At the end of every session, Dr Thompson gave John three
topics to consider for their next session. He would go home, think about what he was willing and
able to talk about, and do some freewriting on the subject to help him sort out his thoughts. Then,
when he returned, he would offer his selection, and they would proceed from there. This gave him
more control over their sessions and his own progression, while still working within the
psychiatrist’s parameters. Last time, she had given him three topics he had in the past deftly
avoided or outright refused to talk about: sex after rape, Mary’s violent death, and killing Darren
Hirsch.

Addressing any of those was like tackling a giant—and David had lost his sling. But of those three,
only one jar had already been cracked open, if only a little. He could allow for a wider fissure.

He had prepared.

‘The first one, then,’ he said.

‘Please name it.’

That’s right. She was no longer allowing such evasions or euphemisms. Rape had a name, and he
was to use it. ‘You asked me how I feel about sex. In light of . . .’ Say it, John. You’ve done it
before. ‘After being raped.’

‘And you feel prepared to talk about this today? You did some freewriting to sort your thoughts?’

‘Yes.’ His mind conjured the images of a spiral-bound notebook he kept in the topmost drawer of
his desk. He had a bargain with himself, to write daily and reread what he’d written, and not be
ashamed. But he cheated. There were dozens of pages he had destroyed.
‘All right. Good, John. Then, to help ease us into the waters, I’m going to begin with a short questionnaire, all right?’

He nodded. While she pulled out a page from the binder on her lap, John popped the cap on his water bottle and wet his tongue and throat. He shifted in the chair, readying himself.

‘Some of these questions may be uncomfortable, but I’d like you to answer them all.’

‘Kay.’

‘One.’ She poised her pencil on the page. ‘In general, before your rape, how would you rate your desire to have sex? Very strong, strong, moderate, mild, very mild, or non-existent.’

‘Before?’

‘Generally speaking, let’s say, in the six months prior.’

He thought of Mary. ‘Strong,’ he said.

‘And since the rape event?’

John cleared his throat. ‘Non-existent.’ These days, he almost couldn’t remember what desire had once felt like.

She ticked a box. ‘Next. How often do you think about your rape? Not often, once in a while, one to two times a week, three to five times a week, daily, multiple times a day, every hour.’

‘Multiple times a day.’

She ticked another box. ‘When do you most often think about your rape? I’m going to read you a list of answers. Just tell me yes, no, or sometimes. When you dress or undress.’

‘Yes.’

‘When you use the toilet.’

‘Yes.’

‘When you bathe.’

‘Yes.’

‘When you watch telly.’

‘Depends. Not as often anymore. I’ll say no.’

‘When you eat.’

‘Sometimes.’

‘When you are in the company of close friends or family.’

‘Sometimes.’

‘When you are in public spaces.’

‘Yes.’
‘When you lie in bed at night.’

‘Yes.’

‘Can you think of other times during the day not mentioned here that you find yourself most often thinking about your rape?’

John pinched his fingers into the bottom of the plastic bottle until he heard little snaps and cracks. ‘I suppose when I’ve got nothing else to think about. So I try not to let that happen.’

She nodded but didn’t comment, only made a note. ‘On a scale of one to five, how would you rate your average level of anxiety when you think about your rape during these daily activities, one being low or manageable, five being high or debilitating.’

John thought. ‘Two to three. Is that an option?’

‘I’ll pencil in a two-plus,’ said Ella. ‘Since your rape, have you had sex?’

‘No.’

‘Do you masturbate, and if so, how often?’

‘No, never.’

‘When was the last time you had an erection?’

It was as if he hadn’t wetted his tongue at all. Instead, his palms were dampening, and his heartrate was up a few ticks. He breathed, long, slow, deliberate breaths. ‘While I was—mmm,’ he groaned, struggling to continue. He balled his fist on his thigh and simplified the answer. ‘Six months ago.’

Ella looked up from the questionnaire. ‘When was the last time you had an orgasm or ejaculated?’

_Slowly in. ‘Six months ago.’ Slowly out._

She paused and asked delicately, ‘Was this prior to, during, or after your captivity?’

God, was this over yet? ‘During. It was . . . during.’

‘I understand. We’ll set that aside for now. Next question: What three words would you use to describe how you feel about your body?’

This was getting tougher. ‘Er, uh . . . ’ He closed his eyes, searching for the most honest answers. ‘Marred. Breakable.’ He sighed out a shaky breath. ‘Transport.’

She jotted these down. ‘What three words would you use to describe how you feel about sexual intercourse?’

‘For myself?’

‘Yes.’

‘Um. Then, I suppose . . . ’ _Honesty, John. She can’t help you if you lie._ ‘Painful. Abhorrent. And . . . dangerous.’

‘Do you see yourself entering into a physical relationship within the next year, the next two years, the next five years, the next ten years, or never?’
His answer here came swiftly. ‘Never. I’m done, Ella. I don’t want that. Not anymore. Not ever again.’

She moved her hand away from the questionnaire. ‘Tell me what you mean.’

‘Well, it’s a choice, isn’t it? And I’ve made mine.’

‘What choice is that?’

‘Sherlock.’

‘You’ve chosen Sherlock,’ she recast, ‘as a partner?’

‘Yes. We’re partners. Oh. I see what you— No, it’s different to the way people think. But I’ve chosen him. I’ve chosen a life with him. The life we share together, that life—it’s dangerous. It will always be dangerous. It’ll take everything I am to keep him safe, and I can’t—’ His throat closed off for a moment. He grunted and pushed through it. ‘I can’t risk anyone else getting too close to that. I’ve learnt my lesson. Bad things happen to people who get too close to us. And after Mary—’ It happened again. He cleared his throat mightily and sniffed firmly. ‘I loved Mary. I love her still. I’ll never love another woman the way I loved her. I wouldn’t trust myself to. I . . . I wouldn’t do that to another woman. Mm? So a physical relationship? Even if I thought I could—and I don’t—I wouldn’t.’

‘Perhaps the answer, then, is obvious, but I’ll ask it anyway. You don’t trust yourself or anyone else with physical intercourse. Is that a fair statement?’

He nodded.

‘Do you see a distinction between physical intercourse and other forms of physical affection?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You trust Sherlock.’

‘Yes.’

‘There’s an emotional intimacy between you, is that right?’

‘I suppose so, yes.’

‘Then would you trust him with physical intimacy, physical affection, further down the road?’

John smiled softly and shook his head. ‘That’s not what I meant when I said partner.’

‘All I’m saying is, in cases where trust and emotional intimacy are already established—’

‘No, no, I know what you’re saying. But Sherlock and I, we’re . . . something else.’ He tried to explain something he’d never really explained to himself. ‘I do trust him. I love him. But he’s not like that. I’m not either. I never wanted anything physical with him, before he died, and certainly not now, not when I can’t even . . . touch myself.’

‘A related question, then,’ said Ella, ‘and our last. We’ve addressed it before, though not exactly in this context. Would you consider yourself touch-averse?’

‘I’m getting better. It’s nowhere near as bad as before.’
'That’s a yes, then?'

John sighed. ‘Yes.’

‘On a scale of one to five, one being tolerable and five being intolerable, how would you rate your level of aversion to being touched?’

He considered the question, but there were too many factors to comfortably settle into a Likert scale. For one, it depended entirely on who, and where, and when, and why, and how, and for how long. As long as it wasn’t a surprise. Yes, an unexpected touch either set his skin crawling or heart racing, but if he saw it coming . . . And as long as he wasn’t touched on his back. Or too high on the thigh, naturally. Or around his neck, again, for obvious reasons. Or against his stomach or chest, for too long, particularly the left side. And the left shoulder, well, that was a bit off limits, too. And his feet. He hated it when Dr Harper touched the bottoms of his feet. It made him want to kick the man in the mouth. Then there were the wrists. Well. He didn’t mind, so much, if Sherlock touched those scars. As long as he wasn’t caught off his guard. And he didn’t mind being embraced. By Mrs Hudson, for one, or perhaps Molly, or Sherlock. He could tolerate that, too.

But, he supposed, he wasn’t as far along as he wished.

‘Four,’ he said sullenly.

‘Better than five,’ Ella said with a sad smile.

‘Yeah. Go me.’

‘It is improvement, John. You’ve come a long way, but we’re not done yet. It seems that many of these issues—sex antipathy, touch aversion—are not surprisingly tangled with the rape event. So we’re going to continue with the prolonged exposure therapy we began a few weeks ago. Because while choosing to lead a celibate life is not itself an unhealthy choice, choosing it based on feelings of fear, pain, danger, and abhorrence is not healthy. So we’ll revisit that question again in future, and in the meantime, we need to address head-on the specifics of the rape event itself, and the emotions associated with it.’

This was not new. Ever since he had returned to her a traumatised victim of torture and horrific loss, she had been engaging him in prolonged exposure therapy. The theory behind it was that repeated exposure—which was to say, re-experiencing the trauma over and over again through repeated narration or writing, or a combination—would decrease anxiety about, anger over, and fear of the event while at the same time increasing coping skills. He was slowly becoming desensitised to the raw horror of it. It was not unlike treating wounded soldiers on the battlefield. The first time a boy had been brought to him with his stomach half blown away and entrails hanging out, he was besieged with nausea and had to leave the tent. Three months later, he didn’t even blink. John had to admit the therapy was efficacious. At least, he was able to talk about the abduction now, and the beatings, and even the carvings with a fairly functional level of detachment.

But they hadn’t addressed in detail Mary’s death yet; it was another door he had been avoiding. He could at least talk about her, though. For a long while, it was too painful to even say her name. He couldn’t say, exactly, when that changed. But one morning, he woke up, and suddenly it was possible to think of her fondly, and not drown in the sadness of her memory.

Another thing he had trouble talking about, or even giving a name to? The rapes. He’d said the word aloud now, and with Ella’s help had been able to recall the number of times it had happened, and the details of each instance. But now, she deemed, they were ready to confront them more
directly. Prolonged exposure. It had another name. Flooding. But she wasn’t using that word.

Trying to hide his fear, John nodded stiffly.

‘All right. Take another drink.’ She set aside the questionnaire. ‘And remember your safety zone.’

John closed his eyes and saw the sitting room at Baker Street. As was now his personal strategy, he placed an imaginary Sherlock in his leather chair, holding his violin and wearing his imperious *whenever-your-ready-John* expression. He also made sure his own armchair remained empty. Someone else had occupied it before. He wouldn’t allow that again. ‘I’m ready.’

‘We’re going to talk about the first rape, John. Today, only that. Take your time, and begin when you’re ready.

He breathed in and out slowly, fully, allowing his ribcage to expand as he filled himself with calming oxygen. He could do this. He had to do this. This was how he recovered. This was how he became master of himself again. If he couldn’t do that, he couldn’t hunt Moran, or protect Sherlock, or get justice for Mary. This was the way, and the only way. He had to face his demons.

‘It was the eighth day,’ he began, ‘of my captivity. And they had me on the floor.’

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Of course, one of the very first things Lestrade asked the officer was whether Stubbins had had any recent visitors. The officer pulled out a binder, licked his thumb, and flipped backward through a log-in registry.

‘Just you, sir,’ said the man.

‘Eh?’

He had been expecting a ‘Nope, not for weeks’ or ‘Just his dear old mum last Thursday.’ What he was not expecting was to see his own name—DI Greg Lestrade—and accompanying badge number written on the ‘In’ line of the registry and marked at 11.02 on Monday morning, and his initials on the ‘Out’ line at 11.21.

The corrections officer took no note of his surprise, nor made any indication that he remembered seeing him. Likely, a different officer had been on shift. He thought fast, and with Holmes-like rapidity deduced what was very likely the most plausible explanation: Sherlock. It wasn’t the first time he’d impersonated the detective inspector, and Lestrade knew damn well that over the years Sherlock had lifted no fewer than four ID badges off him and kept them ferreted away, despite repeated empty threats to arrest him. God, he was such a pushover. When it came to Sherlock, at least. He knew he had a blind spot. But was it really a blind spot if one knew about it? At what point did it become wilful ignorance?

So he did his duty, pretending he’d been there just two days before, and therefore just hours before Stubbins, former officer of New Scotland Yard, had met his unhappy end. He proceeded to interview the prison guards and some of the inmates who had known him, but there had been no direct witnesses to the event, and he left dissatisfied. Naturally, his next stop was Baker Street.

He decided to arrive unannounced and corner Sherlock with the accusation, demanding to know what he had spoken to Stubbins about and to ask, dear God, had he anything to do with the man’s death? He wanted the story directly from Sherlock’s own lips before his meeting with Gregson. The chief superintendent was a reasonable man, but he didn’t suffer the same blind spot as Lestrade did.
But Sherlock wasn’t at home. Nor was John. Mrs Hudson said she’d heard Sherlock go out less
than an hour ago, and there was no telling when either of them would be back, but would he stay
for a cuppa? He was tempted—a respite from police work was always welcome and seldom
claimed—but graciously declined. There were more pressing matters. With a sigh, he thought,
weren’t there always?

He thought of showing up unexpectedly at Mycroft’s penthouse and cornering Sherlock there, if
that’s where he happened to be. But Anthea was very clear about limiting the traffic to and from
the flat, so as not to draw unnecessary attention. She insisted, instead, that all visits be cleared
through her.

So he phoned, first, at which point he was told that Sherlock had not been to see Mycroft for two
days now.

‘And what about you?’ he asked. ‘Tell me you go home to sleep, at least.’

She unapologetically did not answer. ‘We cannot sit on our hands much longer, Mr Lestrade. I’m
ready to act. Are you?’

‘Soon, soon,’ he said, just as he had said before, when he still held the bright hope that Mycroft
would soon wake up and relieve him of the obligation. Every day that passed, however, the
brightness dimmed a little more.

‘They suspect brain damage,’ she said sharply, as if reading his thoughts. ‘So even if he does wake,
he may be of little use to us.’

He winced at the thought, and at her clinical detachment. ‘There’s something I need to take care of
first,’ he insisted.

‘There’s always something to take care of first. But if I must, I’ll move ahead and talk to them
myself.’

‘You won’t have to. I’ll be there. I promise.’

He texted:

*Need to talk to you.*
*Where are you?*

Two minutes later, Sherlock texted back:

*Later.*
*Busy.*

Bastard.

There was nothing for it. He was stressed, exhausted, and in need of respite. It was time to go
home for a spell.

Well, not exactly *home*. Since selling the house, he and Molly had been staying in a Wimdu flat on
a weekly rental and living out of suitcases. The rest of the property was in storage. Though
accommodations were not ideal, it hadn’t been so bad, the first week. But neither Lestrade nor
Molly had many free hours during the week to go house hunting properly, and the tight quarters,
ooisy street, and lack of washing machine were beginning to wear on them.
He returned to find Molly sitting at the kitchen table, which was barely large enough for both her laptop and a water bottle.

‘You’re home,’ he said, surprised.

‘Taking a long lunch,’ she said. A plate of half-eaten leftover curry sat at the edge of the sink. She waved him over excitedly. ‘I want to show you something.’

He shrugged out of his coat and left it hanging over the radiator on the wall. Then he came up behind her and looked down at the screen.

‘Just went on the market!’ she said. ‘Vincent Square, so you could practically walk to work! If you wanted. And I could make it to Bart’s in under half an hour. Two-bedroom flat, modern kitchen, decent size bathroom. And all that light. Look at those windows! Now, it’s a little outside our budget, but there’s always room for negotiations on these sorts of things, so maybe after we’ve had a viewing . . . What’s wrong?’

Lestrade moved around to the opposite side of the table and sank down into a metal-and-plastic chair. He leant a shoulder into the wall and propped his head up in one hand, his elbow planted on the table. God, she was beautiful. Even with her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail and with that little dab of yellow curry at the corner of her mouth, and even smelling faintly of formaldehyde, she was perfection. He was so in love, he almost couldn’t stand it.

‘I love you so much,’ he said, though in a half mumble, as his hand was locking his jaw in place.

Molly blushed. ‘Oh. Well, good. Because I’m trying to find us a house to live in together,’ she teased. ‘You had me thinking something was wrong.’

‘Something is.’

His stomach flooded with adrenaline, knowing the confessions he was about to voice, and he dropped his face into his hand, scrubbing roughly.

‘Greg? What is it? What’s happened?’

‘I messed up, Molly,’ he said woefully. ‘I messed up bad.’

She closed the laptop and reached for his hand to pull it away from his face, and she didn’t let go. ‘Tell me.’

He breathed hard. ‘We can’t afford a place like that. Not anymore.’

‘Why—?’

‘Angela came to see me.’

‘Your ex?’

‘She’s suing me for half the sale price of the house.’

Molly gasped. ‘She can’t do that!’

‘She can. She’s trying, anyway. I’ll fight her, but legally? I don’t know if I have much of a leg to stand on.’

He told her, then, about the terms of the divorce and the loophole Angela’s solicitors had exposed
and exploited.

‘But it’s not fair,’ Molly protested. ‘You paid for the house, not her. Take it before a judge. Make her see reason. She has no part in this, not anymore. I mean, what were you expected to do? Never sell the house for as long as you live? Surely, there’s something like a statute of limitations on the settlement.’

‘There’s more,’ said Lestrade. Miserably, he withdrew his hand from hers to rub again at his face. More than anything, he wanted a cigarette. Would those damned cravings never ebb? ‘I can’t take this to a judge. I’m not even sure I should consult my own solicitors because . . .’ He had to close his eyes to say it. ‘She’s blackmailling me.’

‘What?’

‘I messed up, I messed it all up.’

‘Greg, talk to me. You’re scaring me. Tell me what happened! What could she possibly blackmail you for!’

He lifted his eyes to the ceiling and started shaking his head. ‘There’s this . . . box.’

‘Okay. A box. And?’

Lestrade made a pathetic gesture with his hands, indicating the size. ‘The truth is, I don’t know much about it. I just know it’s important.’

‘You’re not making any sense. I can’t just fill in the holes and figure out what’s going on. I’m not Sherlock Holmes, you know.’

He laughed without humour. He had already considered and dismissed the possibility of hiring a certain private detective to steal it back for him.

‘Start from the beginning. What is this box? Where did it come from, what’s inside?’

‘I don’t know, something dangerous. It has to be.’ Then he blurted out the crux of it all: ‘Look, I’m working for Mycroft.’ Her eyebrows went up and her jaw went down, and before he could retract the confession, he pressed on ahead. ‘Ever since Sherlock came back, ever since it’s been obvious he and John are in a state of clear and present danger, I’ve been working for Mycroft Holmes. He sort of, I don’t know, recruited me. To play spy for him, run errands, do whatever the hell he asks me to do, just to keep Sherlock safe while Mycroft . . . does whatever it is he does. That box . . .’

He trailed off as the sudden thought occurred to him. Never speak of this to anyone, Mycroft had told him. Our association is professional and distant. Never tell your superiors. Deny it to your loved ones. And for God’s sake, don’t tell Sherlock. Was it for their protection? His own? Or, perhaps, for Mycroft’s? The possibility suddenly seemed very real: Mycroft had been clear that he would deny any involvement with Lestrade, if it came to it. And he never talked about his own people. If they—whoever ‘they’ were—knew what he was really up to, what would happen to Mycroft? Or—oh God—had it happened already?

Mycroft Holmes now lay in a coma. Lestrade and Anthea were left to operate a machine they’d never even seen.

He stood suddenly and grabbed Molly’s hand. Then he pressed a finger to his lips to warn her to be silent. Wide eyed, she nodded. He placed an arm around her waist and gripped her at the arm, he steered her to the door. But before passing through, he dropped his phone on the table and grabbed
his keys and her jacket, then together they pushed through the door.

On the noisy street, he finally spoke.

‘They may be listening,’ he said.

‘They? They who?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe I’m just being paranoid. But what I’m about to tell you, Molly, may be dangerous to our friends. And I can’t risk anyone overhearing.’

‘You think the flat’s been bugged?’ she whispered. Her hand tightened anxiously in his.

‘I won’t presume that it’s not.’ Maybe it wasn’t the flat. Maybe it was his phone. Maybe it was hers. He knew that he was sounding irrational, and he was frightening her. Was he going mad? Was the absence of Mycroft’s protective shield a true danger to him, or just making him jump at shadows and think the birds were listening to him and reporting back to their master?

‘We’ll just . . . walk. Walk and talk,’ he said.

But they walked two streets without saying a word. Until:

‘I’ve been working for him, too,’ Molly said, under her breath, just loud enough for Lestrade to hear.

He came to a grinding halt.

‘You what?’

‘Shh.’ She slid her arm into his and tugged to urge him along.

Lestrade glanced around surreptitiously, as if to spot a man in a trench coat, hat, and glasses hiding behind a tree. He lowered his voice and stared straight ahead. His hand was growing clammy in hers.

‘What do you mean, you’ve been working for him, too?’

‘Back in November—’

‘November!’

‘—Mr Holmes came to the mortuary. He wanted to see Tony Pitts.’

‘Oh my God.’

‘It was just an excuse, I think. I mean, he hadn’t even known Mr Pitts, right? And he barely looked at the corpse. What he really wanted was to talk to me.’

‘What did he want?’

‘Nothing, at first. He said he knew that I had helped Sherlock fake his death. He said, if I was willing to help Sherlock once, was I willing to help him again?’

‘What did you say!’

‘What do you think I said? Of course I’d help him. Why wouldn’t I?’
He thought he might wear a hole in his skin, for as much as he kept rubbing circles into the
temples. ‘What did he want you to do?’

‘Be his eyes and ears at Bart’s. John had been discharged, but there would be follow-up
appointments. I wasn’t to spy, really, just sort of . . . keep an eye on things. Be the one to run the
labs, even though it wasn’t really my job. I thought that would be all, that was Mycroft’s way of
making sure things were all right. But then things got . . . complicated.’

‘Go on.’

‘I really shouldn’t be talking about this,’ she said. ‘He said I shouldn’t ever say . . .’

‘Yeah, he told me the same thing. But look at us now.’

They shared a smile that said damned if you, damned if you don’t. Maybe six months ago, even
Mycroft Holmes hadn’t had the foresight enough to see that Greg Lestrade and Molly Hooper
would fall in love like they had. Or maybe he had. Either way, he must have seen the trajectory
early enough to know that these secrets could not remain secrets forever. Not between them.

‘He wanted samples. Blood samples, if I could get them, of both Sherlock and John. Not much,
just 10 ml, about as much as would fit in a syringe. I thought, at first, he didn’t trust Bart’s
bloodwork and wanted his own people to run their own tests. I don’t know. It never made any
sense to me. But in December, he told me to be on the lookout for—’ She cut herself off as a
woman came power-walking up behind them, rushing to get somewhere, maybe the Underground.
Once she had passed them by, Molly continued: ‘Corpses.’

Lestrade barely stopped himself from shouting again and repeating what she had said in his
mounting disbelief. ‘Whose?’

‘Didn’t matter, he said. Only that they were middle-aged, fresh, male’—she lowered her voice to
speak the word again—‘corpses. Two of them. Specifically, two civilians without a criminal past.
No better person to ask than a mortuary attendant.’

‘And why?’

‘He wanted their records. DNA, fingerprints, dental records, all the things forensics scientists use
to identify someone.’

‘Oh my God. He changed the records.’

‘Yeah. I think that’s exactly what he did.’

Though not easily accomplished, the idea was simple enough. Sherlock and John were both in the
system. Their identifying markers, down to their fingertips and DNA, were on record, national
registries—John because of his military history and Sherlock because of one too many past arrests.
But if the records were altered, if Sherlock Holmes’ identity were swapped with that of a dead
man, he became invisible. Any trace evidence he left would lead to a dead end in any investigation.
And the dead man now attached to a record with Sherlock’s true identity wasn’t about to leave any
evidence at all.

‘Does Sherlock know?’

‘I don’t think so. Mycroft made it clear I wasn’t to tell him anything.’

‘Yeah, I got the same speech.’
'That’s not all, Greg.’

‘Let’s hear it,’ he said, resigned that there was a world of things Mycroft had done without his knowing.

‘All of the victims of the Slash Man—they all came through Bart’s. And Mr Holmes, he said he wanted photographs. I sent them on my phone. I know I wasn’t supposed to. Not only was it against hospital policy, but the victims were part of your investigation, and it felt like I was selling photos to the media, and if I got caught I would lose my job. But I trusted that Mr Holmes had a purpose, a plan. So when he wanted a photograph of Moriarty’s corpse after the exhumation, I sent him that, too. And now he’s in hospital, and what if he doesn’t wake up? I don’t know what it’s all been for, and I’m worried I’ve done something wrong, that I in some way compromised your investigation or put Sherlock and John in danger because of what I’ve done, and the secrets I’ve kept. Like with the gun.’

‘Gun?’

‘The gun I used to shoot the intruder in March. That wasn’t the intruder’s. It was John’s.’

Greg was so stunned he started to laugh. ‘When—?’

‘After the break in, day before Valentine’s.’

It sounded like the sort of thing John would do. Lestrade knew John had a gun, and he never said anything. In his own mind, he justified the lawbreaking because he trusted John, not only in his training in firearms, but in his capacity to use it wisely, morally even. Well, that answered the question about how Moran’s man had got hold of an army-issued pistol. Not something he could tell his investigating team, however.

‘And I’m so sorry I’ve kept all of this from you, too, Greg. There are times when I thought I would just burst.’

‘And times I thought I would crumble into pieces,’ said Lestrade. He stopped them walking and turned her towards him, wrapping arms around her and holding her tightly. ‘I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, Molly.’

She laughed, but sadly. ‘Me neither.’

‘I’m frightened.’

She reached up and took his face in her hands. Softly, she kissed him. ‘Me too.’ Then she laid her head against his chest and let him hold her again, enjoying the comfort and security they both sought.

When they took again to walking, their hands found each other. At least one thing in his life was going right, Lestrade thought.

‘So about this box,’ said Molly. Discreetly, she wiped her eyes clear. ‘It sounds important.’

‘Yeah. It does, doesn’t it?’

‘So we’ll have to figure out how to get it back.’

‘Mm,’ Lestrade hummed in reluctant agreement, though he recoiled at the very thought of Molly being subjected to any kind of encounter with the harpy.
'I guess that means,' Molly continued, ‘that it’s time you told me about your ex-wife.’

***

When he walked out of Ella’s office and onto Ashbourne Road, John felt much the same as he did after every session: like he had just finished his first week of his Army training regiment, muscle sore and feeling like he might faint but likely wouldn’t. He could almost hear the major shouting his name. Watson! You undersized twink, up! Up! Run like a man or keep hugging the mud like a slag. Let’s move, move, move! He was shaky all the same. At least he was on his own two feet, cane be damned.

Ella had been sympathetic, but relentless. Her language was soft but unambiguous, her questions direct: What do you remember thinking at the moment of initial penetration? What were you feeling, both physically and emotionally?

Emotionally? Fear. Disbelief. That such a thing could happen to him, was happening to him. Panic that there was nowhere to go, not physically, not mentally. He couldn’t escape even to a recesses of his mind where the shadows might hide him and his intense shame. He’d felt like, not a man, but an animal—debased, stripped of dignity and humanity. And that had been only the very first second. Somehow, incredibly, the excruciating physical pain paled in comparison.

His right knee gave a wobble on the step, but as he reached for the railing, he stopped short. Sherlock was there waiting for him.

Sherlock must have seen the lassitude on his face. Of course, it wouldn’t take a genius to see how haggard he felt, like his sense of self-respect had passed through a blender and he was trying to reassemble it in a hurry. In an instant, Sherlock’s default dispassionate expression promptly slid away. ‘All right, John?’

‘Uh, yeah,’ said John. Then, more honestly. ‘Rough one today.’

Sherlock made an aborted movement, as if to step forward, and his arms did a partial lift. It looked as though he were going for a hug—to comfort him? bear him up, should the leg give out completely on the next step?—but before Sherlock could follow through with the impulse, he maintained his place on the pavement.

But John would have welcomed an embrace. Not from just anyone. But from Sherlock, it would have been okay. After all, they understood one another. They both knew what it meant to have a ‘rough day’. So what if he did want to feel arms around his shoulders. Maybe he was okay with being held for a moment or two, with feeling muscles tighten around him as his own at last relaxed. They weren’t strangers to holding each other when they needed it most. Did they really have to wait for the next devastation? What about when they needed it just a little? But John didn’t know how to say to Sherlock, it’s fine, it’s all fine. Not anymore. So he didn’t say anything, and let the moment pass.

‘Fancy a stroll?’ Sherlock asked instead.

‘Yeah, a bit of air sounds good,’ John replied, and they turned together down the pavement, quickly falling in step with one another.

‘Everything all right?’ John asked. He hadn’t expected to see Sherlock here, after all.

‘I assume you mean other than the fact that my brother is in a coma after being poisoned by the same woman responsible for your abduction and torture, and my fourteen-month incarceration in a
Libyan hell-hole.’

John nearly stumbled, not least because of what was said, but because, when his head snapped around, he saw that Sherlock’s grim face was breaking into a restrained grin. Leevity? Were they allowing themselves to point and laugh at how pathetic they were?

‘Right,’ said John, half ginning himself. Their lives really were quite ludicrous. ‘Naturally, besides that.’

‘Then of course everything’s all right. We’re on a case, aren’t we?’

‘And you just couldn’t wait to get going, eh?’

‘I didn’t see the point.’

‘Right. Well then. Where are we going?’

‘Where our dear detective friends left off. Naturally.’

‘Which is where?’

‘The home of Mrs Bill Murray.’

‘Frances? Why? She doesn’t know anything.’

‘Maybe she does, maybe she doesn’t. Or maybe she does and even she doesn’t know it.’

‘Eh?’

Sherlock nodded to the right, indicating that they should take the corner. ‘There are two types of interrogators, John. Our Lestrade is of the first sort, and it’s his weakest skill as a detective.’

‘How’s that?’

‘He asks questions he wants to know the answers to.’

John sniffed. ‘And this is bad?’

‘It’s limiting. If he doesn’t find the answer he wants with one question, he’ll merely attack it from a different angle. He’s rather single-minded that way. And it precludes him from getting answers to questions he didn’t even think to ask. Donovan’s not much better. If you go after information, you get information in return—but meted out in exact measurements. The subject is a miser, always a miser, and offers only as much as he is willing to part with. By this method, he will always withhold what he believes most valuable to him.’

‘So the second method?’

‘Do you not know? I learnt it from you.’

John gave him a crooked, disbelieving smile. ‘How’s that then?’

‘Emotional manipulation. Far more effective.’

‘I don’t manipulate!’

‘Of course you do, though perhaps would rather think of it as sympathising with the subject.’
Building a rapport. It works. You offer something of yourself to them, and they’re much more likely to offer something greater in return.’

‘It’s called being a decent person.’

‘If you like.’

‘And it’s not a tactic. It’s just . . . connecting.’

‘Exactly. You employ empathy, and when they are set at ease and feel a measure of trust, they start to talk. You let them. And then, you listen, really listen. I watched you do it with Mr Niazi. But I witnessed it long before then, too. Just one of the many ways you were so valuable to the work . . . before.’

‘Oh,’ said John, humbled and not a little chuffed. He hadn’t been expecting the compliment.

‘That’s why, when we meet with Mrs Murray, you do the talking,’ Sherlock suddenly slowed. ‘Where’s your cane?’

‘I left it at home. Why?’

‘Ankle’s bothering me.’

John stopped walking entirely. ‘We should grab a taxi. Maybe call Smalls.’

‘No no, just a little slower is all. It’s good, being out in the city. It was a long winter.’

John sighed and shook his head. ‘We should sit then. At least for a moment. Take that boot off. I want to see the colour of your ankle.’

‘An overreaction.’

‘The last time you neglected it, you went septic.’

‘Yes, and now I have a lovely pin in my bones to keep them from sliding around down there.’

‘I’m not kidding, Sherlock. You mistreat it, neglect it, things start to go wrong. It’s no different to what’s going on up here.’ He tapped the side of his head.

‘You’re the expert,’ Sherlock mumbled.

‘Damn right I am,’ John answered, just as sullenly. ‘Sit.’

John directed him to a wooden bench on the corner of Greyville and Kilburn Priory. Sherlock lowered himself with a groan like an old man, and John sat beside him and rubbed his own right knee. ‘Quick look then, eh?’

‘Fine.’

Sherlock reached down, lifted his trouser leg, and undid the Velcro straps. It was a laborious process, this putting-on and taking-off every day, but he’d not been complaining of it, much. Not aloud, anyway, which concerned John, who was used to hearing him complain of hindrances, both large and insignificant. He wondered just how long Sherlock had been bearing this ‘bothersome’ ankle. Probably for a bit; the pain was probably more than he was letting on.

And to let John take over as primary interrogator? Something was definitely off.
With the boot removed, Sherlock crossed a leg to give John better access without making him kneel on the pavement. John peeled the black sock down gently to expose the pale, bony ankle, along with the incision line from the surgery.

‘When’s your next PT appointment?’ John asked, lifting the leg a little by the calf. ‘Friday?’

‘Friday.’

‘Flex your toes.’

There was no swelling, fortunately, and no discolouration. But Sherlock’s calf muscles quivered as he flexed his toes. ‘Bit stiff,’ he said, holding his breath.

John nodded, then gently rotated the ankle clockwise and anticlockwise. ‘Does that hurt?’

‘Just a bit.’

‘And this?’ He bent the foot forward and back.

‘Mm,’ said Sherlock in the affirmative, wincing.

‘Well.’ John rolled the sock back up. ‘No discolouration or swelling. That’s a good thing. Are you doing your exercises regularly at home?’

This time, Sherlock gave no answer at all, like a guilty child caught in a lie.

‘Muscle strain,’ said John. ‘I doubt there’s a problem with the bones. You’ll want to mention it to your therapist, of course, but I’ll bet he tells you the same. You’ve got that boot on most of the day and wear the brace at night, so your muscles are immobilised ninety percent of the day; they’re trying to atrophy. You have to do those exercises, Sherlock, every day. Twice a week at therapy isn’t good enough. When you don’t stretch it properly, then go strolling around London, you put stress on unworked muscles. So of course it hurts.’

He sat back while Sherlock grumbled and inserted his foot back into the boot; he resisted the urge to coach him ‘not too tight’ as Sherlock adjusted the straps. When he had finished, he leant back into the bench and made no indication that he was ready to up and go.

Then John, thinking over what Sherlock had said, broke the silence. ‘You forgot the third.’

‘Hm?’

‘Methods of interrogation. You forgot the third.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ said Sherlock, simply and unperturbedly, as though he had been expecting the objection from the start. ‘I’m merely denying it any value.’

Nothing more was said after that. John laid his arm behind Sherlock along the backrest of the bench, while Sherlock folded his hands together in his lap. They sat placidly for a while, silently, listening to the birds overhead and watching the cars trundle by on the streets of London.
The Hunt for Bill Murray

THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2015

Sally Donovan had just stepped from the shower when she heard pounding on her front door. She froze, thinking furiously, but she knew she was on top of her rent, and she doubted the building was on fire because none of her alarms had gone off. It might be an unwelcome early-morning solicitor, and if she ignored it, it would just go away. She could reasonably pretend to have already left for work. But then the pounding came again, even more insistent. She towelled off as quickly as her bum-elbow permitted, let her hair drip, and wrangled herself into a dressing gown. Then she lightly toed her way to the front of the flat. Before sliding the chain and unlocking the door, however, she lifted the flap over the peep hole. There, on the other side of the door, Thomas Dryers had just lifted a hand to pound a third time.

Before he had the chance, she wrenched the door open. ‘The hell!’ she shouted.

‘Thought you’d still be here,’ he said, and without making eye contact or begging permission, he stepped into the flat and paced to the opposite end of the room.

‘Dryers!’

‘Look, this is the only way. You’re not answering my calls, you’re ignoring my texts—’

‘Yeah. Take a hint!’

‘Kick me out then, after I’ve said what I have to say. But when I have, I’m guessing you’ll change your tune. You’re reactive, Sally, but not completely unfair—’

At that moment, he turned to look at her properly, and his eyes fell to her chest like a magnet.

‘Ah hell.’ His face reddened like a tomato. ‘You . . . I can wait if you want to . . . that is . . . You naked under there?’

‘Talk.’

In that moment, she would have given anything to fold her arms tightly across her chest. As it was, she held one arm in the other to keep the elbow at angle. She really needed to get it back in the sling. All the same, her glare was just as effective as a slap in the face, and he kept his distance.

‘I lied to Lestrade,’ he blurted out. ‘Sort of.’

He was just feeding more kindling into the fire stoked by anger. Aside from idiotic curiosity, he now had professional misconduct stacked against him. ‘You made a false report? You absolute bastard!’

‘Would you listen? That night, when I came home, there was a man in my flat. He made me swallow that pill at point of gun. Okay?’

She waited for the punchline. Was this the best he could come up with?

Seeing she was unimpressed, Dryers threw up his hands. ‘You think I would roofie myself? All alone, in the front room of my flat, still wearing my uniform? Come on, Sally, you’re not stupid.’
‘An unidentified gunman,’ she repeated sarcastically, ‘broke into your flat—the flat of the great Thomas Dryers—to make you swallow a date rape drug, and then what? Just walked out the door? What a master criminal.’

‘It was to incapacitate me while he got away,’ Dryers mumbled, face still coloured with embarrassment, but now for different reasons.

‘And?’ Donovan rolled her eyes. ‘You’ve had days to cook up a story, and this is the best you got?’

Dryers sighed and closed his eyes, looking more serious than she had ever seen him. When he opened his eyes again, he said, ‘He wanted me to deliver a message.’

She snorted. ‘A mess—’

‘To you. And shit, Sally, he scared me bad enough that I’m going to do it.’

Donovan skilfully controlled her reaction to little more than flaring nostrils, but she felt her heart sink a little. Had she got it wrong? Had Dryers been threatened? She remembered him lying unconscious in the hospital bed, the effects of the Flunitrazepam still in effect, and hoping—actually hoping!—that he’d been in some way victimised. At least that would mean he hadn’t done it to himself. Then came Lestrade’s report, that Dryers had confessed to taking the illicit drug willingly. She was disgusted, with him, and with herself, for having hitched her hopes, however tentatively, to yet another Yarder reprobate. So she silently vowed never to work with him again, to pretend she had never admired him, or trusted him, let alone had feelings for him, no matter how burgeoning or malformed.

Though she still kept hold of those strings, she allowed for the possibility, however remote, that she was wrong. But if she was, this was not good news. Victimisation was all at once the very least preferable of possibilities.

‘All right,’ she said softly, making deliberate work of removing the razor edge from her voice. ‘What did this man say?’

‘Two things.’ His shoulders sagged a little, apparently relieved that she was allowing him to proceed. ‘One: stop investigating Bill Murray.’

At that, her fingers loosened a little more around the strings. Among Yarders, only she, Lestrade, and a select surveillance team knew Watson had identified the man in the photograph. And they were in agreement that it should stay selective.

‘What do you know about Bill Murray?’ she asked.

‘Not a damn thing. I thought he meant the actor.’

‘And why am I to stop my investigation?’

‘He didn’t say, exactly. Only that it was pointless.’

‘Wait, wait. Who is this guy? What did he look like?’

Case file shots of Sebastian Moran surfaced first in her mind, but if it had been Moran, Dryers would have known. Everyone at the Yard knew that mug. Perhaps it was one of his cronies.

‘Old codger,’ said Dryers. ‘I’d put him at eighty at least. White man, brown eyes, couldn’t have been more than five-seven and ten stone five, if I had to guess. Posh as all hell and in a suit that
would have eaten up my salary over three months.’

‘Not Moran,’ said Donovan under her breath.

‘I wouldn’t think so,’ Dryers agreed.

‘But he doesn’t want me to find Murray?’

‘He wants you to solve a different case.’

‘What case?’

‘One headed by Tony Pitts, back in 1996. Unresolved.’

Sally Donovan’s head was spinning. As though in a daze, she moved to an armchair and slowly sank down, resting her arm in her lap. She wiped the water dripping down her brow aside but felt the shoulders and back of the dressing gown growing heavy with wetness.

‘October 4, 1996,’ said Dryers. ‘That’s what he said.’

‘What happened in 1996?’

Dryers shook his head. ‘All he said was, it’s urgent.’

‘Now it’s urgent?’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘Bloody hell.’ She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and when she opened them again, her resolve was solidified. ‘Fine. Let’s get you down to the Yard. You need to give a statement and talk to a sketch artist. Lestrade will lift your suspension, and we can get an APW out on this guy.’

‘Uh.’ Dryers shook his head regretfully. ‘Can’t do that.’

‘Why the hell not?’

‘He warned me. You can’t tell Lestrade. You can’t tell Gregson. Nobody.’

‘Shit, Dryers.’

‘I know.’

‘So why you? Why did he go after you?’

‘He said . . .’ Dryers shrugged pathetically. ‘He thought I was leverage. Said he couldn’t approach you directly, but I could serve as his messenger boy. And if you didn’t do it?’ He turned his finger into a gun and mimed shooting himself between the eyes.

‘Jesus,’ she groaned. ‘What the hell is going on?’ She dropped her hands, angrily; the pain in her elbow flared. What was she supposed to do? Bill Murray was a lead! And Lestrade was counting on her to follow it. She couldn’t just abandon a lead to the psychopath Moran for some nineteen-year-old case because some nameless old crackpot had threatened Thomas Dryers!

A thought popped into her head: don’t abandon. Delegate.

And then, a madder thought followed on: Sherlock Holmes.
Shit.

‘What do you want me to do, sergeant?’ Dryers asked.

She sucked in a long breath and sat back, rubbing her arm. ‘Nothing. You’ve done what you promised to do. Go home. Enjoy your time off.’

Adamantly, he shook his head. ‘I want to help. You and I are the only ones who now know about the file.’

Donovan stood. ‘Go home. I need to get ready for work. It’s going to be a hell of a day.’

‘You doing it then? You going to get the file, investigate this old case?’

She ignored the question, not quite sure what she was going to do yet. ‘Let me know when you’re no longer suspended.’

Without seeing him out, she turned toward the hallway, but Dryers wasn’t satisfied.

‘What about you and me? Are we . . . you know. Okay?’

She paused and looked back over her shoulder. ‘I don’t know what you see in me. This isn’t the first time I’ve turned against you, and been wrong. Why would you believe it’s the last? I’m not reliable, Tom. I’m sorry. Best we both accept the fact.’ Then she walked away.

***

It was the very last phone call she ever expected to make, even if she lived to be a hundred, which, given the state of things, she really didn’t expect to.

‘Who is this, and what have you done with Sally Donovan?’

‘You’re a riot, Holmes.’ She sat in her car outside the Yard, watching the pedestrians amble by and wondering how many among them were future criminals.

‘Not a butt dial then.’

‘Shut up and listen.’

‘I’m all ears. Hang on, I should grab a pen to take notes. John, do you have pen?’

God, he was insufferable. Gritting her teeth, she pushed ahead before he could get in any more sarcastic remarks. He probably had a whole list of them unspooling in that oversized brain. ‘I have an assignment for you.’

There was silence on the other end. Complete silence.

‘Holmes?’

‘Sorry,’ he said, his voice sounding dazed. ‘I’m just revelling in the moment. This is historic: the day Sally Josephine Donovan hired Sherlock Holmes. John, take note of the date. April 23. I want to commemorate this annually.’

‘If we’re even alive by next April,’ she heard John quip in the background.

‘Touché,’ said Sherlock.
‘Shut up, the pair of you.’ This was getting away from her. She shouldn’t have called.

‘Pray, what can I do for you, Sgt Donovan?’ Sherlock asked with excessive servility.

‘Find Bill Murray,’ she said brusquely. Then added, ‘If you think you can handle it.’ There was another long silence. ‘Holmes?’

‘Find Bill Murray,’ repeated Sherlock slowly. ‘You want us, John and me, to find Bill Murray.’

‘If you think can.’

Sherlock cleared his throat. ‘Very well. I’ll put it on my to-do list. Right at the top.’

‘The sooner the better. *Today*, if it’s not too inconvenient.’

‘I’ll start looking yesterday.’

The cheeky bastard. ‘Yeah, you do that. And while you’re at it, make a point of not telling Lestrade.’

‘What, that you’ve outsourced? Why? What are you up to, Sally?’

‘Can I trust you on this or not?’

‘Discretion is my middle name. One Bill Murray, coming up.’

‘Find him. But don’t, you know, talk to him or give him a fright. We don’t want him running.’

‘Survey and report, aye aye, captain. Er, sergeant.’

‘All right, all right. You boys have fun.’

He laughed. It sounded strangely genuine. ‘Right-o. And best of luck to you on your duplicitous mission. I look forward to deducing the details later.’

She hung up on him. *All right*, she thought, sighing mightily, *one box checked*. Next: how to casually rummage cold case files from the nineties without raising eyebrows or making excuses. Only then would she know how all the rest of the boxes on her day’s to-do list would read.

***

When Sherlock and John arrived in Edgware a day earlier, they were quick to suss out an immediate hurdle: the Murray’s front stoop was being watched. They would never be able to just ring the bell and have a chat without word getting back to Lestrade, who would no doubt call them off. So they returned to Baker Street for the night and formulated an alternative plan: catch Mrs Murray unawares somewhere outside the line of sight of her monitors.

After running through several options, they settled on a course of action to be executed the next morning.

John stood across from her in produce, squeezing and sniffing tomatoes, hoping to be noticed. Quite against his nature, he was trying to be conspicuous. He sniffed loudly. Cleared his throat. He had even brought the cane, because what Sherlock said was probably true: people noticed you if you had a cane. He leant on it heavily and let his limp be a little more pronounced when he shuffled over to the onions to keep in her line of sight.
‘Oh my God.’

He looked up and feigned surprise to see her staring at him. In any other circumstance, he would not welcome the attention, but today he was counting on the fact that his face had been in the news for the last six months, and given his history with her husband, surely she had seen it.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked.

‘You’re . . . you’re John Watson.’

‘Yes. And you are . . . ?’

‘You knew my husband, Bill. Bill Murray. You served together.’

‘Oh!’ He let recognition register and hoped it wasn’t too comical. ‘Bill! Yes, of course. That would make you Frances.’ He abandoned the onions and came around to greet her properly, shifting the cane into his opposite hand to shake hers. ‘Is he here with you?’

Her handshake was limp, but she didn’t let go. After a few seconds, he realised why: she was staring at the scars. They weren’t too obvious, from a distance. But up close, they were unmistakable. He hated that look and fought the impulse to pull his hand away and create distance.

‘I heard about what happened,’ she said, lowering her voice. ‘On the news. My God. I’m so sorry, Mr . . . Dr Watson, I mean. Or Captain Watson?’

‘John,’ he said, and finally let go of her hand and looked away. He had suddenly lost the momentum to keep this conversation going. He didn’t know how to respond to this. All these months, and he still hadn’t figured it out.

‘I have to ask,’ she said.

John braced for questions about those days in the basement of the convent. Already he was looking for an exit, and wishing Sherlock had come into the Tesco with him. But Sherlock thought it was best for John to approach her alone. Who knew how the media portrayals had influenced her opinion of Sherlock Holmes? They didn’t need to set her on the defensive from the start. Then it would be harder to get information from her.

‘Have you seen Bill? Talked to him? Lately, I mean.’

The relief was almost palpable. His head cleared of dark clouds and the tingling in his skin subsided. He was back on track.

‘I’m sorry to say, we haven’t been in touch in ages,’ said John. ‘Been meaning to, though.’ Then, pressing his luck, ‘Why?’

‘Police have been ’round. Asking questions.’

‘Is he in some sort of trouble?’

‘He’s missing. That is, they can’t find him. I can’t find him. I keep calling, talking to his friends, but I don’t know what to do.’

‘God.’ John shifted his weight and shook his head concernedly. ‘How long—?’

‘Long time. I just. I don’t know what to do!’
Mrs Frances Murray, as it turned out, was a wheel that didn’t need much grease at all to start turning. Once she had identified in him a friend, he became a confidante, and she started telling him everything, everything she had seen, heard, and even thought in the weeks since she had last seen and talked to Bill. Some of it was familiar, what Donovan had already mentioned. Some of it was irrelevant, like how much of a struggle it was getting the kids dressed in the morning and bathed in the evening, what with Bill being gone. And some of it seemed, well, rather personal.

‘He cheats on me, you know,’ she said, oblivious to the Tesco shoppers pushing their trolleys behind her. Anger flashed in her eyes, but hurt as well. ‘I know he does, he’s been at it for years. I even met one of them once, ’cause she was feeling so guilty she had to come to my house and tell me about it. And there I am, seven months pregnant, consoling this little waif of a girl who’s losing it on my doorstep.’

‘I’m . . . so sorry,’ said John. Not only was this a version of Bill he didn’t know, and didn’t want to know, but he had lost control of the conversation—if he’d ever had control to begin with—and was feeling like Sherlock’s advice to just let them talk was a mistake. Until—

‘Prostitutes, too. Can you believe it?’

‘Mrs Murray—’

‘One kept calling the house! I hadn’t seen Bill since beginning of the year, but she keeps ringing me up through January, February, looking for him, says he won’t return her calls, and I told the tart, I did, I said it very clear, never to call my house again. Haven’t heard from her since.’

Maybe it was the timeline, but something about this story struck John as suspect, and he decided to probe. ‘Was she asking for money? Had he—’ it was an uncomfortable question to be sure—‘not paid up?’

‘No, nothing like that. Just wanted to talk to him, see him. Relentless, she was.’

‘How is it you know she was a prostitute?’

Over Mrs Murray’s shoulder, John saw a white-haired woman throw a scandalised look in their direction before pushing her shopping trolley ahead with overblown dignity.

‘Well, I just figured, what with a name like that. Kitty. Only a prostitute would call herself that. No surname. Just Kitty.’

It was like a punch to the gut. Or maybe a bolt to the brain. But it was certainly one of the very last names John expected to hear Mrs Murray speak. He couldn’t stop himself from blurting out in shock, ‘Kitty!’

‘Horrid name, I know!’ said Mrs Murray.

‘You’re sure she didn’t mention a surname?’

‘Oh no. She wasn’t calling to talk to me. Wouldn’t hardly answer a single question. Just kept saying, Tell Bill to call me back. I’ll make it worth his while, in that sultry whore-voice of hers. I’m not an idiot. I know what that means. If you want my opinion, she’s the one he’s shacked up with. Haven’t heard from her in weeks, same as Bill.’

Mrs Murray didn’t quite have the full measure of it, but then, neither did John. It was somewhere to start.
'Do you,' he said delicately, 'want me to see what I can do? See if I can find him, talk to him?'

Her eyes widened. ‘The police are already—’

‘I know a guy who may be a bit better at finding people.’

‘You mean Sherlock Holmes.’

He smiled at her. ‘I do. Look. Who knows if Bill is with this woman or not, eh? He is most definitely not, John thought. ‘But wherever he is, whatever he’s doing, maybe it’s best if, you know, a friend found him first. Not the police. What do you say?’

‘Oh John, would you?’

That was easier than he’d expected. ‘I’d be happy to. I want to know that he’s all right. And what he’s been up to.’ He smiled at her, then dug into his coat pocket or his phone. ‘Let me give you my number. Then if he calls, or if you think of anything . . .’

They exchanged information, and before they parted ways, Mrs Murray grasped his arm and said, ‘Thank you, John. Thank you so much. I already feel better about this. Take care, yeah?’ One last time, her eyes grazed his scars.

Leaving the tomatoes behind, John made for the exit and the Tesco car park. He spotted the rental, a black Jetta, and let himself into the passenger seat. The interior was toasty warm, and Sherlock sat with the driver’s seat partly reclined, scrolling through his phone. ‘Learn anything useful?’ he asked without looking up.

‘Yes. And you’re not going to like it.’

Sherlock glanced over, then popped the seat back into its upright position. ‘What?’

‘We have to go to Kent.’

‘Kent?’

John bobbed his head once. ‘East Sutton Park Prison.’

Sherlock stared mutely while the information took a moment to register. Then his head hit the back headrest and he groaned.

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Michaela Warner placed her phone face-up on the table between their two coffees.

‘I want to say something first,’ said Matilda Williams, putting a hand over Michaela’s before she could tap the red circle to begin recording. Then, with a tone of shameful confession: ‘I used to read Kitty Riley.’

Michaela grinned, eager to put Mrs Williams—who had been jittery since she walked through the door—at ease. People being interviewed gave miserable answers and lied desperately when they weren’t at ease, even if they had no reason to. ‘Most people did, I reckon.’

But Mrs Williams wasn’t placated. She was twisting a paper serviette between her hands like it had personally offended her. ‘No, what I mean is, I read her, and believed her. That James Moriarty was an invention. That Sherlock Holmes had orchestrated the whole thing, even the trial. I wanted to believe her. Because if what she said was true, then it wasn’t my fault, you see?’
‘It wasn’t your fault either way. According to what you told police, you were threatened. *Coerced* into rendering a guilty verdict.’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s the story I’m here for.’ Her pen was poised above a blank notepad, her questions memorised and poised on her tongue. She just need to crack on.

Eyeing the phone and its red button like it was a cockroach that had found its way into the café and onto their table, Mrs Williams shook her head. ‘It’s not the whole story. So I’m just wondering . . . I’ve had a talk with my husband, and he reckons there may be legal troubles if I talk to you.’

Furrowing her brow, feeling the story already slipping away from her, Michaela said, ‘Mrs Williams, you reached out to me.’

‘I know I did, I know. It felt important, then, to get it off my chest. But now I think of it . . . Well, I’m just not sure how much I can say.’

Michaela slid the phone to the side and inclined toward Mrs Williams, creating a more intimate space where two women could share confidences. ‘Have you ever spoken to a journalist before? Newspaper reporter, that sort of thing?’

‘No. One rang the house, once, after my ex-husband was killed. Wanted me to comment, say what he was like, you know, but I hung up. Couldn’t bear to talk to anyone.’

Mentally, Michaela riffled through her research on Matilda Williams. It was cursory at best. She didn’t have an assistant to do this kind of work yet, and she had been so bogged down in Holmes-and-Watson research that she hadn’t had time to prepare properly for her interview with Mrs Williams. Other than Mrs Williams’ role as the foreperson on the jury, Michaela couldn’t remember much else. Was there something about an ex-husband in there? Something she should know? Damn, nothing. She would have to ask.

‘Your ex-husband. How did he die, if you don’t mind my asking?’

Mrs Williams’ eyebrows rose in surprise, like she was telling Michaela something she was supposed to know already. ‘He was shot.’

‘By whom?’

‘Well, they don’t know, do they?’

‘I’m really sorry to hear that.’

‘Why would you be? Why would anyone? Even me, when I found out who he really was . . .’ But at last, Mrs Williams seemed to register Michaela’s look of confusion. ‘Oh. I thought you knew. I thought *everyone* knew. God, I’ve been so paranoid!’ She put her hands on the side of her reddening face and shook her head back and forth as though chastening herself.

‘What about?’

‘We were already divorced when it happened, a few years already, and I’d hardly spoken to him since. Just a few times, when he came to see the kids. Jeff had very restricted visitation, on account of the drinking. But the police asked me questions, so many questions, trying to discover a violent history, but there was nothing, not really. Nothing I’d seen, anyway. Still, I lost sleep over it thinking I should have seen something in him that suggested he was capable of what he did. And
all this time, I just figured everyone knew, like they were looking at me, wondering how I could have been so stupid, marrying him to begin with. God, I didn’t sleep for weeks!’

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Williams, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘My ex-husband’—she looked around the café and dropped her voice so it was barely audible—‘was Jeff Hope. The serial killer.’

Michaela almost screamed, but managed to keep it to a gasp, which she swiftly covered with a hand as the details of the case suddenly clunked into place, a case she knew only as ‘A Study in Pink.’ ‘Sherlock Holmes solved those murders!’ she said in a screaming whisper.

‘I know!’ Mrs Williams whispered back. ‘And then the trial happened, and he was a witness, and I didn’t make the connection at first. It had been so long since I’d heard the name. But then it came out, weeks later, weeks after that awful verdict, that he had invented Moriarty and all the crimes, and I thought, was it possible, that he set Jeff up to do what he did? Or frame him? I hated him. For years I hated him. I hated Jeff, too, for different reasons, but I never wished him harm. He was still the father of my children. But I didn’t say anything. Not to anyone. What was the point? The man was dead, wasn’t he? All of them. Jeff and Brook and Holmes. And then . . . the letters began to arrive.’

Mrs Williams stopped talking and put a hand over her mouth.

‘Letters?’ Michaela wanted to hit the record button on her phone, or at the very least take notes. But she didn’t want to break the spell. ‘What letters?’

‘I think . . . Maybe I’ve said more than I should.’

‘Matilda.’ She had to handle this delicately. The woman had called her after all. She had her pick of the papers, and she had gone straight to Michaela Warner. That had to afford her some advantage. And wouldn’t Mr Heinrich be pleased? This was a big story! ‘The reason I asked whether you’d ever spoken to a journalist before is this: journalists cannot be compelled to reveal their sources. Check it out yourself: Goodwin v. United Kingdom. As part of the European Code of Human Rights, it is a basic tenet of free press. So if you talk to me, if you tell me what you know, I can offer you anonymity. If that’s what you want.’

For another twenty-five minutes, the two women talked it through—what it meant to be a source, what legal protections were afforded sources, what possible ramifications might be in place if Mrs Williams’ story (still undisclosed) came to light and was connected back to her. Michaela was patient. She was missing a meeting back at the office and losing out on writing time, but this was important. She felt it in her bones.

At last, Mrs Williams consented to talk.

‘I think,’ she began, ‘that I’ve handled dirty money. Jeff’s money. I didn’t know it was dirty, but . . . You see, starting in 2012, somebody found out. That’s when the first letter arrived. Someone was blackmailing me! I don’t know who, I never found out, and I don’t know how, but I think—I think—this is all to do, somehow, with Sherlock Holmes.’

**Friday, April 24, 2015**

East Sutton Park Prison was one of two women’s open prisons in England, but it looked little like a prison and more like a holiday retreat in the country. Nestled cosily in the village of East Sutton near Maidstone, the three-storey brick Elizabethan mansion, erected in 1570, enjoyed sprawling
grounds of well-manicured grass, skilfully pruned trees, and lovely stone walking paths. If not for the modest sign at the unassuming gate, one would be very unlikely to mistake it for a prison at all. A museum, perhaps.

John bent forward and craned his neck to see better through the windscreen. ‘The poor woman,’ he griped as Sherlock parked the car and killed the engine. ‘She must be having a real rough time of it.’

A disgruntled grunt was Sherlock’s only response. He’d said very little on the drive over, and John understood. Neither of them had any desire whatsoever—regardless of what they might learn or how useful it would be—to see Kitty Riley again. John’s last encountered had felt more like an assault, and the memory still lanced him. As for Sherlock, he had had an entire city turn against him because of the lies and vitriol oozing from that woman’s pen. At one point, he had even been stoned. John blamed Kitty for that one, too, and he had no intentions of forgiving it. She was here, now, because of what she had done to John. What she had done to Sherlock went unpunished.

Barely a week ago, Kitty Riley had been convicted on two counts of concealing evidence from police in an active investigation, and one count of maliciously targeting an innocent person. But it was only yesterday that she had been sentenced to eighteen months at East Sutton Park. All told, she’d been there for less than twenty-four hours.

‘Now to see whether they’ll let us in.’ John unbuckled his seatbelt and reached for the door when beside him in the driver’s seat, unmoving, Sherlock hummed his agreement before adding, ‘Yes, we can’t both pretend to be DI Lestrade.’

John’s fingers stilled on the door handle. So he’d figured it out then. Of course he had. He was Sherlock Holmes, and John knew it was only a matter of time. He settled back into the bucket seat. For a long moment, silence reigned, and Sherlock stared straight ahead, seemingly content to sit in the car for the foreseeable future.

‘Something you want to say?’ John asked. He didn’t want to do this, but if forced, he would defend himself to the hilt.

‘Not at all.’ Sherlock still didn’t move to open his door. His voice was soft, but the casual tone was forced.

It rankled John. ‘Good. Fine.’ He pulled the handle and popped open the door. He had one foot out when Sherlock continued:

‘Just next time you borrow something from my sock drawer, I would appreciate your returning it.’

John pulled his foot back inside and slammed the door. ‘Say what you have to say, Sherlock.’

‘I’ve said it.’

‘And I bet you’re just dying to tell me how you worked it out.’

‘No. And you don’t have to say a word about it. Not if you don’t want to. But I’ll not hide from you that, yes, I know where you went. When you’re ready to tell me why, and what Stubbins said to you before he met his untimely demise at the hands of incarcerated thugs, or perhaps we should say hired goons, I’ll be happy to hear it.’

‘Good. Fine,’ John repeated, this time more heatedly. He couldn’t help it. Despite the gentle tone, he felt he was being accused. ‘And when you’re ready to hear that I’m not imagining voices on the other end of a phone call, I’ll be ready to tell you what they say, too.’ He shoved out of the car and
threw the door closed, harder than he had meant to, but it was done. He was glad not to have brought the cane today, glad Sherlock’s damn boot would slow him down.

Only, it didn’t.

Sherlock was out the door quickly and rushing to catch him up. He grabbed John by the arm to detain him. ‘What’s going on with you?’ he demanded.

‘With me?’

‘You know something, and you’re not telling me. Me!’

‘Not now, Sherlock.’

He tried to step around, but Sherlock seized him by the upper arms to hold him in place. ‘Did you know? That Stubbins would be killed. Did you know it?’

‘Of course I knew it!’ John said through gritted teeth, wresting himself free of the grip. ‘I’m the one who delivered the sodding message!’

‘What?’

‘Moran made me do it. And I was going to tell you all about it, too, but you—!’ John twisted away. He grabbed the back of his head with both hands and struggled to regain his composure. Not here. Not in public like this.

‘John!’

His hands fell to his side. He looked up into the sky, shaking slightly. ‘You put it in my head that I was crazy. You did that.’ Then John sighed. He knew it wasn’t fair of him to blame Sherlock. He couldn’t stop Sherlock from thinking any more than he could stop him from breathing. As the anger leaked out of him, leaving behind only regret, his head fell forward, shaking back and forth.

‘I believed you, Sherlock. I thought you were right. You were always right before, when it felt so real. When I used to see him, with my own two eyes, I had to rely on you to tell me he wasn’t really there. And I thought, why should it be any different now? Maybe he didn’t call, and I didn’t hear him, it was all in my head. Trust Sherlock, I thought. You always have before.’

‘I didn’t want to doubt you,’ Sherlock mumbled. ‘Or maybe I did. In this, at least. So all I could do was look for the evidence.’

‘Yeah. I was looking, too. And I found it. Look.’ John glanced around and saw the gate officer watching them. ‘Not here. Later, yeah?’

‘Later,’ Sherlock agreed. They stared at each other for a moment, like something was left unfinished, something more needed to be said, or done, but neither knew what. So they turned together and started walking toward the prison gate. ‘I suspect I’d best apologise, then,’ Sherlock said.

‘Later,’ said John.

Visiting hours at the prison were reserved for the weekend and allowed on the basis of prior appointment, making Sherlock and John a day too early, as well as lacking prior approval. As rare luck would have it, however, the governor—with whom they requested an audience first—was, and always had been, a fan of Sherlock Holmes.
‘We’ve had five Holmes-arrested offenders come through here whilst I’ve been governor,’ said Robin Eldridge, vigorously shaking Sherlock’s hand. ‘While you were dead, I thought, well pots, that’s the end of that run. So imagine my delight when it came out that you were back! Six months later, and we have our first Holmes catch already! Good show! And Dr Watson, a sincere pleasure. It used to be part of my morning ritual, eating breakfast while looking for updates on your blog. You’ll be back at it again soon enough, I hope? Please, have a seat.’

She was a tall, boxy woman—as tall as Sherlock and fifteen years older—with a severe blonde bob and quite the square chin, dressed smartly in a dark suit and shiny black shoes.

‘On a case, is it?’ she asked, a little hopefully.

‘Yes, in fact,’ said Sherlock, and John sensed his relief. It looked as though this was one roadblock that would be moved aside for them. All the same, to seal the deal, Sherlock put on the charm: ‘But we’ve found ourselves in a bit of spot. Can’t move forward, you see. Need more data. We think, though, that one of your new inmates may be able to shed some light on this. Now, I know it’s Friday—no visitors on Fridays—and we’re not police officers . . .’

Ms Eldridge tapped the side of her nose and winked. John bit his tongue. He’d seen this before, and it had always amused him. The woman was flirting with Sherlock. ‘How can I help?’

Fifteen minutes later, Ms Eldridge had set them up in what looked like a tea room with a cosy sofa and two chintz armchairs. John took one, Sherlock the other, and there, with teacups in hand, they waited for the guest of honour.

‘Stop me if I look like I’m about to throw tea in her face,’ Sherlock said mildly, taking another sip.

John appreciated the attempt at humour, but he was nervous, and he hated Kitty all the more for making him feel so. It didn’t matter that they were the ones free to come and go; he still felt an upset stomach.

Before long, the woman herself arrived under escort, but apparently she had not been told where she was going because when she stepped into the room and saw them standing there, she gave a little eep, as if they had jumped out and scared her.

She wore a grey turtleneck jumper overlaid with a black cardigan and what appeared to be black drawstring trousers without pockets—quite comfortable for a prisoner. Her ginger hair was pulled back into a ponytail, minus the fringe that still framed her face. She also wore glasses, a little bit of mascara, and pink lip gloss. Though she had arrived only the day before, she looked like one lounging comfortably in her own flat.

‘Governor says take your time,’ said the escort, then closed the door behind her to stand waiting in the hallway.

By this time, Kitty had quite recovered herself. She tossed back her fringe and walked with exaggerated dignity to the sofa, where she sat at an angle and lifted a leg so she could recline.

‘Maybe dreams really do come true,’ she said in her pseudo-sultry voice. ‘Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, sitting an interview at last.’

‘We’ll be asking the questions, Ms Riley,’ said Sherlock, his voice dark, all semblance of charm evaporated.

‘Ask all the questions you like,’ said Kitty. ‘I’ll not answer them.’
‘I think you will.’

‘Why? What’s in it for me? What can you possibly do to me? I mean, look at me. Look where I am. You already put me in a prison. Granted, it is rather lovely. My roommate is a fifty-four year-old grandmother of six on a three-year sentence for embezzling. She’s teaching me crochet. This afternoon, I’ll be working in the garden. We’re planting beans and squash, so I’m told. And all my meals are locally catered. There’s a vegan option, you know. I think I’ll give it a try while I’m here, see how I like it. And did I mention? Friday nights, it’s karaoke down in the common room. Tonight, I’m singing Jewel.’

John felt it coming on—the tremor in his hand. He set his teacup down in its saucer on the table before it could give away his anger and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘How does it feel, Ms Riley?’ said Sherlock, and if he was equally disgusted with her, he hid it well.

‘How does what feel?’

‘Being wrong. All this time, you thought you had the full measure of things. You thought Moriarty was an invention. What was it like for you, when the tests came back proving it was not Richard Brook in that grave? How did it feel, when you realised you had been fooled, and that for more than three years, you had believed his lie? Your whole career was built on it.’

She sneered and let both feet hit the floor. Again, she flicked her fringe to the side. ‘So what if he was real? That doesn’t turn you into some sort of hero.’ She sniffed and looked at John. ‘I read your recent blog post. Your tribute. My inbox was flooded with it, with people telling me I just had to read it.’ She shook her head, smiling wryly. ‘You’re a good storyteller, Dr Watson. I’ll give you that.’

‘You were, too, once,’ said Sherlock. ‘That’s all your journalism amounted to, in the end. Stories. Fiction.’

‘Are we done here? I need to get back to my tai chi class.’

‘Just as soon as you answer a few questions.’

‘I don’t talk without my lawyer present,’ she said. ‘It’s my new rule.’ She laid her arm along the back of the sofa and once again adopted an air of chilled superiority, like a queen in her castle. ‘And besides, you’re not police. You have no real authority.’

This was taking too long. She was being too stubborn, and Sherlock wasn’t getting anywhere fast enough.

‘Cut the shit, Kitty,’ said John. ‘What the hell do you want with Bill Murray?’

At his outburst, her mouth fell open, stunned. But whether it was by the eruption itself or the question, he couldn’t instantly discern.

‘Oh, I see what this is.’ She laughed shortly, incredulously. ‘Your old mate hired you on, has he? Add another count of stalking and harassment, and my sentence goes up another few months, is that your game? Pathetic.’ She leant forward and repeated herself for emphasis. ‘Pathetic. I never even met him.’

John shot Sherlock a look, trying to tell him to go after her, break her down, or he’d break her teeth.
'Doesn’t it make you mad, Ms Riley?’ Sherlock said, still calm and collected. ‘Moriarty saw an overlooked but ambitious young reporter, hungry for that big story, and he took advantage. He lied to you. Manipulated you. In the end, he made a fool of you, and it landed you in prison. Doesn’t that make you furious?’

John’s teeth were clenched so tightly his whole head hurt. What the hell was Sherlock saying? Kitty Riley wasn’t the victim here!

‘He had evidence,’ she said, nostrils flaring with the effort to breathe and stay calm. ‘Damning evidence, about you.’ Her fingers were digging into her palms.

‘I know.’

‘It was real.’

‘Much of it, yes. But not all.’

‘I couldn’t just ignore it.’

‘You did what he meant for you to do. We all did, back then. And I’ll give you credit. You played your part well. Very well. And I made it easy. I’m an easy man to dislike.’

‘Sherlock,’ said John, both to admonish and to disagree.

‘But facts care little about feelings,’ Sherlock continued placidly. ‘You may hate me all you like. That doesn’t change the fact that Moriarty murdered a man named Richard Brook and assumed his identity, nor that he fooled you with it. The subsequent trail of destruction has come at great personal costs to John and me, as well as to countless others. We are now in the business of setting things to rights, and we need your help to do it.’

‘From here?’ Kitty sniffed and rubbed her nose. ‘With all my powers of the press from behind bars.’

‘I see no bars,’ said John, and he meant it as an indictment.

‘It’s time to pull back the cloak on your anonymous sources,’ said Sherlock, ‘and tell us what they said.’

‘Which ones? I have sources all over England,’ she said proudly and in the present tense, as if she still had a career. ‘Plenty in New Scotland Yard, which should come as no surprise. When you died, they came out of woodworks, all wanting to tell their stories about you, about how much they hated you. They called you a freak and a psychopath, and that was when they were being kind. So when you came back, do you think I had any shortage of insiders? Where do you think I got all my information?’

‘You still don’t get it, do you?’ John seethed. ‘Your informants were the people who kidnapped me and killed Mary. Not Yarders.’

She shook her head in denial and looked out of the unbarred window. ‘There’s no proof of that.’

‘The photos you published,’ said Sherlock, ‘the ones from the convent—’

She laughed, actually laughed. ‘You are kidding, right?’ she said. ‘Where do you think those came from? Perhaps a certain forensics specialist wanting to show the world exactly what you are capable of?’
Sherlock scowled. ‘Anderson.’

‘Of course.’ She cocked her head, regarding him with something close to pity. ‘You really are off your game when you’re not the one crafting the crime.’

John was suddenly on his feet without any recollection of deciding to stand. ‘You’re unbelievable.’ He took a menacing step forward; she shrank back in surprise. ‘You have the truth of things right here’—he raised his own hand to just inches in front of his eyes, and it shook with rage—‘and you still say it doesn’t exist. You’re blind. Blind. Come on, Sherlock, she’s not worth our—’

He turned away, toward the door, but Sherlock reached out and grabbed his arm, detaining him. Still staring at Kitty, still as placid as ever, he said, ‘Tell us about your association with Bill Murray. Then we will happily leave you to your tai chi.’

‘Whatever he told you,’ said Kitty, ‘it’s a lie. I did not harass him. I called once—only once—and he refused to meet me. End of story. I couldn’t even tell you what he looks like, and that’s the God’s honest truth.’

‘When was this?’ Sherlock released John’s arm, but John, breathing heavily, refused to sit back down.

‘December, it must have been. Before Christmas. And yes, I’ve called since, but I only ever got the wife on the line.’

December. Before Bill had disappeared then, thought John. Before the Slash Man’s first killing.

‘How did you get his number?’

At first, she made no indication that she would answer. Then, she turned her neck, let it cracked, and sighed. ‘It was in the email.’

‘What email?’

‘One of my sources.’

‘Which one?’

She glared. ‘I don’t know. Never heard from them before, haven’t heard from them since.’

‘Why the hell would someone give you Bill’s number?’ John demanded, crossing his arms.

Kitty Riley simpered. ‘An excellent question, Dr Watson. Evidently, someone wants something to come to light. Do you know—every paper in the city wants the story. Your story. Who you really are, what really went on in that convent. I’ve offered you quite a handsome sum for an interview before, haven’t I? The offer still stands. The Sun would make you rich.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘John.’ This time, it was Sherlock who was being admonitory.

‘Talk to Bill Murray, the email said,’ said Kitty. ‘Ask him about a man named James Sholto. That’s where John’s story starts.’

John felt like the wind had been knocked out of him, but he stood unmoving, arms still folded, jaw still tight, and face reddening. He had momentarily forgotten how to breathe. Still seated, Sherlock looked to him expectantly, waiting for him to shed light on Kitty’s revelation. But he was too much
blindsided by it himself to offer any sort of elucidation.

‘John?’

‘Why?’ John whispered.

‘Who is James Sholto?’ Kitty asked. ‘I never did find out.’

‘Are we done here?’ John said, turning to Sherlock. His desire to storm out of the room was growing in urgency. ‘She never talked to Bill. She doesn’t know anything.’

Sherlock looked torn, and John knew why. Kitty had opened up a new line of questioning he wanted to follow, as far as he could, as far as she could take him. But he saw, too, the desperation in John’s stance, in his troubled expression. Slowly, he rose to his feet.

Kitty did, too.

‘I never talked to Bill Murray,’ she said, as though she were upset at their leaving prematurely. ‘But I did find the mistress.’

Sherlock froze. He glanced at John again, as though seeking permission.

‘Which one?’ John growled spitefully.

‘I’ll tell you,’ she said, ‘if you tell me who James Sholto is.’

John huffed, his ire making him see spots, and he twisted away so he wouldn’t have to look anymore at her ugly visage.

‘Sorry, Ms Riley,’ said Sherlock, conceding to John’s obvious distress. ‘We don’t bargain with criminals.’

‘Her name,’ John said to the wall. ‘Her name and how you found her, or I tell you nothing and walk straight out that door.’

‘You don’t have to do that,’ said Sherlock. ‘The mistress is irrelevant.’

‘Maybe not,’ said Kitty, a touch of excitement now infusing her voice. She was eager to show off. ‘Fine. I’ll tell. It was really quite clever how I found her, if I do say so myself. This old journalist has a few tricks up her sleeve. I placed an ad.’

‘What?’ said Sherlock, bemused.

‘That’s right. The wife, she screamed at me on the phone, accused me of having an affair with her husband, being one of his hussies. So I knew there were others. I wasn’t likely to get the names from her, though, was I? So I placed ads in the papers throughout southern England. I really did, you know. I have connections at every paper in the country, given my reputation.’

John sneered, but he was glaring at the carpet between his feet.

‘Personal ads, you know. They were simple: To Bill Murray, you forgot your pants. Come and get them. Signed, Mindi.’

‘You’re not serious,’ said Sherlock.

She laughed. ‘I figured, any woman having an affair with Bill and reading that was sure to call the
number and chew me out. But weeks passed, and nothing, and I thought, well, it was worth a shot. But then, I got the call. Anita Heslehurst of Colchester. Go on then, look her up. I met her for lunch, and we exchanged sordid stories. I was a sympathetic ear, and a creative storyteller. But she couldn’t lead me to Bill.’

‘Anita Heslehurst,’ Sherlock repeated, and John, too, filed the name away in a mental cabinet. ‘When was this?’

‘February. Just after Valentine’s. She didn’t take too kindly to being jilted like she was.’

Sherlock shot to his feet. ‘Thank you for your input. We’ll now let you get back to serving time.’ He strode to the door and twisted the handle, holding it open for John.

‘Oi!’ she said. ‘What about Sholto?’

John didn’t even glance her way. ‘He’s dead,’ he said, catching Sherlock’s bewildered eye only briefly as he exited. To the guard, he threw a thumb back to the room and said, ‘We’re done with her.’

***

They drove straight to Colchester, John now at the wheel and Sherlock searching on his phone for Anita Heslehurst. Conversation was terse. Sherlock hadn’t exactly expected their tête-à-tête with Kitty Riley to go smoothly, but he had imagined that—of the two of them—it would have been John who would keep a level head and cool demeanour. As it was, he had barely offered two words unsolicited since leaving the prison. The rest were a chilled response to what Sherlock considered basic and necessary questions.

‘Who was James Sholto?’

‘Later.’

‘If you and Bill both knew the man, and if Moran was the source of the email, then the military connection may be stronger than we originally—’

‘I said later, Sherlock. I’m thinking.’

Sherlock debated whether to push him, but judged that he best not. Not now, in any case. John was too volatile. But after they found Anita Heslehurst, this lack of communication needed to be addressed. If it was true that John really had spoken to Moran (and he wasn’t sure which was worse: the hallucination or the reality), then John had access to data, and it was intolerable that he wouldn’t share.

For now, though, John was dealing with something, and he needed time.

Meanwhile, Sherlock sent off a text:

Update please.

A couple of minutes passed before he received a reply.

Mr Holmes’ condition is stable but unchanged. Last toxicology report came back negative for all toxins. Still
needs breathing assistance.

As he held the phone in both hands, one behind the other, he softly began to scratch. Mycroft had been on the ventilator for a week now. If he wasn’t breathing on his own, the most likely explanation—all factors considered—was brain damage. Theaconitine was a neurotoxin, making brain damage the most logical assumption. Sometimes, Sherlock thought, logic was a bitch.

‘We’re here,’ said John. His voice had softened considerably from when they had last exchanged words, and Sherlock felt some of the tension ease between them.

They pulled into a car park of a sixth form college where the Internet indicated Anita Heslehurst worked as support staff. The plan was to intercept her as she left work for her car. They didn’t know the car, but the website had also provided a photo of the woman.

‘That’s her,’ said Sherlock.

In perfect sync, they unbuckled their belts, opened the doors, and stepped out of the car.

Anita Heslehurst was petite and girlish in manner and speech, though she must have been in her early thirties and a career woman. At the mention of Bill Murray, they had expected her to become defensive or cagey, but she was neither. She was angry.

‘E’s a right bastard, ’e is,’ she said, standing in front of her car with hands on hips and legs spread in a stance of defiance. ‘All sob stories and lies, yeah? And ’im telling me I make ’im feel alive again, like ’e ain’t been alive since before going off to war, like that weren’t ’is own damn fault. Like, ain’t nobody to blame but ’isself. Comes and goes as ’e likes, never a word of warning, and then ’e off’n disappears. ’Aven’t seen ’im in a month or more, but ’e’s sticking me with ’is bills, all the same.’

‘What bills would those be, Ms Heslehurst?’

‘I got’em right ’ere, I do.’ She opened her back seat, which looked like a contained disaster. But it must have had some organisation to it, because she returned quickly with a small stack of torn envelopes. ‘Been paying for ’is phones, ’aven’t I? And other things. Swore ’e’d pay me back, but ’ave I seen even so much as a ten pence? Owes me upwards of three thousand quid by now. I’m thinkin’ I’ll take ’im to small claims. Put ’im up before Judge Rinder, ’at’s what’ll I’ll do, let the good judge rip into Bill for me.’

‘May I?’ Sherlock asked, extending a hand.

She shrugged. ‘You’re the detective, innit?’ And she passed them over. As he riffled through the pages and peered inside torn envelopes, she continued, ‘Kept all them receipts, too. I paid for meals, petrol, shaving cream, ’otel rooms, cleaning service, train tickets . . .’

‘Hotels? You know where he’s staying?’

‘Only where ’e’s stayed. Weeks and weeks ago.’

‘And cleaning services?’

‘Yeah, got that one right ’ere.’ She stepped closer and found the proper receipt, setting it on top for Sherlock to read. ‘Don’t know what it were for, exactly. But I paid it. ’Cause ’e asked it of me. I was a fool. Me bank accounts empty and me credit card’s all maxed out.’

It was a carbon copy of an invoice for a cleaning company called Andre’s General Repair &
Renovation Assistance. Attached to it was a carbon copy of a cheque she had written for £821.98 on March 7, 2015.

Sherlock passed it all off to John.

‘We’re going to spend some time looking at these receipts,’ he said to her. ‘See what we can make of them. They just may point us to Bill.’

‘I should hope so, Mr ’olmes.’

‘Here’s my number. If he contacts you . . .’

‘You can be sure you’ll be ’earing from me if ’e does.’

They returned to the car, but John came slowly, staring at the stack of papers in his hand. Sherlock took the wheel this time, but though he started the engine, he didn’t put the car into gear. He was looking curiously at John, who sat staring at the carbon copy of Anita Heslehurst’s cheque, made out to A.G.R.A.

‘All right there, John?’

Like he was coming out of a daze, John slowly turned his head, and to Sherlock’s surprise, his eyes were misted.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

‘I . . .’ He was searching for the words. ‘I think I have something to tell you,’ he said at last.

Sherlock turned in his seat, hands falling off the wheel. ‘What?’

‘Sherlock. I think . . . I think this is to do with Mary.’
They met again at Vivian’s Café shortly after John’s shift ended, and once again, Mary arrived first, restless and in a state of anticipation. Before leaving the flat, she had foolishly spent twenty minutes changing tops and another twenty in the bathroom fighting the mascara tube and trying to get her hair to fall just right. She didn’t often bother with makeup. Now she regretted her lack of practice. She hoped she looked casually thrown together—though admirably so—and by the time John joined her, she had already ordered their drinks.

‘Any luck?’ she asked, once he had settled and sipped from his steaming mug. He looked a little tired, having just come from work, but the grin he offered her belied any fatigue.

‘Let’s just say that quicker minds than mine probably would have cracked it by now,’ he said.

‘I’ve had those letters for months, and you can see how far I got,’ she replied. ‘Can’t expect you to have made much more of them in a single evening.’

With an ingratiating but self-defeatist kind of smile, he produced one of the envelopes from the inside pocket of his jacket and showed her his discovery. ‘Any idea what it means?’

But she had never heard of A.G.R.A., and was a little embarrassed that the faint watermark had escaped her attention all these months. She supposed it was a company. A manufacturer or business.

He explained how he had spent hours already searching those initials online but had come up with very little. A Sussex-based insurance company (Automotive General Retail Agency), a brewery in Soho (Aggie Red Ales), a recycling plant in Romford (All-Green Recycling Action), landscaping business in Bristol (Allen’s Garden-Ready Artistry), and a dozen others besides. But nothing that pointed them to a bank or loan service.

‘Could just be the logo of a stationery company out of China or something,’ said John, conceding that he may have been off the mark from the start. ‘You can probably pick up a box of them at the Paperchase.’

‘These came from Mumbai.’

‘The first one, maybe. But the thing is, Mary,’ he said, ‘I don’t think they all did. Only, someone wanted you to think they did.’

And he showed her how the postage didn’t add up to international rates, and one of the envelopes didn’t carry an Air Mail stamp at all—like someone had forgotten to include it. A mistake.

‘Houston, we have a mistake,’ he said jokingly, a small smile lighting his face.
'If not from India, then where? Who’s sending me the letters? What does it all mean?'

‘I’m working on it.’

He texted her next day from the Chiswick Post Office to confirm: the letters had almost definitely originated in London, and a storm had just rolled through, and had it reached her in East London yet? and for the next twenty minutes they texted back and forth about a time Mary had been renting a sub-level apartment and it had flooded in torrential rains, and John returned a story about a water main bursting in the dead of winter just under his parents’ flat when he was a kid, and before long, they were typing out jokes about dog owners who dressed their pets in raincoats and boots to walk them in a downpour.

The day after that, he phoned to ask if she had wired any money at all to the account number provided to her with the first invoice. Embarrassed, she admitted that yes, she had: two hundred pounds, as a gesture of good faith, when she had still believed it was she who was in the wrong.

‘Do you have evidence of that transaction? Bank receipts or confirmation email?’

‘My bank should.’

They met up again at NatWest Bank on Shoreditch High Street where Mary had maintained an account since she was fourteen years old, her father having co-signed, and where she had closed her father’s account upon his death and consolidated it with her own, inheriting all thirty-two pounds and fourteen pence of what he had left behind. There, they talked to the bank manager and got copies of the money wiring transaction.

‘It’s not a bank,’ the manager said, directing their attention to the routing number. ‘It’s a brokerage firm.’

‘Out of London?’ asked John.

‘No, Mumbai.’

They exchanged meaningful, troubled glances.

It was late by the time they left the bank, and a tandoori restaurant conveniently located just across the street tempted them both. ‘You’ve been more than generous with the coffees,’ said John. ‘Let me get this one.’

And so it went. Over the next few days, Mary could scarcely be parted from her phone for two minutes and had even taken to bringing it with her into the bathroom while she showered, in anticipation of John’s phone calls. And call he did. There was always a reason, of course. A question regarding her father, or a point of clarification regarding the timeline, or a request for writing samples and old receipts and emails. But inevitably, the business aspect of their conversation melted away, freeing them to talk of the quotidian and inconsequential, and it was these conversations that highlighted her day. She hated hanging up. She looked for excuses to accompany him to wherever he was headed next as he chipped away at her case—a case she was guiltily hoping would prove unsolvable, at least for the foreseeable future. Once it was resolved, for good or ill, what excuse would she then have to talk to and see and think about John Watson?

But on the sixth day since their first meeting when John had agreed to serve as her very own private detective, her phone didn’t ring. She watched it all day and carried it around in her pocket, waiting for it to sound and vibrate, but nothing. Night fell, and she found herself on the sofa, the telly blaring in the background, holding and staring at her silent phone as the clock turned.
midnight.

She debated, next day, whether to call for an update or choose the more mature and dignified route of acting the adult who did not regard hired services with girlish fancy, no matter how charming or attractive. (Though lord, he really was just so charming and attractive.) It was silly of her, really, that she was so taken with him. She barely knew him. Not properly. Reading his blog and cornering him at work and sharing a few cups of coffee and some evening strolls hardly qualified as knowing someone.

And as for him getting to know her? Well, that’s just what detectives did. Wasn’t it? He had been gathering information on his client, that was all. For God’s sake, Mary worked at a florist’s and greenhouse, and seasonally as a reserve ballet instructor for five- to eight-year-olds. She barely made rent every month and had, more than once, had her power turned off for late payments. John was a doctor. He probably dated other doctors and nurses, if he dated at all, if he was not already committed to someone, which, Mary realised with deep chagrin, she had no way of knowing. It hadn’t exactly come up in polite conversation. He probably lived in a posh flat and never even thought about his bills. At least she hadn’t confessed her fancy to Samantha. As yet, she hadn’t even told her sister she had followed through with hiring a detective at all. And so, chiding herself, she resolved to put John Watson out of her head once this was all over, and to stop imagining their interactions as flirtations or their coffee dates as dates.

That was, until nine o’clock that evening, when her phone sounded and John’s number lit up the screen. In that moment, all the suppressed feelings returned to flood her system, and her stomach did a cartwheel.

She cleared her throat and affected a tone of professional disinterest. ‘Hello?’

‘Mary!’

She sat up to the edge of the sofa. On the other end of the line, John was panting. ‘John?’

‘It’s—it’s done! It’s over. The letters, the debts, A.G.R.A., it all came together, like—pow!—and there were maybe a dozen of them, by my count, maybe more, all over southern England, and I put in an anonymous call to the NFIB, and—fronts, Mary, all fronts, the brewery and the traveller’s insurance, every single one of them, thousands, no, millions of pounds—’scuse me, mate—and you’re not the only one, there are hundreds of victims, hundreds, but these people got greedy, they made themselves vulnerable, and, and, and it’s done!’

‘John, slow down!’ she said. She was on her feet now, charged with energy and turning in circles. His euphoria was so palpable her whole body tingled with it, but she didn’t understand a word he was saying. In the background, she thought she heard the blare of a horn. ‘I can barely understand you!’

‘I’m on the street. Trying to catch a taxi. Can I . . . can I pop over? Only for a minute.’

‘Yes!’ she shouted, then clamped a hand across her mouth, wincing. Professional disinterest indeed. Dropping the hand, she said in a much more measured tone, ‘Yes, of course. Please do!’

She gave him her address, and before twenty minutes had gone by, he was ringing her buzzer, every bit as excited as he had been on the phone. Coming into her flat, he positively glowed. The air was so electrified, she thought he might sweep her off her feet, and she was ready to throw her arms around his neck. But nothing such as that happened. She needed to calm herself down.

‘Bad news and good,’ he said as she pressed a cup of tea into his hands and ushered him to the
sofa. His face was flush with excitement, his hair a little wind-tossed. She wanted to touch it.

‘Bad first, then.’

She didn’t touch it.

‘You’ll probably never see that two hundred pounds ever again.’

‘I thought not.’ But she was grinning, because he was grinning. His happiness was a contagion. ‘And the good?’

‘Let’s just say, your debts have been cleared. Every pound and penny.’

She gasped and clapped her hands, so happy she could kiss him but glad she had more restraint. ‘Tell me everything!’

The day before, when he hadn’t called, John had taken a personal day from work to continue his investigation, which up until then bore every sign of fruitlessness. His search for the brokerage firm in Mumbai had been a dead end, as were his amateur attempts to detect the forgery in the handwritten letters. Desperate, he decided to follow what he was sure would prove to be another useless lead: the envelopes.

That is, A.G.R.A.

It was pointless; he knew it was pointless. Nevertheless, he walked into Aggie Red Ales, a rundown brewery in Soho. Walking up to the bar, John asked to see the person in charge, the manager or the owner, and the young barkeeper disappeared for a moment to the back room, returning with a man of an age with John. He showed him the letter, the watermark. ‘Know anything about it?’ It was subtle, the tick in the man’s left eye, almost too quick to catch. Then the question. ‘Who sent you? Who are you with?’ For John’s rather innocent question, the reaction was a hostile one, and he had to be quick on his feet.

‘Just an interested party.’ He didn’t know what made him say what he said next. ‘Interested, that is, in a loan.’

The man signalled him to the little office in the back. John’s heart was pounding, knowing he had just tapped into an oil field, though he had no way of knowing just how rich that field really was. ‘You one of Wilcox’s? Ashton’s?’

‘Ashton’s,’ John said smoothly.

‘Bring the dosh?’

Thinking quickly, he fell into playing the part. ‘No. I wanted to make sure this thing was, you know. Legit.’

‘You shoulda brought the dosh.’

‘I thought this was a loan.’

‘Yeah, it is. But I need a good faith payment. Didn’t Ashton explain it to you? Two grand in the pot and a signature on the dotted line, you get your twenty, and we put your two toward initial interest.’

It sounded like a swindle. At best.
‘I’ll be back tomorrow,’ said John.

‘Not before five,’ said the man. ‘You come in before, I won’t be here. Got me?’

‘Got you.’

He left quickly, mind reeling and aided by the adrenaline in his system. He felt alive in a way he hadn’t for a long time. Thrilled with the chase, the blood pumping through his veins. So what did he know? He knew the Soho brewery was a front for an illegal business. Maybe money laundering. Maybe extortion. He wasn’t sure, and he also wasn’t sure whether Mary and those letters were necessarily connected to Aggie Red Ales. He needed more information, more data.

So he went next to the All-Green Recycling Action in Romford, and he played the same game, and nearly the very same script followed: two grand in, twenty out, no interest for the first few months. And again, a phone call to Allen’s Garden-Ready Artistry in Bristol. The woman on the other end was less inclined to talk to him on the phone, but the impression she gave him was the same. Something fishy was going on. And John, looking at the growing list he had compiled of businesses in southern England containing the initials A.G.R.A., knew he was in over his head. If he only had a partner, someone to talk through it with, someone to give him direction, someone to have his back if he found himself in a dangerous situation, it might have been different. But as it was, he was alone. He had come so far, and could go no further.

Deciding it was in his best interest—and Mary’s—he gathered together the evidence Mary had given him and all of his notes, and in the privacy of his bedsit, with the paper work spread out on the floor around him, he called the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau to report his suspicions.

The news would later name him ‘an anonymous tipster’, after the spout of raids on sixteen illegal money laundering businesses throughout the South. The police had already caught the scent of something criminal in the air, but they had had no idea they were dealing with a sort of conglomerate. They were thin on evidence, had no witnesses, and had not discerned the connective tissue shared among the fraudsters: essential components to solving the case. John provided them with all three, enough to set them on the right trail and bring down a network of blackmailers.

‘Hundreds of victims’, the news reported, and ‘millions of pounds in alleged debt’. Mary hadn’t been the only victim. She hadn’t been the only one receiving letter after letter with a debt that mounted exponentially with each renewal. Like Mary, others had panicked, but unlike Mary, many of them had begun to pay it back, whatever they could in whatever amount, some to the tune of tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of pounds. It was uncertain whether any of that money would ever be reclaimed. Criminal charges were filed, court proceedings commenced.

But what no one would answer—or possibly even could answer—is where all the victims’ names had come from. Not everyone had wandered into a laundrette or computer repair shop or deli looking for a loan.

It was a matter for the police. As far as Mary Morstan was concerned, the nightmare was over. Something else had begun.

SEPTEMBER 2013

Samantha teased her sister about dating a doctor. ‘Lucky girl. Doctors, they know their anatomy,’ she said impishly. ‘They know all the pleasure centres.’

‘Sam!’
‘Oh, listen to you, acting all prudish. Don’t tell me this Dr Watson hasn’t yet given you’—her voice went sultry—‘a thorough examination.’

‘I’ll hang up this phone, I swear to God.’

Samantha just laughed.

In truth, Mary was pleased that Samantha was so happy for her, and that for once she had no critique of her choice. She didn’t confess the full details of how they met, not even that John had been her detective and the man who had instigated the raids on the A.G.R.A. that brought her year-long worries to an end. ‘We met at a café,’ she said, ‘not far from where he works.’ That was true enough.

Though Samantha pressed for more details (the simple and the saucy), Mary was disinclined to satisfy her. She wasn’t sure why that was, exactly. In the past, she had been plenty forthcoming about things like that, with her sister at least: so-and-so was a good kisser, but oof, the body odour had been unbearable; or what’s-his-name was a selfish lover, and let me tell you exactly how. With John, though, she wanted to keep things more private. Maybe it was because he himself was such a private soul, and giving away too many of the details of their intimate moments felt like something of a betrayal. Maybe it was that they were moving so slowly and there wasn’t really that much to tell yet. But more likely, Mary thought, it was because there was something about John, about their relationship, that was different from all those that had come before. From the very beginning, she felt the difference like it was something tangible, something warm and all-encompassing, like a new jumper that would one day become a favourite—worn often and in all seasons—and she had the presence of mind to know it from the start, and so treat it with great care.

So yes, they started slowly, but with exclusive attention. Coffees at Vivian’s Café soon added sandwiches and hours-long conversations, which led to long walks in Kennington Park. At first, John walked close but with his hands in his pockets. But after three days of this polite distance, Mary grew bolder and slid her arm through his. A short while later, he extracted his left hand from his pocket and reached for her hand. He twined his fingers with hers, and Mary felt like they had walked together like this a thousand times before. It wasn’t a matter of figuring out how to fit together. They just fit.

They spoke easily, like old friends with a lifetime of catching up to do. John was warm and honest, but Mary discovered early on that there were certain subjects—details from his past—that he would gloss over, step around, or outright avoid. The war was one. The recent death of his sister was another. Sherlock Holmes was the third.

Only once did she get more than two words out of him about the mysterious detective, and it was in the early days of their courtship, when she didn’t yet understand the delicate nature of their friendship, or how exactly it had ended.

The weather was still lovely and the trees a mixture of golds and reds. They walked hand in hand through the park on their favourite paths. John had an hour free between shifts, and he was choosing to spend it with her. Conversation flowed easily as they continued to learn the details of one another’s lives. Mary found herself doing the majority of the talking, but that wasn’t to say John wasn’t reciprocal, just less verbose. This particular afternoon, they had been talking about places they had lived in the city, and the times they had spent away from it. She spoke of coming to London with her father at eight years old after her parents’ divorce and moving house frequently until she went off to university. Like her, John had been born in London, had gone to uni and studied at Bart’s and found work, all in London. The only period of his life spent away from the city he loved, he said, was during his deployment to Afghanistan. ‘After that, I lived in a miserable
little bedsit for a stint, then on Baker Street for a spell, and I’ve been on Maude Street for just about two years now.’

‘This was after your friend died?’

Though he didn’t stop short, she felt the hitch in his step, and watching the side of his face, saw his features change from relaxed to guarded. A smile was forced to his lips, the kind (she would learn over time) he donned to mask whatever true emotion lay beneath.

‘Erm, yes. Not long after.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said. ‘Losing my father was the hardest thing I’ve ever gone through. Getting that phone call, you know?’

‘Yeah.’ He looked straight ahead, the smile gone. ‘The phone call.’

‘Why did he do it?’ She regretted the question at once and tried to retract it. ‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t ask.’

But he answered: ‘Someone convinced him that his life was over. He believed it.’ Then, more softly, almost like he was talking to himself, he added, ‘Some days, I understand that feeling.’

It wasn’t the first time she had sensed a profound sadness in him, but it was like he had finally opened a window and let her peek inside. Still, it wasn’t an invitation to walk through the front door. She tightened her hand around his, rested his head on his shoulder, and squeezed his arm. They walked on in silence.

**NOVEMBER 2013**

Mary couldn’t say when it was she fell in love with John Watson. It happened over time, a course of days and nights and sunset walks before shifts and early mornings over coffee, fingers touching across the table, shy smiles from across rooms or in close proximity. She knew it was real, one night, when he stood in her doorway to bid her goodnight, but she wanted him to stay, and not just for the night, but for always.

His hand held her hand, lingering, his skin warming hers at the point of contact and beyond. The words were on his lips, just there, ready to be spoken—*Goodnight, Mary*—but he didn’t say them. She didn’t want to hear them. In the soft evening light, his blue eyes never fell from hers but once, to graze her lips, and with gentle invitation, she stepped back into the flat. He followed. The door closed. He touched her cheek. She brushed fingers through his gold-and-silver hair. Slowly, he cupped the back of her head, and she tilted her chin up to meet him. They closed their eyes, guided now by bodies in sync—limb, breath, and heartbeat. He kissed her. Tentatively, at first, as though he thought she might push him away, or that the ground might fall out from under their feet. As far as she was concerned, it had. So she held on, that they might fall together. That night, he stayed, and in the morning, as the sun peeked through the curtains and she lay in his arms, she knew it for certain. She was hopelessly, irrevocably in love with John Watson. Perhaps the sentiment was saccharine, but she couldn’t deny it to herself: it was the kind of love people died for.

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Though they saw each other nearly every day, and sometimes through the night, it was weeks and weeks before she ever set foot in his flat. It was too small, he said, and not worth the visit. The Bolt Hole of John Watson, she started calling it, and John’s Mystery Flat, and she teased him that it was where he kept the bodies, that it was a shrine to his unspoken brony obsession, or that it
housed his secret second family. He joked back that it was haunted: ‘The ghosts don’t take well to visitors.’ She laughed.

When he at last relented to letting her come by, just for a spell before they went to the ballet, she prepared herself for a flat worthy of Britain’s Biggest Hoarders or some other secret shame. What she saw was quite the opposite. It was a bedsit, less a flat and more a storage locker with a bed, immaculate and tidy, less so because of any great organisation but more for lack of property. A single bed, a desk and chair, and a tiny kitchenette with a small fridge but no oven. A wardrobe stood next to the door leading to what must have been the bathroom, though the door was closed. A small bookshelf, only half filled, stood beside the bed. There weren’t even curtains in the window. It didn’t seem right, that a doctor should live like this. Or anyone, for that matter.

‘No TV?’ she asked.

He smiled, closed-lipped. ‘I don’t much like the news.’

This was not a home. It barely qualified as a place to live. In fact—and she was loath to admit it, even privately—the flat put her in mind of a prison cell. She hated it.

John walked to the desk, where the two tickets to the ballet lay waiting for them, and Mary spotted something else. Besides the books, there seemed to be little by way of personal affects. No pictures, no daily clutter of mail or keepsakes. But on the desk, beside a white RAMC mug, was a crystal ashtray.

‘I didn’t know you smoke,’ she said, pointing to it.

He looked confused, then saw her indicating the ashtray. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘I don’t.’ He picked up the ashtray, turning it over in his hands like he didn’t know what to do with it; all the same, he handled it with care. ‘It’s just, erm, it was a gift. Kind of a jokey gift from a friend. Just haven’t got ’round to chucking it out yet.’

She sensed some of his discomfort. Embarrassment? What for? So she tried to ease it. ‘Best keep it then,’ she said. ‘When those kinds of friends pop over, it’s best to have it out, yeah?’

Mary had not actually met any of John’s friends, though she’d introduced him to a few of her own. He had mentioned a name or two in passing, old friends or current colleagues, but he didn’t seem particularly close to any of them.

John set the ashtray back on the desk and picked up the tickets, giving them a bit of a wave. ‘Shall we?’

She was happy to leave the dreary place behind. And all the way to the theatre, she plotted how to get him out of it, to emancipate him from a life that wasn’t a life. She hated to be presumptuous, and she would be appalled to be thought of as vain or self-serving, but Mary believed that John’s best chance of escape rested with her.

DECEMBER 2013

He was kind. He was gentle. He was quiet. Sometimes, she thought, it was because he was sombre by nature, calm and reflective, but there were moments, when he didn’t know she was looking, that he just seemed a little, well, sad. Then she would catch his eye or say his name, and the sadness would crack, crumble, replaced by the smile he wore only for her. It lit his whole face and warmed her down to her stomach. God, she was so in love.

John was like no one she had ever been with before. Intelligent without pretension, considerate
without any expectation of reprisal, funny without being brash. He wasn’t classically attractive any
more than she was classically beautiful. Tall, dark, and handsome were not his descriptors; in fact,
they were almost the very opposite. For a man, he was short (though taller than she), his features
were fair, and his face was plain. He was something of an every-man, one that could easily get lost
in a crowd or overlooked at a party.

In fact, he seemed almost to prefer anonymity. When she convinced him to go to a Christmas party
hosted by her friend Freddie from the florist’s, he spent most of the evening holding a glass of
wine but not drinking, arm wrapped around her waist as they stood in a circle of her friends. He
said little. He seemed to prefer to listen, to smile at the right moments and laugh when appropriate,
but she caught him stealing glances at the digital clock on the Blu-ray player. She had a choice: be
annoysed that he wasn’t being more social, ignore his discomfort, or alleviate it.

‘Bored,’ she whispered into his ear. His eyebrows rose in surprise. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘We don’t have to—’

Touching her lips lightly to his, she forestalled him. ‘Just the two of us tonight.’

With fingers hooked together, they slowly made their way around the room until they reached their
host to offer their compliments and excuses, then slipped out the front door and onto the street. The
air was crisp. Light flakes floated on the air, seeming never to reach the ground. As they walked in
silence, they kept their inside hands joined for warmth. The outside hands were dug into pockets.
For her, it was a moment of perfection.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said.

She pulled herself out of reverie. ‘What for?’

His answer came slowly, like he had given it careful thought, the way he gave everything careful
thought. ‘I’m something of a stick in the mud, aren’t I? That’s not fair. Not to you.’

She gave him a gentle shove with her shoulder as rebuke. ‘You’re not a stick in the mud!’ she said
with a laugh.

‘I think I might be.’

‘Then you’re my stick in the mud.’

He glanced down at her, half smiling, but looking concerned. ‘I worry I’m not enough for you,
Mary.’

The words felt ominous, like he was trying to say something, something she didn’t want to hear.
She stopped walking and pulled him around to face her. For a few seconds, she searched his eyes
and found in them a shadow of fear. Of what? Staying? Or leaving?

‘I’m a mess,’ he said, casting his eyes to the pavement between their feet and shaking his head. ‘In
so many ways, you don’t even know. You deserve someone who—’

‘Stop, stop,’ she said, unable to bear hearing anymore. Mary dropped his hand, but only to reach
for his face and guide his gaze back on her. ‘Do you love me, John?’

‘What?’ He seemed startled.

‘Because I love you. I do. You are exactly enough for me. You are exactly what I have been
looking for, waiting for, my whole life. I thought I would never find you. Please don't ask me to give you up.'

‘I would hate for you to regret me.’

She smiled kindly, pushing her fingernails through his hair to brush away the flakes. ‘Not in a thousand years. I love you,’ she repeated.

John shook his head, like he couldn’t believe it.

‘Do you love me?’ she asked again.

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, and for a heart-stopping moment, she thought he was going to deny it. But he lifted his hand to the back of her head and held it there, then stepped closer. His forehead rested against hers. When he spoke, his words were strangled by emotion. ‘More than anything left in this world.’

She smiled, the cold entirely forgotten. ‘Then kiss me.’

John laughed and sniffed, still emotional, in a way she had never seen him before. She didn’t entirely understand. The history that fed why he feared to love her was still hidden from her, and she wouldn’t press for it. Not until he was ready to share it with her. For now, this was enough. He brought their lips together and kissed her tenderly, the way only he could, because he did love her, and she knew it.

***

John had no family. He had lost his mother and father when he was a teenager, and his only sister just a couple of years before they had met. And because neither of his parents had had any siblings, John had no first cousins.

But there was someone he wanted Mary to meet, someone he described as ‘practically family’, even though he called her, rather formally, Mrs Hudson.

‘And you must be Mary!’

They met her on a corner, and the woman was still several paces away when she opened her arms to Mary, giving her plenty of time to prepare for the embrace. She was an old woman, probably in her later seventies, with short, feathery hair she most likely dyed and apple-round cheekbones in a thin face. Her smile was instantly contagious, and she hugged Mary like they were old friends.

‘Well, aren’t you a pretty thing,’ Mrs Hudson said when she stepped back, but still held Mary by the arms to get the proper measure of her. ‘Oh, she’s lovely, John. Just lovely.’ Then she hugged John, and Mary smiled as he kissed her on the cheek in welcome.

The three of them walked together to the restaurant where John had made reservations. Mrs Hudson walked slowly, linking arms with John on one side; on the other, he sought out Mary’s hand. When they were seated and John had ordered them the house red (Mary had noticed, over the weeks of their burgeoning courtship, that he was only a social drinker, and never had more than one glass of wine or one bottle of beer), Mrs Hudson—positively beaming—began to pepper them with questions, from how they had met to what plans they had made for Christmas. Every answer they gave made her eyes shine.

‘You know,’ she said at one juncture, ‘if you two are ever looking for a place to live—’
John suddenly started laughing, though to Mary’s ears it sounded a bit forced, and he changed the topic of conversation quite abruptly. ‘How’s your niece and her family? The one with the twins? Will you be visiting for Christmas?’

Halfway through the meal, John’s phone sounded in his pocket. He checked the screen. ‘Work,’ he said apologetically. ‘Just a minute, this won’t take long.’ And he excused himself from the table.

Not five seconds after John stepped away, Mrs Hudson reached across the table and squeezed Mary’s hand. ‘It’s so lovely to meet you, Mary. I can’t tell you.’

‘It’s wonderful to meet you, too, Mrs Hudson. John speaks so fondly of you.’

‘He seems so happy. Just so happy.’ Mrs Hudson sat back and rested her hands in her lap. Her smile was one of the brightest and friendliest Mary had ever seen. ‘It warms my heart to see him like that.’

Mary cocked her head, curious. She wasn’t exactly sure what Mrs Hudson was saying. In fact, since first learning of her, Mary had been trying to understand the relationship between John and his former landlady. It wasn’t usual—as far as she was aware—for a grown man, a professional, to be so close with the person he paid rent to every month. But he spoke about her with unqualified praise, and now seeing them together, interacting with, not only ease and familiarity, but affection, too, she knew it was much more than that. If she hadn’t been told otherwise, she would have mistaken them for mother and son.

‘I worry about him, sometimes,’ said Mrs Hudson, confidentially. But she winked. ‘I don’t think I’ll have to, anymore.’

Mary glanced quickly to the window. Outside, John was pacing slowly on the pavement while talking on his phone. She realised, suddenly, that she had an opportunity here. It wasn’t a betrayal of trust, was it, just to ask a few questions?

‘Why do you worry?’ she asked.

‘Oh, he’s just not himself these days. He’s had a rough time of things. Since . . .’

‘Since his sister passed?’

‘Since Sherlock.’

The same sadness that hid in the back corners of John’s eyes now reflected in hers.

‘He won’t talk about it with me,’ said Mary.

‘Nor with me.’

‘I read about it online.’ The words coming out of her mouth sounded so callous, and she feared she had crossed a line, having no business treading on what seemed like family affairs.

But Mrs Hudson was not offended. ‘It was awful when it happened, just awful.’

Mary worried the cloth napkin between her fingers, wondering how far she dared query. ‘I read that he jumped.’

Mrs Hudson nodded soberly. ‘I couldn’t believe it, when I learnt of it. I knew a detective inspector, came by the flat a lot, back then. *He* told me. I knew something was wrong the moment he stepped
through my door. I saw it on his face. And we cried together, but still, I couldn’t believe it. I just couldn’t. Not until John told me himself. John—he saw it happen.’

Gasping, Mary covered her mouth. She hadn’t known John had been witness to such a horrible thing. After her own father’s death, she had struggled not to imagine how it had happened and was glad not to have seen it for herself. Any time she came close, she made concerted effort to push the image away.

‘They were close, Sherlock and John,’ Mrs Hudson said, as their food cooled on the table and John continued with his phone call outside. A fond, though melancholic smile lifted her rosy cheeks. ‘They bickered so much it made their milk curdle, but you should have heard them laughing. A couple of overgrown schoolboys, really, making noise and messes, having adventures and solving crimes. You wouldn’t believe the things they got up to. Well, Sherlock especially. John kept him civil. But Sherlock kept John young.’

Mrs Hudson looked wistfully out of the window to the man they both loved.

‘Sometimes, late at night, when the floorboards creak above me, I think it’s him. Sherlock, I mean. Some nights, I still hear him playing his violin. He composed, you know. He wrote me a piece, just for me, on my birthday one year. A light-hearted, wild thing with his fingers flying all over the place. He thought it would drive me crazy, but it made me laugh. I’ve . . . forgotten it. The tune. I wish I’d made him record it. But even now, there are days I hear him playing, like it’s just for me.’ She laughed. ‘It’s just my fussy old memory playing tricks on me. It tells me, he’s still here! He’s so impatient for John to come home!’ She laughed again at herself, but Mary wanted to cry. ‘I’m just a silly old thing. Even though someone else is living there now, my house is too quiet. John knows he’s welcome back any time. One word, and I’d kick out the current tenants before he could finish asking! But I understand. He needs to move on. He needs to put that life behind him and find something new.’ Again, she reached across the table to pat Mary’s hand. ‘He looks at you, and it’s like he’s breathing again. His whole face just shines.’

‘That was St E’s.’ John reappeared suddenly at the table. Mary controlled a jump. As he slid the phone back into his pocket, he pulled out his chair and sat again.

‘Do you have to leave?’ asked Mary. She didn’t want him to go. At the same time, it wouldn’t be so bad, just her and Mrs Hudson for one evening.

‘Oh no. Just pushing back a surgery tomorrow by a couple of hours, that’s all.’ He flashed another apologetic smile at them both. ‘What are we talking about?’

‘Never you mind,’ said Mrs Hudson deftly. ‘You wouldn’t want me to spoil your Christmas present, now would you?’

They continued the meal, and conversation flowed like a river. At some point, Mary reached under the table and gave John’s thigh a gentle squeeze. He placed his hand atop hers and kept it there.

***

John and Mary didn’t talk about milestones in their relationship, and they never defined it. Mary never heard John refer to her as his girlfriend, and the only time the word ‘boyfriend’ came up was in conversations Mary had with Samantha. But saying it aloud like that made her feel like a teenager, and it made John seem like an impermanent figure in her life. He was John, he was hers, and she was his. That’s really all there was to it.

Nevertheless, meeting Mrs Hudson felt like a milestone, and a significant one. John was opening
his world to her. In a more traditional setting, it was the equivalent of meeting the family. So she wanted John to meet hers.

Flying to Calgary was prohibitively expensive, but over the holidays they set up a video chat session, and that’s how she finally fulfilled Samantha’s wish to meet John face to face.

‘He’s cute,’ said Sam, later, when it was just the two of them again. ‘Kind of soft-spoken, isn’t he?’

‘I’ve dated enough loud-mouths to know they’re not my cuppa,’ Mary countered. She wasn’t sure if it was a criticism, but she would defend John to the hilt.

‘Going on . . . four months now?’

‘And a half.’

‘You are sleeping together, then.’

Mary was glad they were talking on the phone and not by video, to hide her colouring cheeks.

‘That’s all you ever ask me!’

‘Well, you’ve never been shy about talking about it before! What’s different now?’

‘What’s different is, it’s none of your business.’

She was no longer the girl who needed to vent about her sex life, or solicit feedback from her wiser, older sister. What she and John shared privately, she cherished privately. Besides, John seemed classier than that, and she respected him too much to gossip about what they got up to beneath the covers. Together, they had talked about past girlfriends, boyfriends, even laughed about their past mistakes and bad dates. But when it was just the two of them, undressing, touching, holding, giving into the raw need of each other, no one else had a place there. She left the rest of it behind. She imagined he did, too.

So she wouldn’t tell Sam about how tenderly he knew her or how beautiful she felt when he looked at her naked body with desire. The sweetness of his mouth and the passion of his touch was hers and hers alone to treasure.

‘Has he moved in?’

‘One step at a time,’ said Mary, vaguely.

She wanted him to, and had even broached the subject—delicately—on more than one occasion. She mentioned how much time he spent at hers and away from his; she casually calculated the fiscal advantages of sharing one front door; she even got so bold as to tell him what she really thought of the bedsit (‘It’s a hovel, John.’). But something was holding him back. She couldn’t name it. It wasn’t a lack of commitment or needing an exit strategy. It was like he was trying to cross a gulf on a rickety bridge, and one wrong move might plunge him to the ravine below.

‘You’ll bring him out sometime so I can meet him properly, I hope,’ Sam continued.

‘What, to Canada?’

‘You haven’t been home in ages, Mare-bear.’

‘London is home. Why do you never come to see me? You didn’t even come for Dad’s funeral.’

There was a long pause, and for one exciting moment, Mary believed her sister was actually
considering a visit. Then Sam said, ‘I don’t like flying.’

Mary rolled her eyes, this time wishing Sam could see her. ‘Well, John and I love it here.’

‘Maybe you would both love it here, if you gave it a chance.’

‘Dad’s buried here, Sam.’

‘And Mum’s grave is in Calgary.’

She sighed, aching that she couldn’t have it both ways. But her family had always been split down the middle, so she supposed her heart must be, too. ‘Maybe next Christmas, we’ll come visit,’ she said. There was no doubt in her mind about the we. As far as she was concerned, it would be we for the next fifty Christmases. ‘But I’m telling you, Samantha, darling, this is home. London is where I’ll die.’

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On Christmas morning, they woke together, and in the tradition of both their families exchanged Christmas stockings. It seemed they both were making up for past Christmases spent alone. John had stuffed hers full, and included in her haul were the latest Jodi Picoult novel, tickets to see Giselle performed by the English National Ballet, an oven thermometer (she laughed when she saw it—she had burnt both a lasagne and meat pie due to faulty settings on the flat’s old oven), a dozen of her favourite multi-coloured macarons, a purple-and-blue cashmere scarf, and a silver bird hanging in flight on the end of silver chain.

To John, she had gifted three things: First, a gift certificate to his favourite bakery, near the hospital (‘Now you can get a currant scone every morning for a solid month,’ she said, and he laughed and kissed her). Second, an updated phone.

‘Yours is so old, it can’t hold a charge more than a couple hours,’ she said, thinking it was quite the thoughtful gift. ‘So I thought it was time. I mean, I know your old phone was from your sister, but . . .’ And suddenly, she doubted her choice. Maybe she shouldn’t have forced this one on him.

‘I’ve been meaning to update,’ said John, staring at the box, caught somewhere between yesterday and today. She had seen that expression before. ‘They can transfer information, though, right? My address book, and, um, old texts?’

‘Of course.’

He smiled and thanked her, complimenting the new phone, and then lifted the final small box.

Mary’s heart was racing, a little fearful of his reaction to her final gift, which she had placed in an old black jewellery box.

John lifted the lid. His eyebrows lifted, too.

She hastened to put him at ease and said softly, ‘For when you’re ready.’

He picked up the small silver key, a replica of her own. His eyes met hers.

‘I love you,’ she said. Again, that look of disbelief, like he wanted to trust this was true but didn’t know his way forward. She wanted more than anything to erase that look.

‘I love you,’ he said. ‘I just . . . Don’t give up on me, Mary. I just need a little more time.’
‘I know.’

FEBRUARY 2014

On the anniversary of Harry Watson’s death, John made plans to visit her.

‘May I come?’ Mary asked.

At first, John was nonplussed, obviously expecting her to accept his excuse for why he would be away the night before Valentine’s, with the promise that they would spend the holiday together. Then, his face softened. ‘I’d like that,’ he said.

The next day, hand in hand, they crunched through the thin crust of snow on the ground, John bearing a small bouquet of lilies from Rosemary and Thyme, which had been provided free of charge, as a favour to Mary. He laid the flowers at the base of the headstone.

‘We couldn’t afford a plot for Mum,’ he said, ‘or Dad. They were cremated. But I wanted Harry to have a spot in the earth.’

It was all he said.

That night, Mary found him in the kitchen, standing at the sink with a glass of water in his hand. He heard her come up behind him but didn’t turn. Hoping she wasn’t intruding, she stepped beside him and lay a hand between his shoulder blades where she felt the heat and damp of his shirt. Another nightmare then.

He had them, from time to time. That’s what he said. But in all the nights he had stayed over, she had been witness to them only twice. Tonight was the third.

She rubbed his back gently, mindful not to touch the left shoulder and bullet wound scar, which ached at times like these. ‘Acted up’ were his words, but she could see in his face that it was worse than that. When she asked whether he preferred that she never touch it, he said it was fine, he didn’t mind, but she saw that was a lie, too. So she never did.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ she asked, her voice nearly a whisper to match the night’s solemnity.

He drank slowly, lowered the glass. ‘I don’t remember it.’

John was not in the habit of lying to her. That’s why it was so easy to tell when he did.

She rested her head on his shoulder, not ceasing to rub circles into his back until he was ready to go back to bed.

MARCH 2014

On her birthday, Mary went to work, where Freddie and Janelle sang to her and had her blow out the candle on an oversized cupcake with frosting that mimicked succulent flowers in a fondant terracotta pot. Sam called during her break, and they talked and laughed for two hours (Janelle was kindly indulgent).

John joked that he would send her a bouquet from a competing flower shop. Instead, she was delivered chocolate truffles and a pair of pearl earrings.

When she returned home to get ready for her date that night, she was taken by surprise when she
stepped through her front door and found John already there, standing beside an antique rocking chair she had admired several months ago—October, was it?—and adorned with a large red bow. Despite having her permission—nay, her blessing; nay, her explicit encouragement—he had never let himself in before with the key she had gifted him for Christmas. But he was there now, wearing a dark suit and tie, and a sheepish smile on his face. He showed her the key.

‘This okay?’

She dropped her purse by the door. It was more than okay. It was the most wonderful sight in the world, the way her world should be: coming home to find that man she loved in the place he belonged.

‘Does this mean . . . ?’ She almost didn’t dare hope.

‘I was thinking,’ he said, coming toward her with slow, measured steps as he slipped the key into his front pocket. ‘Well, let’s face it. Your bed is softer than mine. Your shower has better water pressure. And I’m over here all the time anyway . . .’

‘Oh John!’ She flung her arms around his neck. He laughed and squeezed her tightly, lifting her off her feet to twirl her. With her feet back on the ground, she held his face in her hands and kissed him joyfully.

***

They moved him in the following weekend. It didn’t take long. John had some boxes and suitcases but no furniture to call his own. They ordered a pizza, turned on the radio, and unpacked his life, mingling it comfortably with hers. They also planned additional improvements to the flat: a new book case, new coffee tables, new rugs. ‘I’ll make curtains,’ she added. ‘You don’t know it yet, but I’m quite handy with a sewing machine.’

Joining their lives together was easy—the emotional work had already been done, so the physical was just a matter of practicality: making space in the wardrobe and in the bathroom cupboards, downsizing from two electric kettles to one and tossing the spare, figuring who got first go at the shower or who picked up the mail. Neither made heavy demands, and both made easy concessions. It was no work at all.

For Mary, is was a happy change, having another body to move around and lean against and welcome home. For John, it was a transformation. He seemed lighter, somehow. Mary couldn’t explain it, couldn’t quite even describe it. Maybe it was the way he walked, like he wasn’t carrying so much weight on his back anymore; or the way he laughed, like it was easier than it had been before. He certainly smiled more. And he became more playful, too, singing while stirring a pot, or dancing with her on their new rugs just for the hell of it, or planning holidays to the country. It wasn’t like he had become a new man. He was the same man she had fallen in love with. But a veil she didn’t know overlaid him had been lifted, and he shone brighter. Perhaps it was the delusion of biased mind, but she thought him more beautiful, in every respect.

The new shelves were assembled. The new curtains were hung. She had just affixed a picture to the wall, one of the two of them standing on the Millennium Bridge, arms around each other and posing for the camera and an indulgent tourist. From the kitchen, John returned with two glasses of red wine.

She met him en route, surprising him, but she didn’t take the proffered glass. Instead, she brushed her fingers along his jaw, along the rim of his ear, and behind his head, pulling his head toward her. She kissed him with need, unrepentant in her desire. He opened his mouth and inclined his
head, kissing her in return. His back fell against the wall. His arms came up and around her. The cool wine glass touched her skin. He started, fumbling a little, but she stepped back, took the glasses away and set them on a table, then wasted not a second more throwing herself into his arms. The wine could wait.

They slid down the walls toward the bedroom, laughing and kissing and moaning, drunk on something quite apart from wine, and stumbled into the bedroom and upon the bed. She would never tire of this, his fingers in her hair, his mouth on her skin, the way he said her name and then couldn’t, could only sigh and pant and give himself to her, all of himself.

Afterwards, returning for the wine, they saw their little mishap: a small splash of red on the floorboards. After a short period of scrubbing and giggling, Mary said, ‘Just don’t tell the landlord!’

‘Ah, it’s not so bad. At least we’re not shooting holes in the walls.’

‘Hm?’

‘Nothing.’ John sat back on his heels and said, ‘Hell with it. Let’s put a standing lamp right here.’

**APRIL 2014**

Mary cracked open the door to the bathroom, but only a little; she didn’t want too much steam to escape. ‘John, it’s work. Should I answer?’

He shouted over the sound of the shower. ‘Text and say I’ll be there in forty!’

She closed the door and picked up his phone from the nightstand, unplugging the charger. Then she tapped in his code and responded quickly to the text. The inbox, though, remained opened, and Mary saw, at the bottom of the screen, that John had over three hundred saved texts. She shook her head with amusement. Did he not know these took up storage space? With a quick swipe of her finger, she scrolled through the topmost texts and saw that they were all from her. Texts from colleagues had evidently been deleted, but—if she was reading this right—he had saved every text she had ever sent him.

Smiling, she hopped onto the bed, sat cross-legged, and journeyed back, back to Valentine’s and New Year’s and Christmas, reliving the days of their relationship in reverse. She wasn’t one to snoop, but this wasn’t snooping, she reasoned. He had given her his password, after all, and this was a history they shared. But she did see, from time to time, that some of Mrs Hudson’s texts were saved, too. She opened only one (‘John, dear, give me a ring when you have a moment’), and she moved on with her own. December, November, October . . . It was no wonder John had wanted to transfer these from his old phone. They should have them printed, she thought, to keep them safe, just in case the technology failed them one day. September, August, and their very first texts, back and forth, when they were practically strangers who still did not know what they would become.

A little egocentrically, perhaps, Mary assumed that the saved texts would stop with hers, the very first one she ever sent. But her heart stopped when she saw a time jump, from August 2014 to January 2013, a text from someone named Stamford. Curiosity drove her before guilt could stop her, and she read:

*John, fancy a pint? It’s been too long.*

That was it. But Mary didn’t think she had ever heard John speak of someone with the surname
Stamford before and wondered who it was. And that wasn’t all. Another large jump in time to the next text, October 2011, from Harry. Oh my God, Mary mouthed as the shower kept running in the distance. This was from John’s sister. Guilt now squeezing at her heart, she ventured to open this one, too:

Thx. Luv u. Don’t make me say it again.

Mary knew that John’s relationship with his sister had been rocky, to put it mildly, and he had mentioned the circumstances of her death, in general terms. He still carried the pain of it with him, the things left unsaid, the anger he had felt toward her up to the last. And here, like a token of whatever good feeling they had shared between them, a saved text, maybe the last she had ever sent him. Nine words from two-and-a-half years ago.

But there were still three more. The shower twisted off just as Mary clicked texts from January 30, 2010, in the order they had been received.

Baker Street.
Come at once if convenient.
SH

If inconvenient, come anyway.
SH

Could be dangerous.
SH

She heard the shower curtain being pulled back and John, humming to himself, drying off. Hastily, Mary closed the inbox, set the phone back on the nightstand, and padded quickly from the room, wiping her eyes and recovering herself before John should see her again.

APRIL 2014

They were not a contentious couple, and they almost never fought. Their disagreements boiled down to the best way to cook eggs, the cultural significance of James Bond (Mary just didn’t get it), how often to wash the bathroom towels (‘Every week?’ said John), and, more seriously, how to manage the bills: John’s earning was higher, so he argued he should shoulder the greater burden of rent and utilities; Mary had her pride and wanted to split all financial obligations they shared fifty-fifty. They settled on sixty-forty for the rent, fifty-fifty for the utilities, Mary would take the grocery bills, John would pay whenever they went out (taxis and meals), mobiles, telly, and internet, and each would handle their own transportation to and from work.

But they didn’t have any serious dispute until Mary found the gun.

She was hunting for stationery, needing a card for a friend’s upcoming wedding, and she couldn’t remember where she had tucked them away. Maybe John had moved them when he moved in. So she reached for the shoebox under John’s side of the bed and slid it toward her. It was bound with rubber bands and felt heavy, and she doubted the cards were in there, but she had to check anyway. And there she saw it, heavy and black, alongside an empty magazine and a full box reading 9mm automatic pistol.

Her heart began to pound in earnest. She had never seen a gun before, not close up, not in real life.
And though she didn’t pick it up, its weight surprised her as she lifted the shoebox. In fact, it upset her a little, in part because there was a lethal weapon in her home, but more especially because John hadn’t told her he was bringing it. It seemed like the sort of thing she ought to have known.

Yes, he had been a soldier. She knew that. But he didn’t talk about it, so she hadn’t spent much time imagining what that really meant. Now, though, she couldn’t help it. This gun was John’s, his service weapon. But had he ever had to use it? Surely he had been trained, but he was a doctor, first and foremost. He had said that. His prerogative was to save lives, not . . . take them. The thought chilled her. Had he? In war, she knew, it was justified, and to save his own life and those of his fellow soldiers, of course, he might have had to. But she just couldn’t imagine it: John, aiming, firing, taking a life. Had this gun, this gun, resting in a box below their beds, been instrumental in killing another man?

‘I don’t want it in the flat,’ Mary said, more boldly than she felt. She hated making demands, but this was one matter where she could see no acceptable compromise.

‘Mary, it’s not even loaded,’ John responded.

‘But it’s against the law! How is it you even have a gun?’

‘I know, I know,’ said John, not answering the question. ‘But it’s a matter of safety.’

‘Safety!’

‘London is . . . Well, it’s not as safe as one might think. It’s good to be prepared.’

‘In our house, John? What do you imagine will happen?’

His jaw grew tight, and he glared. The look startled her, frightened her. He must have seen it on her face, because he half turned away, rubbing a hand down his face as though to straighten it out.

‘What if,’ she said, trying to articulate her fears more carefully, ‘what if the landlord found it? I don’t know why he would, but what if? We would not only lose the flat. If you’re found in possession of a gun, that could mean prison time.’ She couldn’t bear the thought, and a hand covered her mouth as she fought to stabilise her emotions.

‘Getting rid of something like this isn’t so easy,’ he murmured.

‘Find a way. Please. Please. John, if we have children—’ She stopped, surprised by herself. They had never broached the subject of children before, not in any serious context. She didn’t know what John thought about the possibility, aside from the fact that they had always been careful and taken measures to prevent it. More truthfully, she wasn’t positive how she felt about it either. Though still relatively young, she wasn’t that young, and she assumed the window was closing. Then, she met him.

John looked equally surprised, and she almost expected him to laugh. Instead, in a voice choked with emotion, he said, ‘All the more reason to be able to protect them.’

‘Or harm them.’ Why would he think they need protecting? Did he really see the world as such a dark and dangerous place? But there was so much good in it, too! People were good. She had always believed that. ‘God, John. Please. I don’t understand completely, and I know you’ve been hurt. But please. Don’t bring the war into our home.’

He dropped his head to hide his eyes, because they were glistening with tears. And here was something else she had never seen: John Watson crying.
'I never—' It was a false start. His voice caught, and he had to try again. 'I’m sorry, Mary. I would never put you through that. You’re right. I’ll take care of it.’

He was as good as his word. Mary never saw the gun again.

MAY 2014

Shirking off Sam’s needling insistence that they take a spring holiday to Calgary, Mary and John instead kept it closer to home. They visited Stonehenge because, although John had once been on a school trip, Mary had been too busy with youth ballet. But she had always wanted to see it, despite John’s warning that they wouldn’t be able to get very close. Then they took another Saturday to visit Hampton Court Palace, where Mary made John wear a green velvet cape while she herself donned a red velvet robe and begged a jester to take their photograph.

‘This one is not going on the wall,’ John said through an indulgent but pained smile, just before the jester counted to three.

‘You goon, of course not.’

She turned and kissed his cheek, just as the photo was snapped.

‘This one is going in the bedroom,’ she said in her best sultry voice.

John threw his head back and laughed. The jester caught that one, too.

JUNE 2014

It was a wet, grey, gloomy June. London went long stretches of days without sunlight, and one didn’t leave the flat without a brolly and a heavy sense of resignation.

Mary felt it first in her throat: thickness, at the start, then pain when swallowing. But she tried to ignore it, even as her muscles began to ache and her heavy head begged to find a pillow in the middle of the day. She fought it with lozenges, tomato soup, and honey tea, but the virus had taken hold, and, according to her new doctor, would just have to wear itself out.

‘Sleep and fluids,’ said John, holding the backs of his fingers to the side of her face, though he had already taken her temperature. ‘No better remedy. But let me know if your muscle ache worsens or chest feels tight when you breathe, and I’ll get you a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory or analgesic.’

‘Mm, sexy,’ she murmured through a stuffy nose. She rubbed her nose with a wadded tissue.

‘It’s all I can do to keep myself from snogging you senseless,’ he quipped.

She laughed, but it hurt too much to continue. ‘I’m not faking this time,’ she said.

‘What’s that?’

‘To get an appointment with you and trick you into being my boyfriend. This is all real, sweetie.’ She gestured to her duvet-swaddled body with the snotty tissue.

John chuckled and kissed her forehead, promising to bring back menthol for her tea when he returned home from work. ‘ Anything else you might need, text me.’

She was down for four days, sleeping mostly, but also bingeing on the DVD box sets John brought home for her. He was perfectly attentive, but there was something melancholic about him, a slight
distraction of the brain, perhaps. Maybe the cold was playing tricks on her. When her own brain wasn’t foggy with fatigue, she asked about work, and he shared little anecdotes from throughout his day. She asked if he thought he was coming down with it, too, but he said, no, he felt perfectly healthy. Perhaps, then, it was the weather, which was dour enough to affect even the cheeriest of dispositions, let alone John, who was, it had to be admitted, a little more prone to introspection and sobriety than most.

But she couldn’t shake the suspicion that she was missing something. For three nights, he slept on the sofa—so she wouldn’t feel guilty about sneezing and hacking and keeping him awake, of course—but she also caught him in the evening at his desk, staring at his medical journals without actually reading them, seemingly lost in thought. Whatever he was thinking about, whatever he seemed to be dealing with, he was dealing with it on his own.

Eventually, with the month nearly gone but the skies still sulky, Mary’s illness broke. John, too, seemed to be rising from his funk, and when he got home that evening, he didn’t remove his jacket but said, ‘How about we go out tonight? Get you out of this flat.’

‘Oh, thank God,’ said Mary. She threw off the blanket, stood from the sofa, and grabbed her purse from the hook by the door. She didn’t care how she looked and didn’t bother with the mirror, not even to comb fingers through her hair. ‘You choose. I’ll go anywhere.’

He caught her arm before she had fully passed through the door. ‘Sweetheart,’ he said, ‘perhaps some proper shoes?’

She looked down and saw she was still wearing her house slippers. And, for that matter, a dressing gown. She threw back her head and laughed, and John with her. ‘Five minutes,’ she promised.

They went to a nearby pub—quick drinks, cheap starters, and exactly the kind of noise and bustle Mary had been missing while cooped up in bed. It was crowded, but they found a table and shouted at one another over the music while a football match played on a telly in the corner, occasionally eliciting cheers from those crowded together to watch. A server brought them two beers.

John drank slowly, as he always did, and Mary followed suit. She had never been a heavy drinker, but she did tend to adopt the drinking habits of her mates when going out, which meant she’d had very little by way of alcohol since meeting John, and she found herself happier for it. Or maybe that was just John. All the same, after half an hour they had drained their glasses, and Mary was in need of the loo. ‘I’ll get us another round on my way back,’ she said into his ear, the better for him to hear.

As she was waiting at the bar for her drinks to be served up, she glanced at the score (though she cared little for football), fixed her hair in the mirror behind the bottles lining the back wall, and looked down the long bar to see if there was anyone she happened to know. Nobody. But . . . there was one man angled not forward, and not toward the telly, but to the side, the only one to the side, with an intent stare. Mary followed it, and it seemed to her, despite the throng, that he was staring at John.

‘Your drinks,’ said the barkeeper. She picked up the two glasses and returned to the table, intending to ask John whether he knew the man at the bar.

‘Ah, Mary,’ said John, taking his drink from her but setting it aside. He was handing his phone over to another patron. ‘This lovely woman here has agreed to take our photo.’

‘What? Why?’ said Mary, sliding into her chair, which John pulled around to sit right alongside his. ‘I look a mess!’
‘You look stunning. And because, I was just thinking.’ He draped an arm around the back of her chair, covered her other hand with his on the table, and looked directly into her eyes as he said, ‘You’re the best thing that could have possibly happened to me.’

Touched, delighted, she smiled, and nudged his nose with hers. ‘I agree,’ she joked. ‘Oh go on, then.’ She turned to the camera, keeping John’s face close to hers.

His hand moved to her back, and she was filled with wonder and warmth that after so many months, she could still feel herself melting at his touch. Love shouldn’t be this desperate, she thought. Love should flare then grow temperate, a steady pulse, an untroubled melody. But with John, she knew only a racing heart and songbirds going wild with joy. So after the picture had been taken and the phone returned, she looked at him and, with her eyes, begged him for a kiss. Graciously, he obliged.

She had by then entirely forgotten about the man at the bar.
They Call It the Pit

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains intense and vulgar language. Discretion is advised.

Friday, April 24, 2015

They had decided not to return to London. The trail had left the city, so they left with it. Tonight, they were somewhere off the A120 outside of Colchester, having booked a room under John’s name.

Sherlock reclined in the hotel armchair and brought his steepled fingers to his chin. ‘I want to see those envelopes,’ he said.

‘Police have them,’ said John. ‘The NFIB, that is. Mary and I turned everything over.’

The hotel lobby was small and its décor a little too 1990s mauve and country blue, but it was clean and well kept. More importantly, it was quiet. They were sat in two chairs tucked into a corner facing each other with a tiny coffee table between their knees. Here, no one was likely to spot or disturb them.

‘And the raids were national news?’

‘For a few days, yeah. What connected them, though, was not released to the public.’

‘So as not to alert the scammers before a raid.’

‘That’s what I assumed. But it looks like they may have missed one.’

‘Mm.’

John knew that expression: Sherlock was working through a problem, and if John didn’t say something to keep the conversation going, he was likely to slip into his mind palace for an unforeseen stretch of time.

‘Then again, it could be entirely unrelated. Andre’s General Repair & Renovation Assistance might only coincidentally share those initials.’

Sherlock lowered his hands to the armrests. ‘You don’t really think that, do you?’

‘I don’t know what to think,’ said John, sighing sullenly.

Because really, it didn’t make a lot of sense. Though Sherlock had said it twice already that night—he didn’t believe in coincidence—was there really a connection? What did the scam from three years ago have to do with Bill Murray today? Then again, the misfortune that had beset Mary had beset dozens, if not hundreds, of other Britons. So, logically, it was not a stretch to think that maybe, coincidentally, they had caused problems for Bill, too.

That is, if A.G.R.A. was even still in operation. John wasn’t ready to concede that.
‘What do you know about Mary’s father?’ Sherlock asked suddenly.

The question startled John from his thoughts; it seemed Sherlock wasn’t the only one capable of quickly sliding into a private thought bubble. He knew it was not an illogical question. He just didn’t think it a fruitful one.

‘He was a teacher,’ said John. ‘Maths. Died in 2008, I believe it was.’ He had visited the grave with Mary. ‘July, it would’ve been.’

‘How?’

John cleared his throat. He couldn’t quite make eye contact but endeavoured to answer with as much nonchalance as possible. ‘They say he stepped out in front of a bus.’

Lowering his hands to the armrests, Sherlock looked taken aback. ‘On purpose?’

‘Maybe. Mary said he was depressed. He’d struggled with it for years, and for a time had stopped seeking treatment. Guess it all just became too much. She said she could see he was getting worse, but it still came as a terrible shock. It was officially ruled a suicide, but Mary, she...’ John sighed. ‘She made herself believe it was an accident.’

‘Was she there when...?’ Sherlock treaded carefully.

‘No, thank God,’ said John, a little too quickly. He rushed to cover up any implied accusations. ‘But there were dozens of witnesses. Most seemed to believe it was deliberate.’

He had held Mary’s hand during the bus ride to the cemetery in Teddington, and she told him about receiving the phone call. She said she had been very calm. Her voice hadn’t waivered, her knees hadn’t buckled, her eyes hadn’t even burned. She had been at home before leaving for work, coffee percolating and still in her nightdress. She thanked the officer for calling and said goodbye. Then she called Samantha, and it wasn’t until she spoke the words herself that the reality crashed down upon her. ‘Dad’s dead.’ Then she broke down and sobbed.

‘Any cause of his depression? Was it primarily genetic? A side-effect of medications for a different condition?’

‘Debts,’ said John. ‘Financial stress.’

‘What did he go into debt for?’

‘I couldn’t tell you. I don’t know that Mary knew.’

‘Did the sister?’

‘Samantha?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘The question is, why did she oppose Mary going to the police with the matter? Irrational, given it was a clear case of fraud. You made the right call.’

‘Well, it seems clear now, and sure, you would have spotted it sooner, but—’

‘As legal professionals, the Hillocks should have as well.’
‘Well, they didn’t. They seemed to think it would invite trouble. But I think we’re getting off track here. So what if Arthur Morstan was in debt? He’s dead. His debts followed him to the grave, and Mary was conned by people who didn’t even know he had died.’

‘Nothing is irrelevant, John.’

‘In this case, I think it might be.’

Sherlock grunted, and his train of thought suddenly jumped tracks. ‘Setting A.G.R.A. aside, then. For now. There are other matters of greater urgency, I perceive.’

‘You mean . . .’

‘Moran, yes. But first.’ He cleared his throat, adopted a look of sincerity that was a little put-on, and continued, ‘A much-needed apology. I doubted you, and I was wrong.’

But John didn’t want to hear it. Sherlock had not acted maliciously. He had just been being Sherlock, and of all people, it wouldn’t be John who held that against him.

‘You know,’ said John, cutting him off, ‘there may have been a time when those words would have amused me. You, admitting you were wrong.’ Sherlock smiled wryly. ‘These days, though, I’d just rather you were always right. So in future, just let me carry on with my crazy tales, and we’ll deal with them from there, eh?’

‘Deal.’

‘Good.’ He grinned, feeling their easy camaraderie restored, as he liked it. He would rely on that to get him through this next bit.

‘Will you tell me, then, what he said?’ John opened his mouth, but before he could utter a syllable, Sherlock eagerly dictated to him how it ought to be done: ‘Every word you can remember, every inflection. What he said, what you said, everything, John, it may be important. Take your time. But I’m quite ready.’

It would not be hard, remembering. Since the phone call, John had spent hours and days replaying it over and over in his mind, to the point of obsession. It had distracted him from sleep and coloured his moods in greys and blacks. So saying it out loud, he thought, might actually be quite helpful. If he had learnt nothing else from Ella, he had learnt this: talking helped.

‘I’ll do my best.’ But he looked surreptitiously around the lobby, from the man at the counter checking in a new guest to the woman in the corner on her laptop, eating a sandwich. A flutter of discomfort in his stomach made him push to his feet. ‘But not here.’

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The day was over. Donovan was back in her flat. But her evening was just beginning. She had work to do.

She was sat at her kitchen table. Spread from edge to edge were the contents from a case box labelled 4.10.96/Pitts. She’d read the whole case, front to back, twice now, and she was still puzzled. The case was pretty cut and dry, and solved at that. What was it she was meant to understand?

The story went like this:
On October 4, 1996, a kitchen worker discovered a body behind the Hammersmith Ram when he left the kitchen to take a cigarette break. The pub’s manager placed the 999 call at 23.27 hrs. Paramedics responded to the call and were on the scene at 23.39 hrs, and at 23.45, the first officers showed up, among them, Detective Inspector Anthony Pitts. The victim was later identified by family (who reported him missing the next day) as Tomasz Jankowski, a Polish immigrant who had been living in London for twelve years. An autopsy determined the cause of death to be asphyxiation by strangulation.

The police believed it was a robbery gone bad, and based their investigation on this assumption. For one, Mr Jankowski’s wallet was missing, as were his shoes. Witnesses at the pub remembered seeing Mr Jankowski drinking alone at the bar, and the barkeeper remembered serving him a vodka and beer, but he hadn’t been one for conversation. No one remembered him talking to anyone, let alone an altercation. The barkeeper saw him get up and head to the back, presumably toward the gents. It was the last time anyone saw him alive.

DI Pitts reported interviews with family and friends, but unearthed no domestic problems or enemies, no threats or debts, no motives of any sort among his acquaintances. He had been a hard worker, if not a little sullen, and single, having split with his girlfriend of nine years about six months before. His death had been a random hit, apparently. A lone man targeted by a thief. So Pitts searched police records for released criminals with a history of robbery, or assaults with a similar MO. Still, he was turning up nothing.

The case was in danger of going cold. Then, a lucky break. On October 11, someone attempted to use Mr Jankowski’s credit card. The bright, forward-thinking store clerk took special notice of the man whose card had been declined, so when the police showed up later, she gave a very thorough description, down to the mole on an upper lip and the stench of body odour. Apparently, she believed, he was homeless, and she told the police what she thought. It was enough to put Pitts on the right trail.

They arrested Henry Thurgood on October 12, 1996, in a nightshelter, where he’d been paying two pounds a night for a shared dormitory. Along with Mr Jankowski’s wallet, empty of cash, they found the missing shoes, tucked far beneath the bed. Mr Thurgood, age twenty-nine, was charged with murder and robbery. He confessed and pleaded guilty, so there was no trial. He received the mandatory life sentence and a minimum prison term of seventeen years.

Seventeen years. That meant, thought Donovan, that Henry Thurgood, now forty-eight, could very well have been released two years ago and was now serving his sentence on licence.

So?

It all seemed pretty clear cut to her. Textbook. Unresolved? Hardly. The killer had been caught and convicted, and justice had been served for Tomasz Jankowski. The system worked, just as it was supposed to. Then why was she sitting here, going over the straight-forward case, wasting her time? Had she grabbed the wrong file? Had Dryers got it wrong? Was this all some strange joke? It didn’t make sense.

Unless there was something in these files she wasn’t seeing.

She returned to the interrogation transcript.

AP [Anthony Pitts]: Tell me about the shoes, Harry. You prefer Harry, isn’t that right?
HT [Henry Thurgood]: I liked them. So I took them.
AP: No, tell me about how you took them. Did you take them off of Tomasz before or after he was dead?
HT: It were after.
AP: How did you do it?
HT: Just, you know, pulled them off.
AP: What about the laces? Did you untie the laces?
HT: I don’t remember. No. I just pulled them off.
AP: And the wallet?
HT: Took that, too.
AP: From where?
HT: Pocket.
AP: Which pocket?
HT: Jacket pocket.
AP: Which jacket pocket?
HT: I don’t know. The right one.
AP: Inside or outside?
AP: What colour was his jacket?
HT: Took that, too.
AP: From where?
HT: Pocket.
AP: Which pocket?
HT: Jacket pocket.
AP: Which jacket pocket?
HT: I don’t know. The right one.
AP: Inside or outside?
AP: What colour was his jacket?
HT: I don’t know. It were dark.
AP: They have a flood light out back of the pub. Motion-sensor sensitive. I would think it was pretty bright back there, Harry.
AP: How much money was in the wallet?
HT: Twenty quid, thereabouts.
AP: What cards?
HT: Some credit cards, I guess.
AP: So after you stole his wallet, you zipped the pocket back up, took the shoes, and fled, is that right?
HT: That’s right. That’s all I done.
AP: Plus you murdered him.
HT: Yeah. I murdered him. I needed money. Bloke wouldn’t help me out, see? Got me angry, yeah? What do they calls it, a red mist? Yeah, I seen it. And then he put up a fight.

Donovan picked up the stack of photographs from the crime scene. From several angles, shots of Tomasz Jankowski on his back, bright green-and-black jacket zipped to the chin and eyes staring sightlessly skyward. She studied it for a time, but it was hard to see the details properly. So she got up, grabbed a magnifying glass, and placed it over the jacket pockets. She could see no evidence of a zip in either one.

Why had Pitts cited a zip if there was no zip? Why hadn’t Thurgood mentioned the bright green blocks on the jacket? The pattern and colours were rather distinctive.

The interrogation continued for pages and pages more, Pitts pressing Thurgood for details, Thurgood giving short, agreeable answers, and then, six pages later, twenty-nine minutes according to the time stamp recorded in the margins:

AP: How did you strangle him, Harry? With your bare hands? Or did you use something else, like a belt?
HT: It were my hands. Just my hands. Jesus, I’ve already said that. I’ve already confessed. What more do you want?
AP: Just making sure we understand exactly what happened, Harry. Tell it to me again. You strangled him. With your bare hands. How long?
HT: I don’t know. Like, a minute, two minutes, I don’t know. Until he stopped moving.
AP: Show me. Show me how you placed your hands. Sergeant Huxley, you don’t mind, do you? Being our dummy? He won’t hurt you. Go on then, Harry. Show me how you choked him.
[SUSPECT demonstrates a two-handed strangling action on Sergeant Darius HUXLEY.]
HT: Like this.
AP: Just like that?
HT: It were like this, yeah.
AP: For how long, did you say?
HT: It were, like, two or three minutes. Until he weren’t moving no more.
AP: Then what did you do?
HT: I had to get out of there. Didn’t want nobody seeing me. I took his wallet and ran.
AP: Show me, Harry. Sergeant Huxley, would you oblige?
[Sergeant HUXLEY lies down on his back on the floor to represent the victim.]
AP: Just like you did with Mr Jankowski. Go on, Harry, let me see.
[SUSPECT mimes taking a wallet from HUXLEY’s pocket.]
HT: There.
AP: Then what?
HT: Ran to the street. Had to get away.
AP: What about the shoes?
HT: That’s right. And I took the shoes, too.
The transcript ended there. For a few seconds, Donovan stared at the strange gap in the text between the word Huxley’s and pocket. Surely, had she been preparing this case file to present to the chief superintendent, she would have caught it and made the typist redo it. Otherwise, one might think that a word was missing.

But something else struck an unhappy chord with her. Where was the rest of the transcript? No interrogation ended with the suspect having the final word. It was Yard policy to end each recorded interrogation with a recitation of the suspect’s name, the date, and time. In all her years on at the Yard and all the interrogations she’d read and sat through, she had never encountered a printed transcript that didn’t end properly, at least not with some explanation (like the suspect suddenly attacking the officer or having a heart attack). Such an explanation was always in the notes. Here, it was like the end of the interrogation was missing.

‘My God,’ she said to herself. She reached across the table to the rest of the photographs of the crime scene and the victim. From every conceivable angle, the corpse of Tomasz Jankowski’s was captured to offer a full account. More photos from the autopsy were also included: contusions on the torso from a struggle, abrasions on the knuckles, everything from the toes to the top of his head. Everything but a close-up of the neck. There was a distance shot, and profile shots, but nothing to give clear detail of the bruising patterns on the neck.

Show me, Harry.

Not missing. Removed.

‘Oh my God!’ She launched herself at a pad of paper and began to write out her questions, observations, and hypotheses with furious speed, lest she forget something.

What word is missing from the white space before the word pocket? (line 729)
-Whited out after-the-fact, photocopied page? (poss.)
-By whom? Typist? (no) Pitts? (why?)
-Where’s the original recording?

Why is the photo of the bruises on the neck missing from the case file?
-Bruising patterns typically reveals hand-size, finger placement, extent of pressure/possibly
duration
-Cause of death conclusive in autopsy report
-Suspect admits to strangling the victim (bare hands, 1-3 min. discrepancy—sustainable? No hand cramps?)
-Demonstration confirms
-Demonstration contradicts bruising pattern!

CONTRADICTIONS
-jacket colour
-zips on jacket pockets don’t exist
-which pocket was wallet taken from (suspect said ‘left’; transcript maybe redacted ‘right’)
-method of strangulation (hands or tool?)
-at what point were the shoes removed from the body?

Who changed the file, when/how, and WHY?
-Pitts??
-Other? (find Huxley)

Summation—evidence inconsistent with testimony

Conclusion—Henry Thurgood didn’t kill Tomasz Jankowski

Donovan dropped the pen and sat back, making quick revision of her work. Her notes presented more questions than answers, but it seemed undeniable: the wrong man had been convicted of murder.

But three unwritten questions still lingered: Why would Thurgood confess to a murder he didn’t commit? Who was the real killer? And why the hell had she been tasked to find out, nineteen years after the case had been closed?

***

They returned to the room for privacy. The first thing Sherlock did was remove the damn boot. He had cancelled his PT appointment for this case, and insisted to John that he could doctor him well enough. So John, grumpily, had recommended less time in the boot and to opt instead for an ankle brace, which would relieve the pressure but restore some greater mobility. They had picked one up from a sporting goods shop on the road. ‘Just don’t sue me for malpractice if something goes wrong,’ he said.

Once comfortable, Sherlock sat on the bed by the window and stretched his legs out, and John dragged the chair from the desk and angled it toward him.

‘Like I told you,’ he began as preamble, ‘Moran sent text messages to your phone. Seven of them. And I don’t know how, but they disappeared.’

‘I should have worked it out from the start,’ said Sherlock. ‘Moran has tech wizards in his circuit. Peter Caldwell was one, a communications specialist in the British Army. He knew how to make your phone untraceable. It is reasonable to assume he has others who can insert an expiry code, or self-destruct mechanism, into text messages. After a certain period of time has elapsed, or a certain number of views, they simply eliminate themselves.’

‘Well, there you have it.’

‘What did they say?’
‘Taunts, mostly. Like before.’ John tried his best to recount them for Sherlock: the allusion to Mycroft, the invitation to come out and play, calling John a *pet*. Sherlock frowned as he explained all this. ‘He was goading you to call him directly. *You know my number,* he said.’

‘And you called.’

John nodded.

‘My God, John, why? Why didn’t you call Lestrade?’

‘Would you have done?’

‘No, but you’re most sensible than I.’

‘Since when? Besides, after what had just happened to Mycroft? I was angry.’

‘And reckless.’

‘Yeah, a little of that, too.’

‘But you called.’ Sherlock nodded sharply, never one to belabour the point. ‘Go on, then.’

John took a deep breath. ‘I called. I heard him say your name. He . . . he thought I was you, of course. He had been meaning to reach you. Until he heard my voice . . .’

And he began to relate the conversation, as accurately as he knew how.

*Moran’s* voice was a dark timbre, and when he spoke, John had the sensation—felt but unseen—of fluorescent lights flickering above his head.

‘Johnny boy.’

_*The moniker, perverted and demeaning,* was nearly enough to get John to hang up the phone right then and there. Or hurl it at the wall. *Mistake, this was a mistake!* He was alone, he was exhausted, he wasn’t ready for this! At the same time, his well of rage was boiling over. *He wanted to rail, threaten, and damn Moran to the hell’s deepest pit.* So where it came from, he would neither now nor later be able to discern, but an ice-cold sensation took root in his stomach, calming him, keeping his body still and his mind clear.

‘How’s the nose?’ he asked gruffly.

*There was a long stretch of silence. Then suddenly, Moran laughed.* He laughed like he had laughed down there, in the prison-basement of the convent. *But there was a strange bitterness to it,* a sharp bite John hadn’t heard before. ‘John! Shit, I don’t believe it. *My dear, sweet John!* What a treat. *You’re a real . . . treat.*’

‘Where are you?’ John spat. ‘Done playing hide and seek?’

‘Ah, that’s my lad. So angry and sarcastic. *You sound just like my Johnny of the second day.* Do you remember? *We had just finished another game of sixty-seconds in the strap to get you to spill the beans on your precious detective,* and you said to me—when you got your voice back, that is—“Crush my larynx, you son of a bitch, and I won’t even be able to tell you who’s queen of England.” *What a day, day two!* Such spirit. *How long, do you think?’*

‘How long?’ John repeated, stupidly. He knew he should just shut up, proving that a clear mind was not a rational one. *Any rational human being would have hung up by now. Any sane man*
never would have made the call to begin with. And with every word Moran spoke, John’s memories of his time in captivity became sharper and sharper. So long, since he had heard that voice. And yet, at the same time, he had heard it every day for the last six months, and no time had passed at all.

‘How long do you think it will take for me to get you whimpering like a pup again? Will you have more stamina, this time around, or less? I do intend to find out.’

‘You’re sweating,’ said Sherlock, reaching for the air-con unit in the wall and twisting the knob.

‘I’m fine,’ said John, though he wasn’t, entirely. Still, after a second or two, the light breeze reached the damp skin of his face, providing relief he didn’t know he needed.

‘There are waters in the mini fridge,’ Sherlock pointed out.

He made to get up, but John forestalled him to get the waters himself. It was good stand and move. He tossed Sherlock one of the bottles and twisted the cap off his own. Sherlock continued to look concerned, however, and was on the cusp of saying something, so John continued on before he had the chance. He had to get this over with as quickly as possible. ‘He asked if you were with me. I said yes.’

‘You’re lying. I know you, John. I. Know. You. I spent ten days with you. Ten days in deep, tight spaces. Oh, I know you so well.’

John’s hands clenched around the phone so tightly he could hear it creak, its metal inner workings under stress.

‘Still there, Johnny, lad? Let me hear your voice.’

‘What do you want?’ John choked out, but his teeth were gritted, giving his question a rough, almost challenging quality.

‘Just to ask: Did you get my present?’

‘What?’

‘I left it on your doorstep.’

‘You son of a bitch.’

‘Was it still moving, when you found it? Or had it gone cold?’

Sherlock sat spine-straight, hands falling to his knees. ‘He believed Mycroft was dead?’

‘As far as I know, he still believes it. Unless . . .’

‘What?’

‘Well, there’s the old man you saw at St Mary’s. The bug he planted. That was real, wasn’t it? He would have told Moran that Mycroft was still alive.’

Sherlock looked pensive. ‘The man I saw planted that bug around the same time as Moran’s phone call.’

‘But if Moran believed Mycroft dead, why send an agent to plant a bug? Unless . . .’
‘Unless he wasn’t an agent of Moran’s.’

John furrowed his brow. ‘If not Moran’s, whose?’

Sherlock drew up his legs and reclined into the pillow. ‘A puzzle for another day. The point is, Moran believed he had been successful in murdering my brother.’

‘I wasn’t sure, at first, what Moran believed. And I didn’t know if it was better for him to know the truth. So I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t. My throat was so tight, and I . . . Anyway, he knows when I’m lying.’

Sherlock shook his head emphatically. ‘I don’t believe that. It’s a terror tactic, nothing more.’

‘Maybe,’ said John, doubtful.

‘Trust me. Spotting a liar isn’t as easy or fool-proof as film and telly would have you believe.’

‘You spotted it,’ said John. ‘You knew I was lying about Stubbins.’

‘I know you. And I’m clever. I heard an aeroplane.’

John was taken aback but what felt like quite the non sequitur. ‘A plane?’

‘When I called to tell you they had moved Mycroft. I heard an aeroplane in the background. Now, one can’t hear an aeroplane in Central London. Any air traffic is too high above the city, not to mention the noise pollution it would have to contend with, so that meant you had left Central London, confirmed by the fact it took you over an hour to reach me, and your excuse about being at the chemist’s was an obvious lie. Too many details. That’s your problem, John. When you try to be convincing, you add too many particulars to make it sound credible, but really, only lies have detail. So where were you? Heathrow, possibly. Stansted or Luton less likely. Too far away. Or, possibly, London City Airport. Just a stone’s throw from Belmarsh. But I didn’t put that together until dear Sally paid us a visit. Your reaction when she announced that Stubbins was dead. Then I knew you’d been to see him.’

John couldn’t help but shake his head. ‘You brilliant bastard.’

Sherlock smiled. ‘It’s what I do. Moran may be trained as an interrogator; he may be adept at picking up on signals of deceit in the person right across from him in a closed environment. But over the phone? I doubt it. Anyway, one can learn to lie convincingly. If you’re worried about it.’

Taking a long drink from the water bottle, John wondered if he was being paranoid. The man was too much in his head.

‘Don’t be shy. Talk to me, John.’

He transformed his fear into anger, his trembling hand into a clenched fist. But it was still but a mask of bravery he wore as hissed out, ‘You won’t get away with this.’ His eyes were watering, thinking of Mycroft lying in hospital, and Sherlock helplessly pacing the halls. At least, he supposed, Moran couldn’t see the weakness in his eyes.

There was a still a chance to hang up. He should call Lestrade. He should rush to St Mary’s and find Sherlock, make sure he was safe. Instead, he waited for a reply.

‘Don’t blame me,’ said Moran. ‘It’s your fault he’s dead. Yours, John.’
'Wh—?'

'You take one of mine. I take one of yours. See how this works?'

'That's not—'

Then Moran was suddenly shouting, vicious and wild. ‘You slaughtered my man! You fucking butchered him, you rotten cunt!’

‘He lost control,’ said John, a little breathless in the retelling. For a moment, he could almost feel Moran’s voice ringing in his ears, like the bone-rattling reverberations of a large bell. Back in 221B, for just a flash, quick as lightning that left behind a jagged streak across one’s vision, he believed with all his soul that he was back there, a prisoner who would never leave. He had almost dropped the phone.

‘It was just like when I insulted Moriarty,’ John continued. ‘He completely lost control.’

‘You incited his rage.’ Sherlock sat with rapt with attention, perfectly still but for his moving lips and occasional blinks.

‘Like pulling a trigger.’

‘It’s psychosis,’ Sherlock murmured, almost under his breath. ‘Extreme possessiveness disorder. That’s what they called it. He feels intense psychological attachments toward particular individuals. Perhaps it even started with Moriarty and underlies his obsession for the man and his ferocious need to avenge him. But Moran’s feelings of possessiveness are not uniquely linked to Moriarty. He feels it for . . . others, too.’

‘You can say it, Sherlock. I was in the room, after all.’

So Sherlock said it. ‘His obsessions and attachment have shifted to you. That much is obvious. The reasons are different, perhaps. He does not idolise you, as he did Moriarty. He does not see you as brilliant or masterful. But he admires you.’

‘Admires me?’

‘Impossible not to, John. For your—forgive me—endurance. And now, recovery. I doubt he’d ever seen anything of its like before. For a man equally obsessed with torture, he couldn’t help but be fascinated by your strength to endure. So yes, he admires you, maybe even reluctantly. Thus, the attachment and possessiveness. We cannot forget he is a sadist. So for the tortured who endures, the indefatigable torturer cannot help but fall admirer. And then, you robbed him of one of his greatest weapons.’

‘Like I had gone out and shot his beloved pit bull,’ John murmured.

‘Exactly. Not that you had a choice.’

‘I’m not apologising for it.’

‘I wouldn’t wish you to. But I would be hard-pressed to believe that your actions didn’t ignite something in Moran even more savage than before. I don’t know. Who would wish to enter the mind of such a madman?’

When next Moran spoke, it was like the outburst hadn’t happened at all. The pendulum swung back, and he had returned to his cool, conniving self.
‘Have you forgotten, John, how this all began? Are you stupid enough to think I have forgotten? Sherlock killed my master. For this, Sherlock will die. You killed Daz, and for that, Mycroft Holmes had to die. The driver for Pete. The assistant for Lex. I’m a calculating man, John. I believe in balancing the scales.’

John’s throat was so constricted, he could barely whisper his next words. ‘And Mary?’

A deep, pleasurable sigh hissed through the phone. ‘Ah, Mary, Mary, quite contrary. For her, I’ll give you Pitts.’ Then he chuckled darkly. ‘I hope he was worth it to you.’ The laughter came louder, harsher in his ears, and John felt himself swaying. He reached a hand out for the table, but found himself on his knees instead. One hand wrapped around the back of his head; the other gripped the shaking phone still to his ear. He was slipping. His grip on reality couldn’t hold for much longer.

Moran sighed, deeply, fondly. ‘Poor Johnny boy. This is what your master has made of you. A ruin of a man. Mine made me a king.’

‘Moriarty was a spider,’ John said through halted breath. ‘That’s all.’

‘We’re all spiders, John. Spiders on a grand master web. But I am at the centre of it. Do you see how this works? Now, I control the web. Me. If anyone tries to tear it down, I’ll destroy them, part by part. You know what that’s like. You know exactly what that’s like. But unlike your precious detective, I do not suffer the weak. All my people know it. They know. Cross me, betray me, and down come the rains.’

‘Hang up, John, hang up! But he couldn’t. Instead, he found himself replying. ‘You’re deluded. You control nothing, no one.’

‘Fuck you, John Watson. I’m the storm in your life that will never stop bringing hell to your front doorstep. Not until I get what I want. And what I want—what I am going to take—is Sherlock Holmes. I want Sherlock so I can put a pistol between his eyes and watch as a bullet shatters his skull and pulverises that big brain of his. And then I want you, the way I had you before, for as long as you can last. And I’m going to get what I want, John. If you come after me, or after any more of my people, I’ll go after yours. I’ll take the cop, and then the pathologist, and then the old woman, and then the woman who smiled at you when you were buying milk, and the man who served you your coffee, anyone and everyone you so much as glance at or think about or who gives a damn about you. Do you hear me, John? Do. You. Get it? You can hide from me all you like. You can hole up on Baker Street, you can send out your sniffer dogs in search of me, but this ends only when Sherlock is dead and you’re splayed out on a cold floor, waiting for me.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ said Sherlock. He scrubbed a hand down his face, much like Lestrade did when he was overwhelmed—John recognised the gesture.

‘We have to kill him, Sherlock,’ said John. He could feel his heartrate pounding a four, bordering a five, but he was determined to keep himself in the range of sanity. ‘Anything less isn’t enough. The police can arrest him, the system can try him, even put him in jail for the rest of his life. But it won’t be enough. As long as he’s alive, you’re in danger. Our friends are in danger. Everyone.’

‘We have to kill him,’ Sherlock agreed. ‘But we don’t stand a chance if we wait for him like sitting ducks. He’s back in England, but he’s still hiding in the shadows, and the shadows protect him. Our only hope is to pull him into the light.’

‘We’re trying, though,’ said John. ‘Aren’t we?’
‘When he spoke to you, did he give you any sense, any indication at all, as to where he’s hiding?’

‘If he did, I wasn’t clever enough to detect it.’

‘Never mind clever. Could you tell if anyone was with him? Did his voice seem at all to echo? Did you hear any background noises?’

John tried to return there in his memory and listen, pushing beyond the horrible voice to anything else that might have coloured his location. But he came up with nothing. ‘I’m sorry, Sherlock. No. I wasn’t in the right frame of mind.’

‘It’s fine,’ said Sherlock, rolling his neck to release some of the strain. ‘Not a likely avenue of investigation anyway. What will be more fruitful, I think, is why he sent you to Belmarsh. How did he know we had identified Murray?’

John cocked his head, surprised Sherlock had misunderstood. Then: ‘He doesn’t know.’

‘What?’

‘How can he? I never told him.’

‘Then . . . ?’

‘I never said a word about it, Sherlock. He never sent me anywhere. You think I would take orders? From Sebastian Moran? No. That was all me. After the phone call, when it occurred to me I had imagined the whole thing—’

‘Again, sorry.’

‘—again, don’t mention it—I had to know for sure. About Bill, yes, but also about Moran. I had to know if I was crazy. I expected Lestrade to question Stubbins again. I just wanted to get there first. So yes, I stole the ID. I impersonated Lestrade. I lied. And to get Stubbins to talk to me, I lied again, and threatened him with just the idea that Moran had a message for him.’

‘But he didn’t.’ Sherlock was looking at him in awe.

‘Of course not. I just . . . borrowed his language. Stubbins recognised it. And I dare say it scared the hell out of him.’

‘Clever.’ Sherlock nodded once, approvingly.

‘I didn’t know he would end up dead. I just wanted to scare him.’

‘That’s the question though, isn’t it? If your threat was a fake, why did he end up dead?’

John shook his head. ‘Maybe he offed himself before Moran could do it for him.’

‘I hacked the Yard and read the coroner’s report,’ said Sherlock. ‘The stab wound came from behind. He couldn’t have done that to himself.’

‘Then maybe he really did just get unlucky. Belmarsh isn’t exactly Kitty Riley’s open prison. He was an ex-policeman among the most violent of criminals. Maybe he’d put away a few of them himself.’ With a crooked eyebrow, Sherlock expressed his scepticism. John sighed. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘Coincidence.’

‘What did Stubbins tell you about Murray?’
John didn’t know how to say it. He had been in denial about what he had heard since leaving the prison, and Donovan’s visit had upset him only further. But why should he think Stubbins trustworthy? Why shouldn’t Mrs Murray have the wrong end of things? He saved my life, John said, a reminder, a mantra, his touchstone to what he had always known to be true.

‘John?’

‘Stubbins claims Bill was involved from the start,’ John said in a rush, but he closed his eyes and inclined his head away, like he suggested to his patients when administering a painful shot. ‘And that he provided them with intelligence.’

‘Did he say why?’

John frowned. He knew Sherlock was just gathering information, but he didn’t like the way he took it as given that Bill was culpable. ‘Why?’

‘Yes. Why Bill Murray, who knew you and served with you, would betray you?’

Fingers tightening around the plastic bottle, John thought to answer, He didn’t say. But that was a lie, and he couldn’t lie to Sherlock. Not anymore. But before he could answer, Sherlock continued with his own conjectures.

‘What about this man Sholto? Did he have something to do with you and Bill?’

Annoyed, John waved away the very suggestion. ‘Irrelevant.’

‘Is it?’

‘Yes. Sholto was a casualty of war. Like so many others. Stubbins didn’t know him, didn’t even mention him. He said . . .’ God, it wasn’t fair. His whole life wasn’t fair. ‘Stubbins said Bill regretted saving my life to begin with.’

It was some measure of relief to see that such an answer perplexed Sherlock as well. ‘What?’

‘I don’t believe it, Sherlock. I don’t. Stubbins is a liar, just trying to upset me. Whatever Bill’s reasons . . . It’s just not true, okay? I can’t believe it’s true. If it were, Moran would have used it against me in the Pit.’

‘The Pit?’

‘That’s what Stubbins called it. The basement of the convent.’ John scrubbed a hand down his face, now imitating Sherlock. ‘You know, it makes more sense in my head, calling it that. It was never a convent to me. The whole time I was there, I didn’t really know where I was, did I? Blinded on the way in, unconscious on the way out, and all I ever saw was that kitchen, and the black inside of that goddamn freezer.’

He swallowed, not sure why he was saying any of this. It had nothing to do with Stubbins, or Bill. He barely talked about this kind of thing with Ella. And Sherlock wasn’t asking for any of it. But he’d begun, and now it was like he couldn’t stop.

‘I tried to make sense of it all. Where I was. Within London, or how far from London, I had no idea. It felt like miles away. But I wasn’t too concerned at first. I thought— Well. I thought it was to do with Mycroft. So I was angry, not afraid. But I knew in my gut something wasn’t right. I remember trying to memorise the details. Trying to pay attention, to see and observe, so I could put everything together, like you always did. You with your damn aeroplanes.’ He smiled, but sadly,
and Sherlock returned the look. ‘I thought I could figure out exactly where I was. I even remember . . .’ He laughed at his idiocy. ‘I remember counting my footsteps, from the car to the basement. Every time I turned a corner, every step on the stairs, I counted them.’ He huffed another humourless laugh. ‘Useless, wasn’t it? Waste of brainpower. Though, I suppose, there was nothing else I could have done. The moment they had me, they had me.’

‘Not useless, John.’ Sherlock’s legs were folded again, and his elbows rested on knees, fingers laced together. He was regarding John with all seriousness of expression.

‘Of course it was. What good did it do me? What good could it have done, memorising steps?’

‘Just because you didn’t get to use the information doesn’t make it useless. You couldn’t see, but you were still creating a map in your head. Imagine if you’d had an opportunity. I know you didn’t, but imagine if you had. You would have had a fairly good estimate of how far it was from point A to point B, how long it would take you to cover the distance, and whether a mad dash was wisdom or folly.’

John smirked, a little bitterly. ‘See? You weren’t even there, and six months later, you’re still more useful than I am.’

Sherlock didn’t smile back. ‘It took me too long to find you, John. That’s not very useful at all.’

They held each other’s eyes for a long and silent moment, Sherlock’s filled with regret. But in John, there was only love. ‘But you did find me,’ he said.

‘If only I’d—’

‘Sherlock. You found me. That’s the story.’ He nodded assertively. ‘That’s the only story that matters.’

Sherlock sniffed, rubbed his nose. Unable to maintain their gaze, his burning eyes fell to the ugly print on the duvet. ‘Did Moran say anything else?’ His voice had thickened, but he didn’t reach for his water. John spared him.

‘Just one more thing.’

_The floor beneath John’s knees was unyielding; he would discover fresh bruises by next morning. For a while, the world swam. John clamped his hand tightly across his own mouth. If he removed it, he might throw up, or worse, sob, and Moran would hear._

‘Do. You. Hear me?’ Moran’s voice was impatient, like he had repeated himself, but John didn’t remember. Then suddenly, ‘Answer me, you dog!’

‘Yes!’ John gasped, despising himself.

‘Good boy. Good boy, Johnny. It took some work, but you became compliant in the end. Didn’t you?’ There was a long pause. John didn’t trust himself to answer. ‘Say yes, John.’

‘Go to hell.’

Moran laughed. ‘Oh, this will be rather fun, won’t it? I do look forward to our reunion. Very much. I had wanted to talk to Sherlock, but I’m so glad you answered instead. Sherlock would just get in the way of this. This. Me and you. I’m so damn glad, John, that he never did trust you with his secret. If he had, what then would have become of you? How quickly would you have given him up for abandoning you? Or would you have sacrificed yourself in the name of a charlatan?’ John
didn’t answer. ‘Ah well. I doubt it would have made any difference at all, in the end.’

John pulled his hand away from his mouth. ‘You’re wrong.’

‘Eh? What’s that, Johnny, my sweet?’

‘It would have made all the difference in the world.’

‘Is that so? Well, I hope you don’t—’

But John wasn’t done. ‘Because at the start, I would have kept his secret. To protect him, I would absolutely have kept his secret to the grave. But to protect Mary, I would have given him up in a heartbeat. It wouldn’t have mattered, though, would it? You would have killed her anyway. Then me. Then Sherlock.’ His hand tightened, trembled, but from fury, not fear. ‘If he had not lied to me from the start, we would all at this moment be dead. Because of what I didn’t know then, but know now, I survived. Sherlock is alive. And you . . . you better run.’

‘I didn’t say another word. I hung up. But I couldn’t move. I should have returned to the hospital straightaway, but it’s like . . . I don’t know. It’s like I’d been punched in the gut and had the wind knocked out of me. I was numb, disbelieving. I’ve known all along that he’s still out there, that he hasn’t just disappeared. I keep seeing him out of the corners of my eyes, after all, because I’m half crazy. But hearing him again . . . It suddenly became real. The threat wasn’t just in my head anymore. It was more than an hour before I could get up off that floor.’

His retelling now finished, John sighed and leant back into the chair. He held the water bottle between his knees, but he was okay. He could drink, or he could not, and he’d still be okay. When he next lifted his eyes, he found Sherlock looking at him again, like he’d just said something repugnant.

‘Is that what you believe?’

John quirked his head. ‘What about?’

‘About Mary?’

Nodding sombrely, John said, ‘She was dead one way or the other, wasn’t she? But she died because of me. Not you.’

‘That’s not true, John.’

‘It is, Sherlock,’ John said as rejoinder. ‘I’ve thought about it a lot. I have. I was what they had against you; she’s what they had against me. Whether you had told me the truth or not, her end was the same because I had already made her a part of my life. That’s on me.’

‘You told me before, that I should have taken you with me when I left. Right?’

‘Yeah . . .’

‘If I had . . . Things would have been different. That, as you say, is on me.’

John frowned. Had he gone with Sherlock, everything would have been very different. To start, he never would have met Mary at all. The thought pained him, for all she had meant to him. But for her sake, perhaps it would have been better, had she never met John. Even as far as the scamming was concerned. Financial ruination was preferable to having your throat slit by a sadist.
‘I think,’ he said slowly, ‘that the only thing we can say for certain is that it’s on him. All of it.’

‘Quite so,’ Sherlock said softly.

Having reached the end of his recounting, John drained the last of his water and left the bottle on the dresser. As much relief as he felt at having shared the burden of that conversation with Sherlock at last, it left him feeling exhausted. At the same time, he was nervous about falling asleep. At least he had had the foresight to bring his pills. Before dropping them into his luggage, he had doubted whether he’d take anything. They made him sluggish, difficult to arouse, and being away from Baker Street felt risky enough. But tomorrow, he sensed, would be a long day. He needed sleep. He would have to take his medicine.

‘Tomorrow,’ said Sherlock, ‘we’ll start with this repair and renovation shop. See if we can’t figure out exactly what kind of services they provide.’

They settled in for the night. Sherlock showered, but John thought it best he not, not in a strange place. So he just changed, took his pills, and got into bed. When they were both settled and Sherlock turned out the lights—having left the bathroom light on and the door ajar—John faced the wall and burrowed his head into this pillow. He tried to clear his mind and sink into sleep. But he couldn’t help but wonder. At that very moment, did Bill Murray sleep deeply, and dream? Or did he spend his nights like John—in fitful unrest, or trapped inside nightmares echoing with the laughter of a madman?
SATURDAY, APRIL 25, 2015

‘Don’t ask,’ said Sherlock. ‘Tell. Not could I please see, but rather, I need you to. Brief eye contact, subtle but confident nod, a posture of relaxation but authority. One hand in the pocket, weight rested on one leg, shoulders back. Body language is everything.’

John didn’t need the coaching. Being in the Army had already taught him a thing or two about the bearing of authority. But Sherlock, who would not be coming in, needed to feel a measure of control, and John granted him that.

‘And if they say no?’ They were parked in a half-empty car park in front of a strip mall. The occasional passer-by caught both their attentions, but so far no one suspicious. Still, John kept an eye on the side mirror; Sherlock was watching the rear.

‘They won’t. Not if you make it clear you have every right to the information. If you believe it, they’ll believe it.’

‘Right.’

‘They won’t fuss. Also, I still think you should go Essex.’

‘For the last time, I’m not doing an accent.’

‘It’s a noteworthy feature. You’ll make yourself harder to identify if they think they’re looking for someone from Essex.’

‘I’m not doing the accent.’ John unbuckled his belt. Right. Easy in, easy out. ‘Be back in five.’

The sign for Andre’s General Repair & Renovation Assistance was green with white lettering, and otherwise entirely unremarkable. It was sandwiched between an internet café and a used bookstore in Aylesbury, with a white van parked just out front bearing the same logo, but with the addition of the cartoon silhouettes of a hammer, paintbrush, and feather duster. Written on both the van and the windows to the storefront were the words: For all your repair, renovation, cleaning, and restorative needs.

John entered through the single glass door.

From behind a receiving desk, a young woman looked up from the magazine spread open in front of her and smiled around her chewing gum. ‘Hiya. Are you here for a consultation?’

‘No—’ John started.

‘Because Mr Tollman won’t be in ’til four.’
His eyes did a quick scan of the room. It looked like an ordinary shop, staffed by an ordinary receptionist. There was a wall of specialty cleaning products, a dozen how-to brochures, and a shampooer for hire in the corner. A door at the back led, presumably, to the storage, tools, and other equipment fit for the business. Perfectly ordinary. ‘That’s fine. I’m sure you can help me. Won’t take a second.’ He smiled briefly, and before she could ask any questions he pulled out the carbon copy of the invoice. ‘My company hired you on for cleaning services in March. Our records got all messed up, so it wasn’t clear which property that was for. I need you to verify an address.’

‘Sure,’ she said. No hassle, no follow-ups. She took the invoice, noted the exact date, and swivelled in her chair toward the computer at her elbow. He heard her repeating to herself, ‘March 7, March 7,’ as she typed and scrolled, until: ‘Aha! Here it is.’ Her eyes squinted. ‘Property on Bishop’s Street in Wingrave, Buckinghamshire.’ She looked up from the screen, smiling again and smacking her gum. ‘Sound right?’

‘Does it have a list of services rendered?’ He nodded to the invoice still in her hand. ‘Itemised?’

‘Yes, all the details are here.’

‘Print that off for me, thank you,’ he said.

She clicked two keys, and the printer behind her hummed to life. ‘Looks like you’ve used our services with this property once before. Do you need that itemised invoice, too?’

John licked his lips. ‘What date was that?’

‘Looks like November 9 of last year.’

Casting his mind back, he tried to remember whether there was anything significant about that date. But his memories of being in hospital were fuzzy; anything happening in the outside world was a mystery. He’d need to ask Sherlock. ‘Print that one, too,’ he said.

With the papers still warm from the printer in hand, John thanked her and turned to leave. But he paused at the door.

‘Just out of curiosity, how long have you been here?’

‘Me? Oh, just about six months.’

‘I mean, the business. Been around long?’

She laughed at her misunderstanding. ‘Oh! Well, let me think. Not long, really. A little over a year? Mr Tollman had a van service, he and a partner, but they were saving up money for a permanent location and larger staff.’ She waved a hand. ‘And here we are!’

John smiled tightly at the poor, vapid creature behind the desk, who hadn’t even asked his name. ‘Here you are.’

***

They found a sandwich shop and ordered soups. Neither was particularly hungry.

‘November’s renovation services included door and carpet replacements, lino installation, and some paint work,’ Sherlock said, eyes jumping all over the page. Meanwhile, his butter bean soup remained untouched. ‘Four hundred twenty-seven pounds ninety pence. March services were exclusively cleaning jobs. Not just hoovering, either. Deep cleaning. Seven different cleaning
chemicals are listed here, four workers, a total of seventeen man hours. From the looks of it, they worked the entire building, all 1,700 square feet of it.’

John dipped his bread into the soup de jour (carrot), which was still too hot to eat with a spoon. At the side of the bowl rested his phone, open to maps. ‘Looks like a house, country road. Only six miles from here. Jesus.’

‘What?’

‘I mean . . . do you think he’s there? Right now?’

‘I guess we’ll find out.’ Sherlock set the pages down. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘What am I thinking?’

‘Yes.’

John dropped his spoon in the bowl and sat back. ‘I don’t know. I mean, it can’t be Bill’s house.’

‘Can’t it?’

‘Place like that? He wasn’t exactly a rich man. And besides, he already has a house. And anyway,’ he continued, grabbing the pile of invoices and receipts Anita Heslehurst had provided, ‘if he’d had a country cottage to disappear to, he wouldn’t have had all these hotel bills.’

They’d spent the morning piecing together the timeline, based on the dates listed on all the receipts, but it didn’t paint a very clear picture. The hotels were scattered from as far west as Plymouth and as far north as Manchester, the earliest dating in January, the latest in March, and lining up those dates with what had been going on in London at the time revealed nothing of obvious significance.

‘Unless he’s hiding,’ said Sherlock. ‘Which would suggest that whoever he’s hiding from knows he has the cottage.’

John thought about that, but returned to his initial objection. ‘He couldn’t afford it.’

‘You have Mrs Murray’s number on hand?’

‘It’s in my phone. Why, you think I should call?’

‘If her husband owns a cottage, chances are she knows.’

Picking up the phone, he shook his head, still dubious. He scrolled until he found her number. ‘You’d think she’d mention that to the police then, wouldn’t you?’ He tapped her name and brought the phone to his ear, giving Sherlock a meaningful look. Sherlock returned a cocked eyebrow.

‘Hello? John?’ Mrs Murray’s voice was both surprised and hopeful.

‘Afternoon, Fran,’ John replied. ‘How are you?’

Sherlock made a circling gesture with this finger, meaning Get on with it.

‘Fine, fine, have you, erm, that is, have you found him?’

He winced. ‘Not quite. But we’re making good progress. I’m calling because I have a question I’m
hoping you can answer.’

Sherlock rolled his eyes and John’s adherence to polite custom. John angled away in his chair.

‘I’ll try my best.’

‘Do you know if Bill ever owned property in Wingrave?’

There was a pause on the other end. Then: ‘On Bishop’s Street?’

John’s head snapped back around to look at Sherlock, who, seeing this, sat straighter in his chair.

‘That’s right,’ he said, a little unevenly, ‘on Bishop’s.’

‘That was his father’s. Bill inherited the property when he passed.’

‘Then—?’

‘He sold it when we moved house in Edgware.’

‘Oh, he sold it,’ John repeated, for Sherlock’s sake, and Sherlock’s eyebrows pinched together.

‘When was this?’

‘Couple years now. End of 2012. I was pregnant with our second child, and we needed the space.
John, why are you asking about the Wingrave cottage?’

He scrambled for an answer that didn’t involve evidence acquired from a former mistress. ‘Just
some references in old emails,’ he said vaguely. ‘Any idea who he sold it to? Friend, maybe? An
acquaintance?’

‘Never did say, I don’t think,’ she answered. ‘No one I knew. Just sold it.’

‘Right. Um. Thanks, Fran. We’ll be in touch.’ He ended the call.

‘Interesting,’ said Sherlock mildly. At last, he seemed to notice his soup and began to eat.

‘He sold it,’ John said, rather adamantly. ‘Nearly three years ago. Long before . . . Anyway, he
sold it.’

‘And yet,’ Sherlock said between spoonfuls, ‘he’s cleaning it.’ He smacked his lips. ‘What might
we make of that?’

John had forgotten his food entirely. He watched Sherlock, who seemed intent on nonchalance,
while taking large and frequent bites, as though to keep his mouth occupied. Probably to keep
himself from giving voice to exactly what he himself had already made of it, John thought.

‘He’s guilty as all sin,’ John said in a small voice. ‘Isn’t he.’

It wasn’t a question.

‘Why do you say that?’ Sherlock asked, addressing his nearly empty bowl of soup.

‘Because he’s a liar.’

Sherlock’s eyes raised, though he kept his head inclined over his soup.

‘He lies to his wife,’ John continued morosely. ‘He steals from his girlfriend. Maybe, all this time,
he’s been lying to me, too. This man we’re chasing. He’s not the man I knew. Or thought I knew.’

‘As far as I’m concerned,’ said Sherlock, ‘none of this yet adds up. Moran, Murray, A.G.R.A., it doesn’t make sense. That doesn’t mean it won’t. It only means, there are too many pieces missing. And until we uncover more evidence, hasty conclusions are unwarranted.’

It was Sherlock’s way of trying to make him feel better. The words themselves did not. All the same, John appreciated the gesture.

***

Michaela Warner wished she were anywhere but here, doing anything but this. For the first time in a very, very long time, she doubted her choice of career.

The front door to 221B Baker Street cracked open; she ran a sweaty palm across the hip of her skirt and licked her lips. *You’re a professional, Michaela,* she coached herself. *This is what professionals do.* But as the elderly woman stepped out onto the stoop, she couldn’t stop herself from moving backward, not forward. She had little practice in accosting women old enough to be her grandmother.

*Be bold. Be assertive. Be the sapling of a future journalism-award-winning giant oak tree.*

She stepped forward. ‘Hello, Mrs Hudson? Are you Martha Hudson?’

The woman had her hand on the knocker to pull the door closed. ‘Yes?’

‘You’re Sherlock Holmes’ landlady?’ *Ugh, stop hedging, get in there!*

Adjusting the strap of her purse on a shoulder, Mrs Hudson smiled, but warily. ‘Yes, are you a client? I’m afraid Mr Holmes isn’t in.’

*Assertive!* ‘I’m Michaela Warner, special reporter for *The Guardian.* Would you mind if I asked you just a few questions about your tenant John Watson?’

But she hadn’t even reached the end of her sentence before Mrs Hudson started shaking her head, wagged a finger in her direction, and pushed the door so it swung inward as if making for a hasty retreat.

‘Just a few minutes of your time, that’s all I ask.’

‘Please go away, Ms Warner.’ Mrs Hudson stepped a foot back inside the house.

Michaela started forward, hoping she didn’t appear too desperate but wanting to convey a sense of importance all the same. ‘I only want to give the people of London an accurate depiction of Dr Watson, and tell his story *right.*’ She knew she was speaking too quickly, and her words sounded too rehearsed, but she had to get them out because the door was closing, and Mrs Hudson had disappeared inside.

She was a fool to have thought this might work. Because she couldn’t bring herself to approach John Watson directly, she designed a different and more cowardly angle of attack, to go through his close friends. Of course it hadn’t worked. That woman had every right to slam the door on her. And so, conceding defeat, she allowed herself a long sigh, shoved the pad of paper back into the pocket of her trench coat, and started away.

But she hadn’t gone far before she heard, to her perfect surprise, the very same Mrs Hudson
suddenly calling her name and summoning her back.

In utter amazement, she returned, hand hovering over her pocket.

‘Yes?’ she asked, cautiously hoping.

Mrs Hudson hadn’t left the stoop, and left the door standing open behind her, but she was smiling, hands clasped together in front of her, and when she spoke, it was kindly, if not just a little berating.

‘I wonder,’ she said, ‘are you at all familiar with John’s blog?’

Of course she was. Recently, since she’d begun work on the Sherlock Holmes story, she’d been reading it every night before bed, and in bits and pieces throughout the day. In its entirety, she must have read it at least twenty times by now. ‘Yes,’ she nodded eagerly, ‘I am.’

‘Then you’ll know that John doesn’t need help telling his story right.’

Yes, she was indeed being chastened. Having no retort (at its most recent count, John’s blog had almost as many hits as The Guardian had subscribers), she merely smiled and nodded to show she understood. She had no teeth.

‘So what you should be doing, I think you’ll agree, is telling the story of those who no longer can.’ Mrs Hudson took one step down, coming closer to her. ‘The press keep hounding and going on about Sherlock and John. But I’ve heard hardly a word on Mary Morstan. Her name has become a footnote in all of this. Where’s the outrage on her behalf? Where’s the compassion for a woman whose life and future were taken from her so cruelly? You tell that story, Ms Warner. Don’t tell the people what they want to hear. Tell them what they need to.’

***

They waited until dark.

Bishop’s Street was a long country road that skirted the village of Wingrave to the east. Along its route lay scattered cottages and stretches of overgrown fields that had once been farmland but now served as untamed greenery and buffers between neighbours. Not far from their destination, Sherlock found a patch of earth just off the shoulder, surrounded by brush, to serve as a lay-by, and there, he hid the car.

‘What are we doing?’ John asked as Sherlock killed the engine and turned off the lights, casting them in darkness made all the deeper by the thick boscage and bramble surrounding them.

‘From here, we proceed on foot.’ He unbuckled his belt and glanced toward John in the darkened car. ‘An unannounced approach may be deemed most prudent, wouldn’t you agree?’

The overt plan was to follow Donovan’s directive: to survey and report. The unspoken but mutually understood plan B was to corner and interrogate. If Murray was there, that is. There was no reason to believe he would be, not if he was on the lam, hiding from everyone from his wife to his mistress to the Yard’s special surveillance team. But the cottage was ostensibly invisible: no one knew about it. So, as they both reasoned, it might be the perfect hideaway. The chances of his actually being there were looking pretty good.

That said, John was feeling slightly ill. On the one hand, he prayed that Bill would not be there, and they could continue the hunt. To hunt was to keep moving, keep striving forward with purpose, but certain distance. Because when they found their quarry, the game would change. Whatever Bill had to tell them, for good or ill, it meant the next hunt would be for Moran. And he wasn’t ready
for that one. God, he wanted to be. But he knew he wasn’t. In a way, he wanted to chase Bill
forever.

But on the other hand, he thought he might implode if he didn’t learn the truth of his erstwhile
friend, and soon.

‘Phones on silent,’ Sherlock advised, and they set off together down the dark road.

For a quarter of a mile they walked in silence, each man absorbed in his own thoughts, until they
came to a bend in the road, and as Bishop’s Street curved to the east, a narrow drive branched to
the west, leading to the cottage and secret home of Bill Murray. They paused, shared a glance, and
took the westbound road.

At the end of the long drive stood a two-storey cottage wreathed by white gravel. In the style of a
French Provence farmhouse, its front door wasn’t immediately apparent, as all along the front side
of the cottage stood four double-door windows framed with open shutters against pale yellow
stone. Behind the house, following the path of the gravel drive, stood a detached garage, or maybe
a garden house. Every window was dark. No porch light or lamppost was lit. By all observable
evidence, no one was home.

Still, they approached the dark house as if armed men were standing as sentinels and staring at
them from the rooftop, watching them come.

They circled the whole perimeter, glancing into every window from the front to the back and both
sides, but they didn’t see so much as a digital clock on a microwave. Not a single dot of light. They
returned to the front door.

‘I dare say it’s abandoned,’ said Sherlock, voice deep and soft.

John frowned. Was that disappointment he felt? Or relief?

‘How do you feel about a bit of housebreaking?’

Maybe it was anger. ‘Just show me which window to break.’

‘My dear John, you insult me.’ Sherlock tutted. ‘I broke out of a high-security Libyan dungeon.
You think I can’t manage breaking into a middle-class country cottage?’

He couldn’t help himself. John laughed, light and contained laughter, and caught Sherlock smiling
at him, despite the dark. ‘Off you go, then. And let’s hope they don’t have security alarms.’

‘They don’t. I checked.’

Leaving the front door, Sherlock pulled his wallet from the pocket of his jacket and extracted a
credit card. He stopped in front of one of the French windows.

‘You’re not serious,’ said John.

‘Tried and true,’ returned Sherlock. ‘Observe the expert. I’ve been doing this since I was thirteen.’

John couldn’t help but smirk as he watched Sherlock wedge a card between the two casements. At
the foot of the windows, he placed the toe of his shoe (on the unbooted foot) and added pressure.
‘Single-point guardian lock,’ he said, as he began to jimmy the card up and down. ‘Most windows
like these have them, especially the older models. These locks look mid-century. So all you have to
do is press the card down between the upturned hook and plate, and . . .’
John heard a soft *slide* and a crisp *click*. The window swung open.

‘Brilliant,’ said John.

‘I knew I could still impress you,’ Sherlock said, holding the window open for John to pass through.

They slipped inside the dark cottage, and Sherlock closed the door behind them. There, in the middle of the room, they paused to get their bearings. Then John spotted the light switch plate on the wall. He moved toward it.

‘Stop,’ said Sherlock. He pulled out his phone and turned on the torch app. The intense white light made John wince, and Sherlock angled the beam to the floor. ‘If the house has been empty for a while, we don’t want to arouse the neighbours’ suspicions.’

‘Oh. Right.’ John pulled out his phone and lit it up as well, holding the light downward. ‘What are we looking for?’

‘Anything that might tell us when Murray was here last, and maybe where to find him.’

‘Okay. So. Split up to cover more ground?’

‘Quick walk-through the house, first,’ said Sherlock. ‘Make sure we really are alone.’

The ground floor was a large, open space, both rustic and modern in design. Standing in the centre on the wool rug beside the sofa, one could see as easily out the large front windows as out the back wide panes. In full daylight, the space would be well illuminated, with very little need for strategic lighting. On the south end of the room stood a fireplace, on the north end, a renovated American kitchen, and a floating wooden staircase in the centre, which twisted and led to the upper level.

They climbed the stairs to the master bedroom, two smaller guest rooms, and a bath. As they had suspected, the house was unoccupied.

‘I’ll start up here,’ said Sherlock. The house might have been empty, but he spoke quietly. ‘You take the ground floor. Look for anything that confirms Murray has been here. Check the bins, the fridge, all cupboards, everything.’

‘Got it.’

‘Shout if you find something.’

‘You, too.’

‘And keep an eye on the drive. Just in case. We can slip out the back.’

John returned to the ground level. At the foot of the stairs, he made a slow revolution, letting the light fall into every corner of the spacious room. It felt . . . sparse. Empty spaces where furniture might once have been placed, an absence of the clutter of daily living, but for some cursory items on consoles or coffee tables. No photos, no personal affects. It might be a place to sleep, but not to live. John knew the look of a place like that. But the air smelt a little sharp in his nose, like disinfectant, but not potent, like the doors and windows had remained shuttered for a long time and the air had been trapped, unable to circulate properly. A memory stirred, his stomach clenched, and for a sliver of a moment he felt something sour stinging his throat. But he forced it away, and next moment, it was gone.
He set to work, beginning in the living room, but there was little to find. The books on the shelves were old and dusty and what John imagined had once belonged to Bill’s father. Nevertheless, because they were relatively few, he pushed them apart to see if anything was caught in between. Nothing. The drawers below the telly were stuffed with DVDs, all older titles, and on the coffee table was nothing but a box of tissues. There seemed to be little of interest in the living room, so he moved to the kitchen.

As Sherlock had recommended, he started with the fridge. When he opened the door, the light came on, proving that someone was still paying for electricity, but the inside, like much of the house, was mostly empty, but for two bottles of Old Speckled Hens shoved near the back. That was all. There was no way to tell how long they’d been there. John wondered if Bill was in the habit of stocking the fridge with beers. They had once enjoyed drinking together. But some men returned from war and developed a particular kind of dependence. Alcohol, he’d heard more than one former soldier say, chased away the demons. For his part, for better or for worse, John had given them a place to stay.

The freezer was empty. The cupboards held plates and cups; cutlery and tea towels filled the drawers. The bin was empty—it wasn’t even lined with a bag. Along one wall, facing the living room, stood a pair of folding louvre doors, and when folded, revealed a small storage space. In the corner, a vacuum cleaner, and hanging from hooks on the walls, a feather duster and fly swatter.

Between the sink and the fridge was a small walkway leading to a door, and behind the door was a sizeable walk-in pantry lined with nearly bare wooden shelves. It seemed older than the rest of the house, as if this space alone had been left untouched by renovations. Some empty jars and small cardboard boxes. No food in the fridge, none in the pantry, and yet someone kept up on the utility bills? John made a mental note to check for post in the slot or a box on the porch.

He was about to leave the pantry when, by the light from his phone, he notice a rectangular outline in the floor. Upon closer inspection, he realised it was a door, a trap door, with a metal ring sunk into an impression in the wood. Curious, he bent over and he grabbed it, pulled, but it didn’t open. That’s when he noticed the key hole. Standing straight again, he cast the light around, and on the wall near the door where he had come in, he saw a small silver key hanging on a string.

The key fitted the lock and turned with ease, a satisfying clink. Setting the key on one of the shelves, John grasped the lock again. This time, when he pulled, the trap door squeaked on its hinges and swung upwards, falling against the nearest wall. In the revealed hole were a set of old, narrow, wooden stairs, leading down.

There, he paused. He shone his light into the hole but could see no further than a few steps. Was it at all needful, he wondered, to go down there? A musty smell was rising. Likely, it was nothing. Just an old cellar, unused for months, maybe even years, as empty and pointless as the rest of this house. But he didn’t close the door, and he didn’t move away.

It’s irrational to be afraid of the dark. Sherlock’s voice was inside his head.

You have a light, he reminded himself.

It had been six months since Dr Peabody had diagnosed him as nyctophobic. But that had been in the immediate aftermath of the convent. And though he still slept with a night light always plugged in, that was only because he needed it when he awoke from nightmares and needed to quickly orient himself to his real-life surroundings. Now, he was fully awake, and in charge of his own mind.

Don’t be a coward.
Clenching his jaw, holding his breath, he started down the steep, narrow stairs, his light held out in front of him like a shield.

The cellar below the house opened up to his left and stretched back, back, perhaps half the length of the ground floor itself. His light didn’t quite reach the end. But one of the first things he saw, to his relief, was a cord hanging from a bare bulb. He tugged, and the bulb buzzed; gradually, its light swelled, allowing him to turn off his torch and return the phone to his pocket.

With the light on in the cellar and now a clear view into even the corners, John felt his heart rate begin to slow; he hadn’t realised just how fast it had been racing, and he laughed shortly and called himself an idiot. It was perfectly fine. It was a cellar like any other: cool and dry, smelling of earth. Packed dirt beneath his shoes muffled his footsteps. The walls, too, were unfinished and made of earth, with narrow but deep holes where one might cheaply store wine bottles, rather than build or buy an expensive wine rack. But there were no bottles left to keep cool.

Advancing a little further, as the room opened up just a little more, he noticed, to his left, a door made of metal and painted red. It was shiny, the way new things were shiny, and had a silver handle at the side, and a silver flap at the bottom, like what someone would push the post through, only a little larger. But what was it doing here? What was it blocking off? John grasped the handle, pushed, and with a groan, the door swung in. He followed it.

He could tell the space was small, but the light from the solitary bulb didn’t reach here, and he wasn’t sure exactly what he was looking at. He took another step and reached again for his phone, not realising that the door was slowly falling closed behind him.

John’s screen lit up; he swiped for the torch app. And just as the door banged closed, his torchlight fell to the floor. In the centre of the small room was a red dog bowl.

With the shock of being dunked in freezing water, John was slammed into a full-blown panic.

‘Sherlock!’

He whipped around and threw himself at the steel door, but his fingers scraped only metal. There was no handle on this side, nothing to pull, no escape.

‘Sherlock!!’

From behind came a dark chuckle. He gasped and spun around, pressing his back to the cold metal and raising the torch with a trembling hand. The shadow of a man stood in the corner, tall and broad, and his arm jerked to aim the torch. But when it was illuminated and the corner proved bare, he saw only that the shadow had moved to the other end of the room. With a shout, he again refocused the light, but the figure again disappeared.

John couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t think. It was cold, and he was naked, and he was trapped in a basement. And thirsty, he was so thirsty.

Drink up, pet.

‘No!’

He started forward and kicked the dog dish with all his might; it rebounded off the wall and circled the floor like a disk. Laughter sounded again at his side. He flung himself away from the voice in his ear, landed on his knees, and scrambled upright again. Again, he shouted for Sherlock, with the futility of screaming for a dead man. But not even the living could hear him down here, a thousand steps below the earth.
He couldn’t find the door. Had there been a door? He circled, circled, around the perimeter, keeping as far from the dog bowl as possible. His fingers clawed the earthen walls, desperate for air. He gasped, sobbed, screamed. His back was burning with the sting of a thousand cuts. Mary, where was Mary? What were they doing to her?

He’d been tricked. Snared. Trapped in a house of horror, the house of Bill Murray, the house of Sebastian Moran, they were one in the same.

Me and you. Me in you.

His phone fell to the dirt floor, on its face. The light went out. He screamed.

***

The master bedroom was basically aseptic. Sherlock could think of no better word. It hadn’t just been cleaned. It had been sanitised down to the rug fibres. Not a single hair in the en suite, not a smudge on the mirror. Only a fine layer of the natural dust that settled in any room left unoccupied for weeks at a stretch. Even New Scotland Yard’s most painstaking and proficient forensics teams would be hard-pressed to find any evidence to suggest a human being had set foot in this room. And, he had begun to conclude, that seemed to be very much the point.

But he wasn’t satisfied, and so he methodically opened every drawer and overturned every rug and shone his light into every corner and unscrewed every light fixture and power point, just to see if there was something hidden behind the plate. When he was finished there, he moved to the first guest bedroom.

He was leafing through some magazines left on a bedside table when he heard it. John, calling for him. Not just calling. Screaming.

Sherlock had never heard his named screamed with such terror before, and his reaction was visceral. He tore out of the room. Wildly, he flew down the floating stairs. But when he reached the ground floor he spun, eyes searching the dark. But John was nowhere to be seen.

‘Sherlock!!’

The cry came from below. But where! What was happening! Was he hurt, was he in pain, was he being attacked? ‘John!’ he called, but there was no response.

Then he saw the light: pale and distant, somewhere beyond the kitchen. He ran toward it, into a pantry, where he saw a hole in the floor, and down the hole, a light. He didn’t think twice before flinging himself down the rickety wooden stairs and into the cellar where, again, he heard a shout, muffled, but there was no mistaking its desperation. ‘No!’

Several things registered in his mind at once, almost paralysing him. No windows. A dirt floor. Pipes running above his head, a single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, and walls of earth with holes for wine. He knew where he was, exactly where: For five days, this wine cellar had been the prison of Karim Omid Niazi, the last victim of the Slash Man. Here, in Bill Murray’s basement. But that meant . . .

‘John!’ he cried, as he heard his friend scream again. He ran to a red, steel door, from where he had heard the cry, grasped the handle, and with his whole body shoved inward. Light spilt across the threshold. Not much. Just enough to see John doubled over with his hands over his head, crying. At his feet was a red dog bowl, and his dropped phone. Other than that, there was no one else, and nothing else, in the tiny room.
Bracing the door open with a hand, he called to John. ‘Let’s go, let’s go,’ he urged.

John seemed not to hear him. He moaned and sobbed and shook where he stood. This wasn’t the first time Sherlock had seen his friend in such straits. Far from it. This was a panic attack. His mind was fogged—trapped in the memories of past fears and unimaginable pain—and too far gone for Sherlock’s words alone to penetrate the intrusive images. In fact, it would be nearly impossible to restore him here, in a hole too reminiscent of the prison he had once known, with the red dog bowl to remind him of his torment.

‘It’s me, John. I’m getting you out of here,’ Sherlock warned, then stepped forward, releasing the door, which began to fall. He caught it with his foot. Then he scooped up the phone and dropped it in his pocket. ‘Take my hand.’

Without waiting a moment longer, he grasped John’s hand and pulled him out of the small room. John came with no resistance.

He moved quickly. The air above was freer, the surroundings safer. There, calming John would be easier. *I should have taken the ground level,* he thought, cursing himself. Then, *We shouldn’t have separated at all.* At the stairs, Sherlock positioned John in front of him so he would be the first to rise. ‘Up, up!’ he directed, and John, stumbling a little, took hold of an unstable railing and ran up the stairs. Sherlock waited until his head had cleared the ceiling before turning out the cellar light.

Back in the centre of the house, John was clearly trying to get his breath back. A hand splayed on his chest and he was gasping, pacing and turning restlessly like he was caught between needing to flee and not knowing where to go.

‘Hey,’ said Sherlock gently. He took a cautious step forward. ‘Hey, John. Look at me.’

John hit himself in the right ear, three times, like trying to dislodge or shake loose something that had crawled inside.

‘John.’ Slowly, giving John a chance to retreat, he reached for his arm. Held it. Stepped closer. John stopped and didn’t try to pull away. But even in the darkened room, Sherlock could tell his eyes were darting, searching for something sinister lurking in the shadows. So Sherlock put his hands on both sides of John’s head to anchor him. ‘Look at me.’

For a few seconds, John seemed lost. Then Sherlock turned them, slowly, until the moonlight coming in through the window was just enough to illuminate his face so John could see him. When he did, his eyes stilled. Recognition dawned, and John returned to himself. A shuddering breath passed through him, and he gasped, ‘I’m okay.’ He reached up and grabbed Sherlock’s forearm, as though to keep himself balanced. ‘I’m . . .’

But again, he froze. He was staring beyond Sherlock’s shoulder now, and it was as if a sheen of fear fell over him again. At that moment, an artificial light struck his face, and slid across it. Sherlock turned sharply. Through the large front windows, he saw headlights coming down the drive. Fast.

For half a second, under the brightness of the light, Sherlock’s brain whitened out. Then, like an engine thrown into overdrive, the variables, hypotheses, and deductions raced through his brain at record speed.

No one knew they were here. That is, no one friendly. So it wasn’t Donovan. It wasn’t Lestrade. And Mycroft, who may have had such powers of tracking at his disposal once upon a time, was still lying insentient, his life supported by machines and his brain on leave. It was possible that it
was the police. If a neighbour had spied them breaking into the house . . . But the nearest houses were far out of view and in any case blocked by trees. And in his gut, Sherlock knew it wasn’t the police.

And not just one car, but two.

‘Oh God,’ John was saying. ‘Oh God, oh God.’

‘Out the back,’ Sherlock directed hastily, ignoring his own rising fear as he grabbed John’s hand once again and pulled him toward the back of the house.

But the second car was coming around the drive that ringed the house, cutting off any escape. ‘God,’ John moaned, his voiced pitched. ‘Oh God.’

Sherlock calculated their chances. They could run upstairs and hide in a cupboard or bathroom; but the lights streaming through the windows would highlight their silhouettes crossing the room and fleeing up the floating stairs.

Doors banged shut in the front: driver and passenger sides. Then came the sound of male voices, their words indistinguishable.

Sherlock started for the cellar. John’s hand tightened in his, terrified, and he dug in his heels, refusing to return.

The engines died, and the headlights with them. Voices in the back now, laughing, drawing nearer.

‘Sherlock!’ John said in a hoarse whisper.

‘Trust me.’

They had mere seconds. They wouldn’t make it to the cellar in time, in any case. So Sherlock dragged John to a pair of folding, white louvre doors, folded one side, kicked a bucket out of his way, and pulled John inside after him. It was just as he slid the door closed again that the front door of the cottage opened.

A second later, the house lights snapped on.

John flinched violently beside him. He moaned in his throat, a high-pitched quaver.

There was nothing for it. Maybe John couldn’t help it, but if he moved, if he made any noise whatsoever, he would give away their hiding place. Discovery was not an option. So Sherlock slid his arm around John and pulled him in, clamping one hand across his mouth, holding the other arm around his middle. ‘Shhh,’ he breathed into his ear. John gasped through his nose and tightened his fingers into Sherlock’s bracing arm. He was holding his breath; his body made tiny jerks, arms twitching, stomach muscles spasming. ‘Breathe,’ Sherlock whispered.

The back door opened and fell closed with a bang. John recoiled. Sherlock held him tighter.

‘Hey hey hey!’ said one of the men. ‘Galdano, you mother-fucker, I thought for sure you’d a been arrested by now!’

There was laughter as the four men greeted one another, but only one was met by name. Sherlock lowered his head to peer through the slats in the door. Three white men, one black, and when the black man, the tallest of the lot, turned at just the right angle, a tiny piece of the jigsaw clunked into place. Sherlock knew that figure, those dimensions. This was the man he had chased on the
railroad tracks, when he had believed he was running after the Slash Man.

There was no question. These were Moran’s men. He and John were definitely in danger.

‘He coming then?’ asked one.

‘That’s what the message said, innit?’

‘What’s this about, eh?’

‘Dunno. Just following orders. Meet at the old rendezvous. So here we are.’

One of them had wandered into the kitchen. Sherlock heard him pull a glass from the cupboard and fill it with water from the tap, as though he’d done it a dozen times before. Then he opened the fridge. ‘Shit, lookee here! We got ourselves some beer! That Bill. What a guy!’

‘Where is that old son of a bitch?’

‘Toss me a beer.’

‘Last I heard, he’s gone underground.’

‘On the run, that’s what I heard.’

‘Ain’t but two beers.’

‘Fucker, gimme the second.’

John’s breaths were rapid and shallow; he was going to make himself dizzy and likely to faint if he kept breathing like that, Sherlock thought, wishing there was something he could do to calm him. But at the mention of Bill Murray, John stopped breathing entirely.

‘Didja hear about old Everett?’

There was laughter all around.

‘Was that one of yours then, Paul?’

‘Weren’t none of mine. I thought it was one of yours!’

More guffaws, and the hiss of a beer being cracked open.

One of them was in the living room, punching buttons on the television. ‘Too bad the damn telly don’t work no more.’

His vantage point was far from optimal, but Sherlock was cataloguing everything: what little he could see of their faces, what jackets they wore, what shoes; he attached names to voices and who said what; he noticed the guns weighing down pockets and tucked into belts and trousers. Each man was armed. Sherlock and John had left Baker Street without so much as a knife.

_Stupid, stupid._

John was shivering, proof that his panic was escalating. If the men didn’t leave soon, if he couldn’t get John out of the cupboard and into open air, far away from here, he feared what might happen. But he dared not slacken his grip on John’s mouth or waist, not even a little. Instead, he laid his head against John’s and rubbed subtly, the only comforting gesture he could think to offer. He
didn’t even dare another shushing sound, no matter how soft.

‘Ah, here he comes,’ said the one called Paul. ‘Man of the hour.’

‘Time to see what the fuck he wants.’

‘Whatever it is, you’re gonna give it to him, Holton,’ said the black man, whose name had not yet been spoken. The men were moving toward the front of the house as beyond, in the drive, a third vehicle had arrived. Its engine grew louder as it drew nearer, and then stopped.

Sherlock’s own trepidation was climbing, climbing. He tried to think, think! What was he to do? How long could they remain hidden? If there was an opportunity to slip away, would they dare take it? And what would they do if they were caught? But more importantly . . . Who had just arrived? Was it Bill? God, please, please be Bill Murray, he thought desperately.

Agonising seconds dragged by. His palm was damp from John’s hot, rapid breaths, and when the front door opened, John gave a small whimper and squirmed in Sherlock’s arms. Impossibly, he tightened them even more.

But two unknown men came into the house and then into view. Through the thin gap between the slats, Sherlock memorised their faces. They were carrying large black duffels, two apiece, heavy laden, but with what, Sherlock couldn’t immediately discern. And for a moment, he was so distracted by his curiosity over these two men and their baggage that he was unprepared to see Sebastian Moran following behind.

A jolt of fear passed through John’s whole body, so violent that Sherlock’s grip over his mouth slipped. As John’s head flung back, it knocked painfully into Sherlock’s mouth; they both stifled cries in their throats. Sherlock himself was beginning to panic. If they were found, Sherlock was a dead man, and John . . . He would be worse than dead. He had to keep John quiet, at any cost. So he clapped a hand once again across John’s mouth and with bruising strength, held it there. He hooked a leg around the front of John’s weaker leg and planted his foot between John’s to prevent him from unwittingly kicking out. He squeezed John’s body with his own, and all the while, he tried to send his thoughts to John: Breathe. Just breathe. I’ve got you, John, but you have to breathe. But hot tears were sliding over his knuckles, and John’s stomach was stuttering with rapid sobs.

Six months had passed since Sherlock had last seen him. In the basement of the convent, while John lay dying at their feet, they had stood face to face. Much had changed. Sherlock knew he himself was a changed man, but Moran . . . He appeared somehow darker. Before, his black hair had been cut close to his head in military fashion; he had worn a white collared shirt and dark suit; there had been something business-like and proper in him, but with a sort of madness crackling below the surface, which Sherlock had himself witnessed erupt into violence.

Now, the madness was laid bare. Sebastian Moran’s hair hung shaggy over his ears, loose and unwashed. He wore a full beard, at least one month’s growth. If he wore a suit, it was hidden beneath a long, dark trench coat. But if his appearance had gone to seed, his manner was still that of a commanding officer. With slow, menacing steps, he entered the circle of his men, and with sharp, scrutinising eyes, he took in the measure of them. When he turned to face the louver doors, a streak of scar tissue ran from cheek to cheek, slashing across his nose.

At the sight of him, John drew in a ragged breath, and Sherlock knew he was microseconds away from an unstoppable scream. Quickly, he dropped his hand from John’s mouth and grabbed his throat instead, choking the cry before it began. I’m so, so sorry, John!
You’re going to have to kill him.

Sherlock flinched against the thought. John jerked under his grip, a sharp elbow to the ribs.

I told you it was a mistake, Sherlock. He’s not ready.

Shut up! Shut up!

If they find you, you’re dead anyway. Both of you. And it’ll be worse for him than it was before. Go on then. A quick, merciful death for the John you love so well. Squeeze his throat. Snap his neck. He won’t even know it’s happening.

Out of my head! Out!

John scratched desperately at Sherlock’s sleeves.

It’s the obvious solution. Logical, even. Kill John Watson.

Having locked John in place with his leg, he dropped the arm wrapped around John’s torso and stroked his hair and the side of his face. He stroked until John stopped scratching, stopped struggling. Then slowly, he released John’s neck. Something had stabilised. Now, John covered his mouth with his own two hands, and Sherlock encircled him once again, this time with both arms.

When Moran spoke, his voice rumbled deep, and John’s pulse throbbed so furiously Sherlock felt it in his own chest. ‘In the Bible,’ he said, continuing to pace the circle as he addressed his men, ‘Jesus tells his disciples, if your right eye offends you, pluck it out. If your right hand irritates you, cut it off.’ He came to a stop, toe to toe with the man standing just before the louvre doors. The man’s head blocked Sherlock’s view of Moran’s face, but his words were unimpeded. ‘Wisdom? Or foolishness?’

For a long, stuttering moment, the man, Galdano, fumbled. ‘Erm, I, uh, I should say, sir, that is, colonel . . . Being that it’s Jesus and all . . . wisdom?’

But Moran didn’t reply straightaway, nor move so much as a finger. He stared down his man, and to his credit, Galdano had stopped squirming.

At last, he continued. ‘I agree.’ He took again to pacing. ‘But he was exaggerating, wasn’t he? Speaking in metaphors. Isn’t that right?’

‘I should hope so, sir.’

There was nervous laughter around the circle.

‘But what if it’s not your eye that offends you, or your hand? Hm?’ Slowly, he extracted from an inner pocket of his coat an object Sherlock first mistook for a pen. Then he saw the gleaming tip, slightly rounded, but with an edge like a razor. A silver scalpel. John pitched forward suddenly, involuntarily, but he was kept in place only by Sherlock’s relentless hold.

Moran stopped again in the centre of the circle and rotated slowly.

‘What if . . . it were a man? An apostate? A Judas? What is it the Lord Himself should have done to good ol’ Judas?’

No one spoke. It was quiet enough in the house to hear a pin drop. John and Sherlock both were holding their breaths.
Moran glared hard at them all. Then he stalked to the edge of the circle toward one man, who couldn’t help but fall back a step. Moran reached around his back, it seemed, but Sherlock’s view was still impeded by Galdano. Then Moran whipped around, and Sherlock caught the glare off a black pistol just before the bang.

Galdano’s skull erupted—wooden slats on the doors exploded—the wall behind Sherlock’s head sprayed dust and mortar—blood spurted into the gap in the door—Sherlock flung himself back into the corner—his head struck the wall and rebounded—he and John dropped to the floor beside the vacuum cleaner, and John’s flailing leg kicked the door hard. Less than half a second after the explosion, Galdano’s body slammed into the louvre doors and crumpled to the floor.

It had all happened so fast. Sherlock’s mind was screaming. Had they been heard, or had the blast and Galdano’s collapse shielded them? Had the bullet hit John? On the floor now, he cradled John awkwardly in his arms, and began patting every bit of him he could reach, checking for injury in the dark. His adrenaline was flowing so fast he wondered, too, if he himself might have been struck and hadn’t yet begun to feel it. Warm blood slid down his face—was it his own?

A wide pool of blood spreading from Galdano’s body was seeping under the door where they sat, soaking through their trousers.

Moran whirled to face his men, who all jumped in their skin and stepped back. ‘I’m trying to build a kingdom!’ he cried, flailing the pistol in their faces. ‘A fucking kingdom! And I will not be undermined! I will not suffer defectors! Am I understood? Am I fucking understood?’

‘We’re with you, colonel, all of us, we’re with you,’ said Paul, his voice trembling and weak.

John grabbed Sherlock’s hands to stop them from searching. Instead, he balled it in his, and pressed it against his chest like holding onto a stress toy.

Moran shook his head, and tapped the pistol to his temple. ‘Am I stupid, Paul?’

‘No, sir.’

‘No, sir, is goddamn right.’ And without a second thought, he aimed the Glock again, and fired off a second round, right between Paul’s eyes. His skull split in two and fell with him to the floor.

The other two men turned to run. But Moran was a marksman, his hand was cold and steady, and there was murder in his eyes.

He felled one by the stairs, a clean shot to the base of the skull; then he whipped around and shot the fourth man just as he reached the back door. With each bang, John flinched violently, but he was as silent as the grave.

The last shell casing hit the hardwood floor like a tap dancer. Then all was quiet. Neither of the two men still standing, the two Moran had brought with him, had moved an inch.

‘And you two?’ asked Moran. ‘Where do you stand?’

The answers came swiftly, and without fear.

‘With you, Colonel.’

‘We are your men.’

‘It’ll be you, sir. You’ll get to Holmes first, and we’ll be at your side when you do.’
‘Good.’

Moran rolled his neck. He twirled the scalpel around in his fingers, flipped it up into the air, and caught it by the handle.

‘Keys should be on the bodies. You, take the Beamer. And you, the Mazda. Do what I brought you to do, then disappear. We’ll be in contact.’

‘And Murray?’

‘Don’t you worry about Murray.’ Moran strode toward the front door. Just as he was leaving, he said, ‘He’s mine. And he knows it.’

Sherlock’s legs were growing numb under John’s weight, but he could feel Galdano’s warm blood soaking all the way through his trousers and socks. His own grip on John was bloodless. As for John, his stomach kept contracting violently, a diaphragm spasming with hiccough-like pulses. Sherlock could hear his laboured breaths, but though they were loud in his own ears, he doubted they could be heard beyond the door. Sherlock’s arm muscles were wearying and threatening to seize up. He repositioned them to offer his arms some relief without daring to let go.

His angle of vision from the floor was poor. Instead, he listened intently as the men worked, moving from one dead body to another. He heard the brushing of cloth and the light jangle of car keys. Then, the long, drawn-out hum of zips. They were opening the black duffels.

‘Guess this is it for the old rendezvous,’ one quipped drily.

The other ignored the comment. ‘Do the beds. I’ll do the sofas.’

‘And curtains.’

There was a crunchy sound of paper. Newspaper? Sherlock bent his neck for a better angle, but it was no use. What were they doing? Then, heard a wet, slopping sound, like water in a jug.

Not water! The pieces clicked together all at once. And sure enough, just as he realised what they were about to do, the faintest whiff of petrol reached his nose.

He inclined his lips to John’s ear and whispered so softly he could barely hear himself: ‘They’re setting the house on fire.’

John didn’t answer, didn’t move, unless it was to blink. And for a moment, Sherlock wondered whether he had heard, or if he was too lost to hear anything at all. Then came a slow nod.

‘We have to wait.’

Again, the slow nod. Sherlock squeezed his hand, the only reassurance he could think to offer. John squeezed back.

There was nothing to do but to wait. Wait and listen. While one of the men ascended the stairs, the other crumpled newspaper and littered the room, sprinkling petrol here and there. Oh God, it would burn fast. Fast and hot. What if they sprang out of the cupboard now and attacked? Downstairs, it was just one man. They could take one man. But if he had a gun, and if he was as deadly with it as Moran . . . And if it went wrong, and the second man, drawn by the sound of shouts and gunfire, returned . . . No, it was too risky. Besides, Galdano’s body, pressing up against the door, would hinder a surprise attack.
But then, if they struck the match while Sherlock and John were still hidden, they would be
trapped by more than a corpse.

While he thought, Sherlock felt a something stinging on the side of his face, about eye level. It had
taken a while for him to notice, but it seemed that the bullet had come a bit too close after all.

Right now, it was the least of his worries.

Hard steps hurried down the stairs.

‘Mattresses are on fire, let’s go,’ said the second man, urgently.

‘Mazda’s out back. Get out quick. I’m making a trail out the front.’

This was it. This would be their only window of opportunity. The back door opened and fell closed,
and footsteps moved toward the front. The black duffels were left behind.

‘Now, John,’ said Sherlock. ‘Stand and be ready.’

In that cramped space it was hard to move at all, but John managed to plant his feet under himself,
grab the wall, and with a little shove from Sherlock, rise to standing. Then he turned, grasped
Sherlock’s arm, and pulled him to his feet. With numb, buzzing legs, wet with blood, his stance
was wobbly, and he leant against the wall for support. John set a hand on the door to push the
central hinge that would fold it outward and let them escape.

‘Wait.’ Sherlock put a hand on John’s shoulder. They weren’t cleared yet to open the door. Not
until the Mazda rolled away. The back way was their only feasible escape.

John put out a hand on the wall and bowed his head; Sherlock could tell he was still trying to
breathe. He transferred his hand from shoulder to back. ‘We’re almost out of here, I promise.’

All John could do was nod.

In the distance, the Mazda’s engine roared to life. Then, with the spinning of tyres on the crunchy
gravel, they heard it pull away.

‘Out the back, go, go!’ Sherlock whispered.

John pushed the door, but it didn’t fold. Galdano’s body was blocking its path. Two handed now,
he pushed with greater force, grunting in panic and frustration. The body moved a few inches, but
not enough to free them.

‘Hard, on three,’ said Sherlock, shaking the feeling into one leg as he joined John to push. ‘One,
two, three.’

They pushed together, and just as the door shoved the body out of their path, there was a flash of
light from the front of the house. The fire chased the trail of petrol like a roaring tiger racing across
the floor. Heat and devouring light suddenly filled the room. With a shout, Sherlock pulled John
back inside the cupboard, a temporary haven, as the wool rugs and sofas and curtains erupted into
flame.

The smoke alarms began to howl. The heat was intense. Already, black smoke was rising, roiling
on the ceiling like storm clouds.

‘Now! Now!’ cried Sherlock. He grabbed John’s hand again, threw an arm across his own nose,
and jumped over Galdano’s body, pulling John along behind him. He assessed quickly. The front half of the house was a standing wall of fire. So he turned right, toward the French windows at the back. The curtains on either side were crackling. The sofa was engulfed. At his side, John was doubled over, coughing, but his hand held true.

Sherlock felt like his skin was burning. The scar tissue from his ordeal on the tracks, when his arm had caught fire, flared in protest of the heat, and his face felt like he’d suffered a bad sunburn. His eyes were stinging with the smoke. He felt his chest constricted with the lack of oxygen.

There was no clear path through the maze of fire. There was no obvious exit. He would have to make one.

Tugging John toward the tall windows, framed in fire, he lifted his leg, and kicked as hard as he could at the lock. It held fast. He kicked again. It rattled loudly, but it wouldn’t budge. Suddenly, John dropped his hand. He looked back in panic, but saw that John had grabbed a heavy wooden chair, its legs smoking. Then he swung it with all his might. The glass shattered. John dropped the chair and stuck out his hand again for Sherlock to take and lead him on. Together, they leaped through the broken window and into open air like blackbirds from a tree aflame.

They ran. They ran past the garden house and into the field, illuminated by moonlight and a blazing country cottage. They pushed on with sore limbs and strained tendons, but their chests ached with the lack of oxygen, and as the April grasses grew taller and the bramble thicker, they collapsed. Sherlock released John’s hand and twisted his neck to look back at the ball of fire. Someone would come. Soon. Even now, Fire and Rescue Services were probably on their way. They would come, and if they couldn’t put the fire out, they would wait until it died out, and then they would find the remains of four murdered men. Whatever other evidence was destroyed, those charred skeletons would tell the story of execution. An investigation would be launched. Bill Murray, as either the current or former deed owner, would become a person of interest. Sherlock and John had to get to him first.

On the ground beside him, John had pushed himself to hands and knees to crawl away, but he didn’t get far before he began to retch. Cough, and sob, and retch.

‘John—’

John shook his head, gasping. ‘I’m okay. I’m okay. He’s gone, and we’re okay.’

The fit continued for a short while, working its way out of John’s system. Sherlock gently laid a hand between John’s shoulder blades until it passed. When it did, John covered his eyes, tried to breathe. Coughed. A long stretch of quiet in the dark. Then—

‘Was it real?’ John asked. ‘Was he . . . real?’

Sherlock felt John’s muscles quivering, shivering, beneath his fingertips. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It was all real.’

John’s shoulders sagged with relief; but in contrast, his face twisted with pain. He leant toward Sherlock, and Sherlock grabbed his quaking shoulders and pulled him in for a close embrace. ‘Oh God!’ John gasped.

‘It’s okay, we’re okay. We’re alive.’

‘If he’d found us . . . God, Sherlock!’

‘Shh, shh, don’t think about it. Don’t think.’
The wind blew softly across field. It was far from sufficient to temper the raging fire in the distance, but just enough to cool the sweat on their brows. After a short time, it reminded them that the night air had chilled, and they couldn’t stay. They pulled apart.

‘Ready?’ Sherlock asked, holding John’s head and searching for his eyes in the dark.

John just nodded. Then they helped each other to their feet, and keeping to shadows of the treeline, slipped away into the night.

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‘I’m off for the night, miss.’

Anthea looked up from her book, blinking. Her eyes were tired and burning dully from trying to stay awake. Her bare feet slipped off the sofa and onto the plush rug.

‘Thank you, Joan.’

‘Catheter bag is fresh and IV drip is changed. Vitals are stable. Nurse Wyand will be here within the hour, and Dr Nash is on call. I’ll see you tomorrow, miss.’

‘Tomorrow.’

The front door closed, and Anthea curled over her knees to stretch her back, then, book in hand, she rose to her feet. She walked down the hallway and into Mr Holmes’ room. Even if it was just for an hour, she never wanted him to be alone.

‘No new updates in the last twelve hours,’ she said aloud, as though to an empty room. But it was important to her that she report the day’s activities. She walked around and began to tidy things up. ‘Lestrade is being cagey, and your brother has left London. He’s in Buckinghamshire, but I don’t know why. I shouldn’t think he has any sentimental attachments there, based on what you’ve told me. But Watson is with him. That should make you feel a little more at ease.’

She turned on the telly in the corner and brought up a channel for classical music. Violin concertos had always been his favourite. She turned the volume up a couple of ticks but kept it low and soothing.

‘No word from your people. I’m keeping operations running as usual, but I don’t know how much longer I can do it before they realise it’s me and not you at the wheel.’ She slid the book back onto the shelf where she had left a gap. ‘Then again, they might know already.’

She came up to the bedside, and, as what had become a perfunctory measure, started squeezing his legs, ankle to thigh and thigh to ankle, just as a nurse had showed her, to massage the muscles and keep the blood flowing as normal. Her own hand was still in plaster, but she made it work.

‘Davenport was buried yesterday. I paid all the funeral expenses from your account. I figured you would have wanted it that way.’

Then she moved on to the arms, wrist to shoulder and shoulder to wrist.

When she finished, she sat in the chair beside the bed and sighed deeply, exhausted. Briefly, she squeezed his hand, then let her own fall to her lap. Slowly, she rested her head on the mattress beside his shoulder, and allowed herself respite. She closed her eyes.

It was just about then that Mycroft Holmes’ eyelashes began to flutter.
End of Part 1
Along Came a Spider

On the other side of the chessboard, Moriarty was laughing. He wiped tears of mirth and nearly slid out of his chair.

Sherlock shot to his feet and spun away.

‘Oh, come on, Sherlock!’ tittered the madman. ‘Don’t stop playing now! We’re finally having fun!’

Fisting two hands in his hair, Sherlock doubled over and pulled at his curls until he felt them ripping from his scalp. He wanted to scream.

‘What’s wrong, poppet? Come here. Sit on Daddy’s knee and tell him what’s wrong.’

‘Get out, get out!’ Sherlock cried, beating his own head with the heel of his hands.

‘Oh, well that’s no use.’ Moriarty heaved a great, over-dramatic sigh. ‘I can’t leave because I have nowhere to go. This is my home now.’

Sherlock couldn’t stand it. He started running. He flew across the floor so white it was invisible, and into a distance with no horizon. But there was nothing to run to, only something to run from. Still, he had to get away. His feet pounded silently, but his harsh breaths were loud in his ears his throbbing heart painful in his chest. He ran until it was near to bursting. Then he stopped, bent over hands to knees, and fought to regain control.

‘That’s the problem with sentiment,’ Moriarty continued dully.

Sherlock spun around. Moriarty was sitting at the chess table, chin propped in his hand. He’d run so far but gone nowhere.

‘It’s the chemical defect found on the losing side.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Your words, Sherly. Not mine. I’m just the little voice in your head reminding you that you used to be good at this. A real contender. My, how the mighty have fallen. You and me both, old boy. Oh Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock. You were right. You were right! Look at you now. A little sprinkling of sentiment, and you’re out of control. You’re losing. Lo-o-oosing.’ His eyes dropped to the table and up again, to draw Sherlock’s attention to the board. ‘Your knight is definitely in danger.’

Sherlock marched over, seized his knight, and moved it decisively forward on the board.

Moriarty’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

‘Bold move. Endanger yourself to spare the knight? That’s not how to win at chess.’

‘It’s how I win at chess!’

‘Testy, testy.’

‘You’ve changed the rules of the game, Jim. I’m adapting.’

‘Have I done?’ The light of madness lit Moriarty’s eyes, and his lips were spread in the sadistic grin of a child who was eager to be caught.
Sherlock continued. ‘But not in your favour. I’m curious. How do you hope to hold one kingdom—
his motion toward Moriarty’s side of the board—‘with two kings?’

The queen had promoted herself. New rules indeed.

Rolling his neck, Moriarty regarded him silently. The teasing had ebbed out of him; he was dead serious. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I think that’s more your problem than mine. Innit?’

SATURDAY, APRIL 25, 2015

John lifted Sherlock’s chin to turn his face to the light. With a wet flannel, he gently wiped away the blood drip-dried down his cheek from where the skin lay flayed. The bullet had grazed just above his right cheekbone, nearly at eye level. The flannel was cool, but the wound burned.

John took his time, and moved slowly. But while evaluating the severity of the abrasion, he froze, the flannel forgotten in his hand. Sherlock didn’t need to ask what he was thinking. He was thinking it too: Half an inch to the right, a quarter inch, and it would have been over entirely. For him, anyway. Not for John. Overcome at the thought, John wordlessly wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s head and pulled it tight against his chest where Sherlock could hear his throbbing heart. He didn’t move. Neither man did.

Although only an hour from London, they did not return. Sherlock had wanted to. He wanted to get John to Baker Street, behind secure doors and encased in familiar walls, where they could both calm down, take stock of themselves, and make sense of what had happened tonight. But it seemed unwise to delay medical treatment. John was coming down from a panic attack and was still short of breath; Sherlock was bleeding from a head wound; both had smoke in their lungs. A trip to A&E wouldn’t do—too many questions, too much exposure.

They had already booked a room in Aylesbury, expecting to retire there once their examination of Bill Murray’s now burned-down cottage was complete, and from there plan their next move. So it was to the hotel they returned. The blood left on the seats and floor of the rental car was something they would just have to worry about tomorrow. Once in the room, they bolted the door, drew closed the curtains, and deposited their bloody clothes in the tub. After looking at each other, and knowing they were in a state, they called reception to request an emergency kit, and a very basic kit it was—a variety of plasters, dressings, sterile wipes, scissors, safety pins, and disposable gloves. John had met the runner at the door in a white undershirt, murmured thank you, and shut the door quickly.

Now, John sniffed loudly and unwound his arms from Sherlock’s neck and stood back, turning to the kit. From the white box he pulled out an envelope of sterile wipes and a couple plasters. His eyes were shining in the poor lamplight.

‘Are you okay?’ Sherlock asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

‘Nope.’ John forced a tight smile that disappeared quickly.

He was fixating. They both were. Tonight might have gone so wrong, so horribly wrong. They had learnt more than they were ready to learn, seen more than they were prepared to see. Inadvertently, they had found Karim’s prison, the same place Moran had intended to take John on the night he was rescued from the basement of the convent. The cottage had served as a rendezvous of sorts for Moran and his people, and there seemed to be no more denying it—Bill Murray was at the heart of it all. He had betrayed his friend.

Even as they sat there, the cottage was burning to rubble, but the truth of the location had almost
cost them their lives. Sherlock had nearly taken a bullet in the brain. As for John . . . Sherlock could see bruises beginning to form around his mouth and along his throat, forceful impressions of Sherlock’s own fingers as he smothered him, choked him, nearly killed him. God, what might he have done? Every time he looked at them, he thought he was going to be sick.

*He’s alive, he’s alive.* He kept it on replay in his head.

Sherlock’s grazed skin was too broken and widely split to stitch, even if John had had the proper materials. But it was shallow, and the bleeding wasn’t bad. John dressed it with Brulidine cream, plastered it, and gave him paracetamol, which he carried with him in his overnight bag, along with his own daily stock of pills. Sherlock wondered if tonight he would take something to help himself sleep. As for Sherlock, he wasn’t sure he wanted to sleep at all.

John finished administering to him. Then he took a few steps back until his legs hit the edge of the bed, and he sat, his head falling into his hands.

‘What do we do now?’ he asked softly.

Sherlock gingerly touched the bandage, adding pressure until he felt the gentle sting. ‘I don’t know.’

‘The police will investigate.’

‘Yes.’

‘They’ll find the bodies.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the dog dish. If the fire doesn’t destroy it.’

‘It won’t. Nothing in that room burns.’

‘They’ll know we were there.’

‘Maybe not.’

‘They will, Sherlock. We left a blood trail from the house into the field. They’ll follow it.’

Yes, and they would find where John had thrown up, and if they had tracker dogs they might even follow them to where they had parked the Jetta. But there the path would go cold. There was no CCTV out here, and there had been no witnesses. They’d clean the car, return it in a day or two, and the police would be none the wiser. If they tested the blood, they might find a match for one of the victims, if he was in the system. But if they tested the vomit, it would lead them to John.

‘We should tell Lestrade,’ he said. ‘Get ahead of it.’

John’s head came up sharply. ‘No.’

‘Moran is back on British soil. Lestrade needs to know what we know.’

‘If he knows we were there, in the house—’

‘We’ve done nothing wrong, John. We were witnesses, that’s all. If Lestrade has a problem with that—’
‘I don’t mean Lestrade.’

Sherlock closed his mouth. Oh, he thought. Idiot. John’s paranoia was currently serving them better than Sherlock’s brain. If they told Lestrade they had been in the cottage, along with all they had seen and heard, he would tell his team, and though Lestrade had reassured them time and time again that there were no more moles at the Yard, neither Sherlock nor John—especially not John—had much confidence in that assertion. It wouldn’t do if, by any means, word got back to Moran.

‘We don’t say anything,’ said John. ‘We just keep doing what we’re doing. We find Bill.’

Sherlock nodded slowly. A DNA test would take time. They would need to solve this before the police discovered they had been anywhere near the house. ‘And then what?’

John wouldn’t meet his eyes. ‘We deal with him.’ He sniffed again, coughed into his fist. ‘Right. On the bed. Let me take a look at your ankle.’

SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 2015

He hadn’t meant to fall asleep. Later, he would realise that John had slipped him one of his own benzodiazepine pills, mixed with water. He dreamt of fire, and John—John screaming, shouting his name, and there was no way to reach him. Meanwhile, the fire raged.

Sherlock!

His eyes flew open.

‘Sherlock,’ John whispered again, removing his hand from Sherlock’s shoulder.

Sherlock blinked, then winced. He turned his face from the glow of a mobile.

‘Wake up, it’s Anthea.’ John clicked the lamp between their beds. A moment later, John’s words registered. As he rose swiftly to sitting, he grabbed the phone from John.

‘Anthea?’ He glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand: 03.29. He braced for her words. John looked ready steady him.

She got straight to the point. ‘He’s awake.’

Head snapping up to meet John’s eyes, he asked, ‘When?’

‘He’s been in and out for the last hour or so. Doctor’s on his way.’

‘How is he? Is he talking? Can you tell if—’

‘No. It’s too early. But how soon can you get here?’

‘We can leave right now,’ John said; he was standing close enough to hear.

‘Within the hour,’ Sherlock promised.

He ended the call, shot to his feet, and threw his arms around John, joyfully. He couldn’t tell if he was laughing or crying.

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Coming out of a coma wasn’t like simply waking up, John said. It took time, it happened in stages,
he knew that. Logically, Sherlock knew it. Nevertheless, the disappointment lanced him when he
arrived to find Mycroft with eyes sealed shut and an intubation tube still running down his
windpipe, as if nothing had changed.

‘We’ll remove it,’ said the doctor, ‘once his conscious state has stabilised. Then we’ll be able to
more accurately assess how well he can breathe without it.’

‘How long?’ Sherlock knew the question had no answer, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking.

‘We’re optimistic,’ the doctor answered vaguely. ‘We need him to stay awake for longer than two
minutes first. Small steps, Mr Holmes. These things can’t be rushed.’

The already long night was about to grow longer, but there was no sense in them all standing
around waiting. So Sherlock sent Anthea to sleep in a proper bed, and the nurse, too. As for John—
he talked with the doctor in the corner of the room while Sherlock paced around the bed,
examining the machines and watching Mycroft out of the corner of his eye for the slightest twinge
of life. When the doctor retired to an adjacent room, ready to be summoned at a moment’s notice,
John remained and looked over the charts, but it was mostly pretence for staying nearby.

‘Sleep,’ Sherlock said, relieving him of the duty.

‘I can stay.’

‘I’ve rested. You haven’t. Really, John.’

‘If you need me . . .’

‘Thank you.’

Now, alone with Mycroft and his machines, Sherlock drew nearer, bent at the waist until his face
was alongside his brother’s, and said what he had not been able to in the presence of the others.
‘Mycroft. It’s me. Open your eyes. Please.’

He felt the childlike hope fizzle. There was no change. Mycroft was still pale, still gaunt. The nurse
shaved his face daily, for the sake of hygiene and the use of medical tape, but his nose hairs were
beginning to poke out of his nostrils. It was a thing Sherlock might have teased him for in the past,
but realising Mycroft habitually trimmed those hairs, and no longer could, made Sherlock
unaccountably sad. His brother had never looked more vulnerable.

Angry at his reaction—a thick throat and burning eyes—Sherlock straightened abruptly and forced
himself in a mode of derision. ‘I almost died tonight,’ he said, conversationally. ‘If you wake up,
you can yell at me for being so careless.’ He quirked an eyebrow, as if Mycroft’s silence was its
own snide response. ‘No? Passing on the pleasure?’

But the farce couldn’t hold. He was too tired. He sat on the edge of a nearby armchair and scraped
his clawed fingers through his listless curls, back and forth, rapidly, until the massage turned
painful. He stopped.

‘What’s worse,’ he continued, more softly now, ‘is that I very nearly deposited John on Moran’s
doorstep and rang the bell.’

Sherlock expelled a long breath, and suddenly he was relaying the entire night, step by step, part by
part. Not, perhaps, with the same narrative savvy John would have used in working up a blog post,
and certainly including more of the trivial and superfluous details a true storyteller would edit out.
But it was a full account of everything he had seen and heard and felt—not only as sensory
perception but also—and perhaps more often—as related to his emotional states, passing through anxiety and fear and panic that he had walked them into a trap about to spring.

‘Am I doing this all wrong, Mycroft?’ he asked. ‘Have I been doing it all wrong from the start?’ He sank back in his chair and slouched down. In his exhaustion, he ran a hand across his face and shielded his eyes, as though he could hide from reality. ‘From the very start?’

But he may as well have been talking to himself, for all the answer Mycroft gave.

It happened at just after five o’clock that morning. Sherlock was on his phone, reading aloud the news briefs as they appeared in his feed.

‘Yup, there it is,’ he remarked. ‘House fire in Buckinghamshire, local police report. Don’t worry, Mycroft, the old Holmes estate is still standing. Though, between you and me, I’d be little moved if the house were bombed from above.’ He hummed through the report, saying, ‘Apparently, a passing motorist called 999 when he saw the house ablaze. Deaths suspected but not confirmed. Clearly, they don’t know much yet. And they won’t, not until—’

He stopped short, for he thought he had just seen Mycroft’s finger curl.

A few seconds longer, he waited, watched, until the finger uncurled and became still. Slowly, Sherlock rose to his feet. He dropped the phone to the chair and stepped closer to Mycroft’s bedside. There, he put his hand on his brother’s shoulder while leaning over him. ‘Mycroft,’ he said softly, his breath lodged painfully in his chest like a stone. He gave Mycroft a gentle shake. ‘Mycroft, it’s me. It’s Sherlock.’

Again, the curl of a finger. With his other hand, he reached for Mycroft’s, and after Sherlock nearly passed out from holding his breath, he felt the slightest of twitches on the inside of his palm, a lifted finger. He exhaled, and squeezed. ‘Come on, Mycroft, you can do it. Wake up. Wake up. It’s Sherlock, I’m here.’

Mycroft’s chin rose, just slightly, and his eyelashes began to flutter. Sherlock almost cried. ‘Yes! God, yes, come on, wake up. Wake up!’ He continued to speak his brother’s name and words of encouragement, all the while squeezing his hand.

Ages passed before Mycroft’s eyelids parted. Then fell shut again. Then opened. The irises roved sluggishly, seeking out the owner of the voice that continuously called to him. When they found him, they stilled, and Sherlock knew there was recognition in those eyes.

‘That’s right, stay with me now,’ said Sherlock, quickly wiping tears on the backside of his free hand. ‘Stay awake. I need you to stay awake, okay? Mycroft, do you understand?’

Mycroft blinked, but it wasn’t clear whether he understood anything at all.

‘You’re okay. You’re going to be just fine. Just stay with me, okay? Stay, stay.’

He hit the call button.

The doctor was in the room first, followed swiftly by the nurse and Anthea, who looked distinctly human in pyjamas and bare feet, her unkempt hair full and free around her face. John, who may or may not have been asleep, was the last to arrive. He hovered in the background while the doctor and nurse worked, testing visual and audio responses while speaking low, calming voices. But when Sherlock looked over and smiled at him, John smiled back, sharing his relief.

Mycroft maintained consciousness for only about ten minutes this time and gave few signs of
understanding much at all of what was going on around him. He made eye contact with whoever was speaking, but he couldn’t maintain that contact for long. He blinked and followed pen lights and traveling fingers, but he couldn’t answer questions with any sort of signal that he understood them. And he wasn’t cognizant enough to even be bothered by the tube traveling down his trachea. Still, the doctor was encouraged, and so was Sherlock. Consciousness of any degree was a positive sign, and he would take it.

He settled back into the chair in anticipation of the next awakening.

MONDAY, APRIL 27, 2015

Sally Donovan checked her watch. She had been waiting for seven interminable minutes, and in those seven minutes, she had read every certificate on the walls, taken note of every medal and commendation, and scanned the titles of every law book, every procedural binder, and every historical volume of every British war since the Anglo-Aro War of 1901. At last, the door opened, admitting Willard Huxley, who was darker than Donovan and had risen to the rank of Police and Crime Commissioner for the Merseyside Police. Aspirations. Donovan immediately put out her hand.

‘Morning, sir, Sgt Donovan, Metropolitan Police.’

‘Morning, yes,’ said PCC Huxley. He pumped her hand once and let go. ‘Have a seat.’ He walked behind to his desk and pulled out his chair. ‘Have you been here long?’

‘Only just arrived.’

‘Did you fly?’

‘Drove.’

‘Drove? Bit of a morning jaunt.’

‘I was keen.’

‘And how are you finding Liverpool?’

‘Tolerable.’

He smiled wryly. ‘Not quite London, is it?’

‘No. But it’s close to home. I’m originally from the North, near Leeds. My family are still there.’

‘And yet you went to London.’

‘And you left it.’

His accent was decidedly Southern.

PCC Huxley made no direct response to that. Informalities expended, he cut to the chase. Donovan approved of the business-like approach.

‘I’m happy to give you the time you requested, Sgt Donovan, though I’m curious as to why this isn’t a conversation we could have over the phone.’ She opened her mouth to explain, but he cut her off. ‘I was sorry to hear about Tony’s death. Terrible thing, no matter what he’d done. But like I told you yesterday, I really didn’t follow his career. Not since we stopped working together. So I don’t know how much help I can be.’
'It’s the time you did work together that I’m interested in,’ Donovan said.

‘Oh?’

‘Tony Pitts died a crooked copper. I want to know if he’d always been one.’

His lips tightened, and Donovan regretted that she hadn’t used softer words. Law enforcement, no matter their rank, tended to dislike even the suggestion of corruption in the police force. The higher the rank, the more prickly the reaction. But Donovan had never been very good with soft words.

‘Looks to me like there’s a lot of shady business going on in Scotland Yard these days,’ said Huxley.

She nodded sharply. ‘I’m on clean-up duty, as it were.’

‘Self-assigned?’

She said nothing, but neither did she look abashed.

PCC Huxley smirked. ‘You didn’t want to talk on the phone, and you arrived in haste and all alone. I know a rogue officer when I see one.’

‘I prefer self-starter.’

‘Your chief superintendent may disagree. Luke Gregson, is it? We’re from the same neighbourhood, you know. Used to be close mates. Good man.’

‘Yes, he is.’

‘I don’t know your DI personally, though he’s been in the paper a fair bit over the years. Not very good with the press, is he?’

‘Greg Lestrade’s a sight better detective than he is a politician,’ she said.

‘And I suppose you’ve had your fair share of dealings with that Sherlock Holmes then, too, eh? What a fiasco. The Moriarty Mayhem, is that what you’re calling it down there? We just call it a mess.’ Huxley grinned tightly. ‘Are the rumours about him true?’

‘Which rumours would those be, sir?’

‘Is Sherlock Holmes as good as they say he is?’

She didn’t even blink. ‘In my experience, rumours are always somewhat off the mark. In this case, way off.’

‘That’s what I th—’

‘He’s far, far better.’

Huxley’s eyebrows arose. ‘Is that so?’

‘A few questions, sir, and I’ll be out of your hair.’ She didn’t want to talk about Sherlock, let alone defend him, which is something she’d be doing an awful lot lately.

With a conceding nod, he said, ‘Let’s hear them, then.’
'I want to ask you about a case you worked when you were still with the Met, back in '96. You were a detective sergeant working on Pitts’ murder investigation team. It involved a strangulation, a bloke behind a pub called—'

‘The Hammersmith Ram.’ PCC Huxley closed his eyes and gave a long sigh.

She quirked an eyebrow. ‘You remember it, then.’

‘Last case Tony and I worked together. Oh, what was the perp’s name . . . Thurgood, I believe. That’s right. Harry Thurgood.’

‘Yes,’ said Donovan eagerly. ‘He served seventeen years for the murder of Tomasz Jankowski.’

Huxley grunted, but whether it was mere acknowledgement or irritation, Donovan couldn’t discern.

‘Did he do it?’ Donovan asked with sudden assertiveness.

The commissioner chewed his tongue, then gave a shrug. ‘He pled guilty, didn’t he?’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘In law—’

‘I know. But that’s not what I asked.’

Huxley picked up a pen from his desk and started fidgeting with it as he leant back in his squeaky chair. ‘I really would like to know why you are asking me about such an old case.’

‘I can’t say, sir,’ she said simply.

With a long sigh, he twirled the pen in his fingers, seeming to be thinking things over. Donovan waited patiently. Finally, he slapped the pen back to the desk and said abruptly, ‘Of course he didn’t do it. I knew it. Pitts knew it. It was cut and dry. To me, at least.’

‘What do you mean, Pitts knew it? He put Thurgood away.’

‘Something must have changed his mind. But the night we interrogated him, Thurgood couldn’t keep his story straight. He’d confessed, sure, but no one who actually murders someone is so sloppy with the details. Pitts spotted that straightaway. A master interrogator, really. He would ask questions from every angle imaginable and just let the contradictions float to the surface. Didn’t take him too long, either. What other detectives could discover in eight hours, he managed in four. Maybe two. I learnt a lot from him. A hell of a lot.’

‘So what happened?’

With a shrug, Huxley said, with a tinge of bitterness, ‘Search me. I went home, and figured Thurgood would be released by morning. But.’

‘But?’

Huxley started forward in his seat, picked the pen back up, and pointed it at her. ‘It’s the damndest thing, sergeant. When I returned to the Yard next morning, I was told that I had been reassigned. Just like that, I’d been dropped from the team. I went to Pitts, asked what happened, and he tried to shake me off. Didn’t want to answer my questions. I only found out later that Thurgood was being convicted of the murder, and . . .’ He trailed off, like he’d just realised something. ‘Well, damn.’
'What?' Donovan asked.

He shook his head. 'Before I knew which way was up, I was being transferred. Not just to another division, but up here. A transfer I didn’t even put in for, like they were trying to get rid of me without outright sacking me, but I hadn’t done anything wrong. I was told that it was Liverpool or bust. Just like that. I thought, well, I thought it was racial, but didn’t have any real evidence for bigotry, and I was afraid to rock the boat too much, you know? So here I am. Did well enough, I suppose.'

Donovan backed up a little. 'Who signed the transfer order?'

'My chief super. Back then, man named Poole.'

'On whose recommendation?'

'I never found out.'

'Did Pitts—?'

'I never spoke to him again. I was out of there before we ever had the chance to cross paths. I called once or twice. Tried to tie up some loose ends, resolve some things in my own mind. But he never took a call. I never spoke with him directly. And frankly, I built up some sore feelings about it that lasted a good few years, until I got on with my work and didn’t think much about London or Tony Pitts at all. So when I heard he’d been taken out by a sniper . . . What can I say? I didn’t know what to think. I had lost my fondness for him, but that’s a hell of a way to go.'

Donovan nodded mutely. It had been a hell of a thing to witness. Minutes earlier, she had endured a hateful and derogatory tongue lashing from Pitts—having been called a traitor and worse—and she was more than happy to see him arrested. But when they marched him outside of the Yard to put him into a car, Lestrade slowed, pulling out his mobile. She felt a flare of annoyance that he would even bother to answer his phone at such a time as this, but just as she chanced to glance at him, it happened. Without warning, with barely a sound, Pitts’ skull erupted. And Donovan thought it was Lestrade who had been killed, for how closely their heads were aligned, how they fell to the pavement together. The shock and horror of it wouldn’t register until later, and when it did, the images would haunt her for weeks, every time she closed her eyes. If that son of a bitch had killed Lestrade . . . She didn’t like thinking about it, even now.

'How goes the hunt for those bastards?' Huxley asked, interrupting her thoughts.

'I wish there was more to say,' she said, hoping he gleaned from that the double meaning she intended.

He nodded and didn’t press her for more.

'So one day, Pitts is doing his job and it’s business as usual,’ she summarised, ‘and the next, Thurgood is being charged for a crime didn’t commit, and you’re being transferred.’

‘That’s the long and short of it.’

‘Something’s not adding up,’ she murmured, mostly to herself. ‘What happened to make him change his mind?’

They spent the next forty-five minutes reviewing together the facts of the murder. Donovan had brought with her the case file, and she pointed out the inconsistencies she had identified in Thurgood’s testimony. She wanted to make absolutely certain of two things: one, that Harry...
Thurgood was indeed innocent; and two, that Pitts was, for whatever reason, trying to cover up that fact. The question that remained, in the end, was why?

‘Can I ask you a question, Sgt Donovan?’

She waited.

Huxley shook his head and said, ‘I’m all for letting the truth come out. But why this case? Why now? And why you?’ He shrugged, indicating that he didn’t actually expect her to answer. ‘You’re on Greg Lestrade’s team. Is this somehow connected to Sebastian Moran?’

‘It couldn’t be,’ she said, for she had already considered that. ‘Moran would have been only twenty-three at the time, he hadn’t even been deployed yet, let alone met . . .’

It was like someone had hit the fast-forward button in her brain, jolting her forward down inevitable paths of reasoning and unexpected leaps of logic. It happened so fast that she almost couldn’t keep up with herself, and it simultaneously stole her breath and lodged it in her throat, cutting off what she had just been about to state.

‘Yes?’ Huxley prompted.

She shook her head sharply, bringing herself back to the present. ‘Nothing, never mind. Er, thank you, sir, for your help. I . . . I ought to get going.’

They rose together and shook hands across the desk. Hurriedly, Donovan scraped the papers up off the desk and began shoving them inside her attaché case.

‘Everything all right?’ he asked, because he could see plainly it was not.

‘Thank you, commissioner,’ she said, shaking his hand again, because she had quite forgotten she had already done so. Then she headed for the door.

‘A word of advice, sergeant,’ Huxley called after her, and she halted in the doorway, trying not to appear too desperate to flee so she could scribble down her thoughts before they slipped away, like a dream. ‘Whatever it is you’re doing,’ he said, ‘don’t do it alone. The more people that know the truth, the harder it is to kill. You get me?’

It occurred to her, then, that PCC Huxley saw more than he let on.

‘Yes, sir, I do.’ They exchanged curt nods, one last, time, and Donovan left Liverpool.

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Unemployment didn’t suit Thomas Dryers, as his indefinite suspension was proving.

He was lying on his sofa, one leg thrown up on backrest, the other fallen to the floor. On his chest lay the TV remote and scattered crumbs from Walkers cheese-and-onions crisps. A few more were caught on the chin of his two-day beard, and grease lined his lips and fingertips. He didn’t care. He was in the middle of yet another episode of Corrie, a little too invested in the Steve-and-Michelle storyline, and fuck anyone who told him they weren’t meant to be together.

His phone sounded above his head. He didn’t care. It was too much work, reaching for it. But as ‘Starman’ kept playing as his ringtone, he groaned and pawed around until he found it on the accent table. It was to his great surprise that Sally’s number lit up the screen.
‘Hello?’ he asked timidly.

‘I need you.’

‘Sally, this is all so . . . so sudden.’

‘Shut up and listen. I’m on the road, be there in about an hour. You’re coming with me to interview an ex-convict.’

Dryers sat up swiftly, and crisp crumbs scattered onto the rug. ‘Come again?’

‘Plain clothes, no uniform.’

‘Wait, am I off suspension?’

‘No.’

‘So . . . ?’

‘You said you wanted to help me, didn’t you?’

‘I do! Yes, of course.’

‘And you know what I’m doing is top secret.’

‘Yeah, no, I get it.’ He was on his feet now, licking his fingers and brushing a greasy hand across his vest. ‘I’m your man.’

‘Then put on some trousers and be ready to go. One hour, Dryers.’

He looked down at his wrinkly boxer shorts and straightened the waistband. Then he couldn’t help but beam. ‘How did you know?’

But she had already hung up.

**TUESDAY, APRIL 28, 2015**

For three days, Sherlock slept very little. Since Sunday, Mycroft had been swimming in and out of consciousness at irregular intervals, never staying awake for long, but his brother did not fail to be present for each surfacing.

Nor had John left the penthouse. He’d phoned Mrs Hudson, letting her know they would be away for a few days but that they were all right and to call if she needed anything. He’d been in contact with Lestrade too, who wanted to come, but John discouraged him. Too much traffic in and out of the building was unwise, especially if they wanted to keep the truth of Mycroft’s survival secret. ‘He’s coming out of it,’ said John, ‘but slowly. Not even aware enough to do much more than respond to his name.’

‘Is there, you know . . . ?’

Lestrade was unwilling to give it voice, but John understood what he couldn’t say: brain damage.

‘Too early to tell,’ said John. ‘But there are positive signs. Last time he woke up, they took him off intubation, and he’s breathing on his own just fine.’

‘Thank God.’
‘Yeah.’

‘How’s Sherlock holding up?’

‘Impatiently. But good, all things considered.’

‘All things considered.’

‘Yeah.

‘Yeah.’

‘And you?’

John hesitated. He hadn’t been sleeping much himself. He had his meds, but wasn’t taking them. He had a bed but couldn’t lie still. He couldn’t talk to Sherlock about what was troubling him, not with Anthea and the doctor and nurse in such constant proximity. And in any case, Sherlock had enough to be going on with. John had spent too much time serving as Sherlock’s paramount concern. This was something he needed to deal with on his own. So yes, he wished he could talk to Lestrade, and tell him about the fire in Wingrave, the men who had been murdered there, and the reappearance of Sebastian Moran. Was Lestrade even aware of the fire? Or was it too far outside his jurisdiction? When would Bill Murray’s name arise? At the very least, he supposed, they should tell Donovan. After all, it was her assignment that they had taken responsibility for.

‘Fine. Good. Yeah.’ It was all he could manage as a response. ‘Just keeping an eye on things. Anything new on your end?’

‘Not much, just . . . erm . . .’

‘What?’

Lestrade laughed a little, though without humour. ‘Just a spat with the ex.’

‘Angela?’

‘Yeah. Can’t seem to shake her. Hag.’

John brightened a little, which he supposed was not an entirely good response. But there was something alleviating in having such an ordinary problem as an ex-wife. At least not every problem was tangled up in Moriarty.

‘Sorry to hear it,’ he said. ‘You need to blow off some steam? I don’t drink much anymore, these days, but we can swap stories of misery.’

This time, Lestrade’s laughter was appreciative. ‘Someday soon, hopefully. At the moment . . .’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘Yeah.’

After that, there wasn’t much more to say.

‘Take care, John. And see that Sherlock gets some sleep, eh?’

‘You too, Greg.’
'And you’ll keep me informed. About Mycroft. If he starts, you know, talking. And if there’s anything I can do to help.'

‘Thank you. Good luck with Angela.’

‘Please don’t say her name.’

The next time Mycroft awoke, he seemed a little more alert than before. From the corner, John watched as the doctor tested his pupil dilation and asked him questions, while Sherlock fidgeted restlessly on the other side of the bed. They had already established that Mycroft knew his own name and remembered who Sherlock was, and where he was, so the questions, this time, got a little further along.

‘Do you remember what happened, Mr Holmes?’

A pause. The doctor was blocking John’s view.

‘He nodded,’ Sherlock announced excitedly. ‘Did you see that? That was a nod.’ He cast a quick smile in John’s direction, but returned eagerly to the moment at hand, like watching a child’s first steps. ‘Mycroft, do you know who did this to you? Do you remember that?’

‘Slowly, Mr Holmes,’ the doctor coached. ‘Don’t press him. The details will come slowly.’

‘But he remembers, he just nodded.’

‘Let’s not distress him.’ Returning his attention to the patient, the doctor continued, ‘Are you in any pain?’

For the first time, Mycroft Holmes attempted to talk. Edging closer, John heard only a sighing breath, but no sound at all. The doctor felt his throat (for oedema, John surmised). It was likely, after intubation, that the tracheal tissue was swollen, and the vocal chords, so long relaxed, could not vibrate together to produce sound.

‘Try not to talk,’ said the doctor. ‘Here now. Tap your finger once for no, twice for yes. Do you feel pain?’

John watched Sherlock, whose eyes were glued on his brother’s right hand. He shifted his weight, the better to see while maintaining his distance.

A single finger lifted and fell.

‘He says no! No pain!’ The elation in Sherlock’s voice pained John, for how long it had been since he’d heard it.

But the finger lifted again. And fell. And lifted. And fell. Sherlock’s face fell with it, and it was as though John could read his thoughts. The response to the doctor’s question was random, meaningless. He could understand the direction to lift his finger, but failed to comprehend the question or generate a meaningful response. Except . . .

‘Sherlock,’ said John, ‘it’s Morse.’

The tapping finger paused, as if to reset, then started up again: three dashes, pause, dash-dot-dash. Mycroft had tapped out O-K.

‘Okay?’ Sherlock repeated. ‘Oh. You feel okay? No pain?’
Sherlock’s eyebrows pinched, confused.

‘You, Sherlock,’ said John. ‘He’s asking after you.’

Sherlock’s mouth formed an oh as he slowly looked back at Mycroft’s face. ‘Me?’ His voice choked. ‘I’m fine, don’t be an idiot. You’re the one who’s laid up in hospital.’ With a forced laugh, he added. ‘Can’t even spell properly.’

They continued to talk to him and reassure him, not only of his own wellbeing, but of others’. He didn’t seem to believe that Sherlock was all right because he kept asking. Or maybe, and John suspected this was more likely the case, he forgot the answer.

John slipped away, to let the doctor work and to give Sherlock time with his brother. He passed Anthea’s door, which was still closed, and made his way to the kitchen where he pulled down a mug and set about to make tea. When it was prepared, he sat on a stool at the counter, the mug between his hands, still too hot to drink. And minutes later, when it wasn’t, he did nothing. Though still holding the mug, he had forgotten all about it. He stared straight ahead without seeing, lost in his own troubled mind, and when Sherlock came into the kitchen, he didn’t hear him, didn’t notice anything, not until Sherlock pulled the mug out of his hand and audaciously dipped his finger in it.

John jumped, startled.

Sherlock sucked the cool tea off his finger. ‘Shall I make you another? Maybe go for something hot this time?’

‘Sorry, I was just . . .’ He cleared his throat. ‘Mycroft?’

‘Sleeping again.’ He was in good spirits as he moved to the sink to toss the spoilt tea. ‘Which is something you should give a go.’

‘Yeah . . .’

‘All right there, John?’

He shook his head and forced a smile. ‘You, erm, you’ve an appointment scheduled this morning with Ella, right?’

Sherlock pulled a face as he flipped on the kettle. ‘I know I said I’d go back. And I will. But just today . . .’

‘No no,’ John hastened to say. ‘This is where you should be right now. What I mean is, if you’re not going . . . Well, maybe I’ll take your spot.’

The flint in Sherlock’s eyes began to flake with sudden comprehension. ‘Oh. Right.’ He licked his lips, trying to find his way forward. ‘Are you—?’

John spared him. ‘Fine, I’m fine.’ He’d been using that word an awful lot lately. Such a meaningless descriptor.

‘We haven’t really talked about it. Moran.’ A little clumsily, Sherlock sympathised, ‘Seeing him again was, I mean, after all this time, not that it’s been that long, not really, but with all that’s happened since then, knowing all he’s done, to you especially—’
Scrubbing his weary face with a hand, John stopped him. He could barely think about what had happened in that cupboard right now, let alone talk about it. ‘I just need a bit of a top up, that’s all,’ he said. ‘I’m fine now, but I figure, today might be a good day to go.’

Sherlock gave a sombre, unconvinced nod. He wasn’t buying that John was at all fine.

But John needed him to pretend. He slid off the stool. ‘Might as well head out. I’ll call her on my way.’

‘John,’ Sherlock called after him, but he just didn’t have it in him to turn back.

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Since the fire, John’s imagination had been running rampant. He felt like some weaker, terrified version of himself was still trapped in a small room, scraping at the walls, screaming to get out, while at the edges of his vision, a shadow chased after him.

That’s not how things were supposed to be, not anymore. In killing Daz, he had believed that he had also slain that weaker, terrified man. Someone else had emerged. In his latest dreams, he was angry, always angry. He watched Mary die and felt only rage. He twisted a knife in the gut of a dragon and felt a sadistic sort of relief. He saw the taunting face of James Moriarty and knew only all-encompassing hatred. He felt like a monster. But he was relying on that monster. It was the monster that would kill Sebastian Moran.

But at the moment of truth, the monster was nowhere to be seen. The small, quivering man was back. John had thought him fled. Instead, he’d only been pushed down into hiding. Not gone, never gone. Would he ever be gone? God, he just wanted to be free of the cage.

He’d called ahead, so he was a little surprised by the expression on Naomi’s face when she saw him walk through the door. She was with another patient, who was leaning over the desk to point to a date on her desk calendar.

‘Dr Thompson is expecting you, John,’ she said. Then her eyes fell to her keyboard. ‘Go right in.’

‘Thank you, Naomi.’

He would tell her about the new dreams. Already he had prepared the words. But he didn’t know how he would tell her about the failure in the cupboard, not without explaining about Moran, and the fire, and Bill Murray. He didn’t know how to explain that he had wanted Sherlock to kill him, just so Moran wouldn’t get the pleasure. Whatever he said, he needed her help. To regain stability, to see things more clearly, whatever it took, whatever she told him to do, he would do it.

John pushed open the door, and froze. Ella was waiting for him. But she wasn’t alone.

‘Welcome, Dr Watson.’

Irene Adler smiled at him even as she levelled a gold-plated revolver at Ella Thompson’s head.

‘I didn’t even have to abduct you, this time. Come in. I have a chair waiting for you.’
She Likes to Watch Him Dance

TUESDAY, APRIL 28, 2015

Not long ago, John had believed she was dead.

The last time he had seen her—it seemed a lifetime had passed—they had been standing together in the sitting room of 221B. Sherlock was there too, though not really: he was lost in his mind palace, seated in his leather armchair by the fire, as still as a statue, as inscrutable as Sanskrit, and as insentient as his laptop. In other words, his normal state, when he was working on a problem. John had no patience for it. Or rather, he had no patience for her. Sherlock may have fallen admirer, but John felt like his skin was crawling with cockroaches every time she opened her mouth to deliver a half-snide, half-simpering remark as she tried to best Sherlock at his own game. He couldn’t explain his distaste of her, even to himself, and he thought, begrudgingly, though with little repentance, that perhaps he was being unfair. She was a provocateur, mostly. Not evil. Not the kind of evil that would grab you off the street, strap five pounds of Semtex to your chest and treat you like a marionette doll to torment your friend. Nevertheless, he had no desire to spend any solitary time with the woman. And because she was evidently intent on sticking around, he did not. It seemed harmless. She seemed harmless.

When he returned much later that night, neither she nor Sherlock was at home. The next morning, Sherlock announced in a monotone that she had been arrested. Then he retired to his room for the rest of the day. John believed him to be, at best, sulking at the loss of a playmate. At worst, he was heartsick. It had been Mycroft Holmes, some weeks later, who told John she was dead. Executed. For the first time, John felt sorry for her. Despite his unspecified dislike of her, he had not wished her dead.

But that was then. Much had changed.

‘The chair, Dr Watson.’

She had not come alone. There were six men in the room with her. Two flanked either side of the door, at John’s shoulders, and carried Monadnock batons. Two more stood on either side of Irene Adler and Dr Thompson, and John could tell by the way their jackets hung that each carried a firearm in shoulder holsters. A fifth stood by the desk, and the last by a chair placed in the very centre of the room, empty. A chair that had been set there especially for him.

Oh, and a seventh. He understood now. The man with Naomi was holding her hostage. He was their alarm bell.

Irene stood imperious. She wore a dress of severest black, a high collar juxtaposing a sharply dipped neckline, a tapered waist, a hem at the knee, and shiny stilettos. A long chain hung around her neck and disappeared into her cleavage. Not exactly a day look. At the cottage, Moran had appeared dishevelled and manic, a devolution from the self-possessed and calculating man who had first greeted John when they had dragged him into a basement kitchen and wrangled him into a folding metal chair. Irene, on the other hand, was as dignified and domineering as a queen. She held a gold pistol as comfortably as if it were a hand fan. But it was pointing at Ella.

By all measures, Ella appeared composed—knees together, hands folded in her lap, chin level. But the backlighting from the large window and her own dark skin made it difficult for John to make out her true expression.
John felt paralysed. Last time, he had been set upon, dragged away, forced into the dungeon. This time, he had just strolled right in. Fluorescent lights flickered above his head. He twitched. Tried to breathe. No, no. There were no fluorescents in here. Ella used standing lamps only, and they were all providing steady illumination. A trick of the mind, just like the sudden odour of stale standing water and the chill that crept up the skin of his back. *In your head. In your head.* How much of it? Just some, or all? He shook his head to clear it and focused on what he knew to be true: he was not yet detained. Still, his feet were as though stuck to the floor.

He had the power to do only one thing: check the faces of each man for Sebastian Moran. But he wasn’t there.

‘You can run, of course.’ His eyes snapped back to Irene Adler, who cocked an eyebrow at him. ‘I won’t stop you. Run back to Sherlock, tell him I’m back in London, warn him. But you won’t do that, will you?’

Irene ran a hand down one of Ella’s braids, pushed it behind her ear. A slow smile spread across her lips.

‘Don’t touch her,’ John said, finding his voice.

‘Then sit.’ Irene withdrew her hand. ‘I’m not here to hurt you, John.’ She spoke his name like it was sour on her tongue. ‘But if you don’t cooperate, I will hurt her. I’m the one holding the cards. Remember the last woman who suffered because you couldn’t cooperate? Do we get to travel that road again?’

His thudding heart now sank a little deeper. Just like that, he’d been trapped. Was his defeat so easily accomplished? After all he’d suffered and survived, was it all so easily undone? Was he so easily undone? But what choice was there? He couldn’t run. He couldn’t fight. He couldn’t call for help or warn Sherlock or do anything useful at all. One wrong move on his part, just one, and Ella was as good as dead. That couldn’t happen. He couldn’t let that happen. So he stepped further into the room. Behind him, one of the men moved to close the door. John glanced over his shoulder and saw Naomi a short distance away, watching him, a tear sliding down her cheek. The door closed.

He halted when he saw a bundle of zip ties in one man’s fist.

‘Don’t tie me down.’ He lifted a hand to ward them off as a surge of panic rose in him.

‘Tell him not to fight me,’ Irene said to Ella, continuing to stroke her hair.

Ella said nothing. Closer now, eyes adjusting to the dim, John could see the blood trickling down her chin from a split lip, the drops staining her lap.

John’s rage began to uncoil. It was almost an act of defiance, now, sitting in that chair, simply so Irene didn’t have the satisfaction of forcing Ella to tell him to do *anything.* He sat, and with no resistance but a hard expression, he let the men zip tie his elbows and wrists to the arms of the chair, and his ankles to the legs. He waited for one of them to punch him, for the chair to tip and for the crash to the ground to ring in every bone. But no one touched him, only to reach inside the pocket of his jacket and steal his phone. Irene held out her hand for it.

‘Shall we call him?’ she said teasingly.

John glared straight ahead, only once chancing a glimpse at Ella, wherein he tried to convey his remorse.

‘What do you say, John?’
‘Fuck you.’

Irene smiled coquettishly, but her eyes were black as night. Then she passed his phone to her nearest henchman, who dropped it into his pocket.

‘John Watson, John Watson. John, John, John.’ She stepped forward menacingly, leaving the gun and Ella to the grip of another stooge. ‘That’s all I hear anymore, it seems. You’re quite the puzzle. So many people are simply obsessed with you. Sherlock, of course, but that’s old news. And it’s not just him, is it?’

She lifted a finger to trail down the side of his face; he leant his head away, just out of her reach.

‘I’ve watched the footage, of course. Some of my people, they can’t stop watching it. Everyone wants a piece of you. But I just don’t see it. God knows I’ve tried. Of all the kinks and fantasies I’ve indulged in my line of work, you’d think nothing could shock or perplex me. But you.’ She tossed her head and laughed. ‘Give me the freaks, the sadists, something I can understand! But you! You’re just so plainly pedestrian, the most ordinary man I’ve ever known. And I’ve known so, so many.’

She reached again for his face; this time, her nails latched onto the side of his neck. A thumb grazed the scars of two puncture wounds. She grinned.

‘Despite appearances, you must make for a bloody good shag.’ Her fingers flattened against his skin, almost caressing. ‘Or are you the gentle lover? That’s it, isn’t it? People do get so awfully sentimental about their first. Sherlock is no exception.’

‘Don’t touch me,’ he said, breathless with anger.

‘Don’t spoil you, is that what you mean? Sweetie, after the way Daz took you? Over, and over, and over again. You’re already thoroughly wrecked, inside and out.’ She dragged her fingers away and held out her hand, palm up, toward one of her men without taking her eyes off John. Her man placed a handkerchief there, and she began cleaning her hands. ‘They call you the Spanner. Did you know?’

He didn’t care. He wanted her to stop talking. He couldn’t think when she was talking, and he needed to think. The terror was rising in his him. Images of the convent flashed before his waking eyes, thoughts of Moran and Daz and whistling and peppermint, and he couldn’t think. He looked to Ella for help, for some sign or cue to help him remember how to keep his mind, but his vision was clouding over, and he couldn’t see her properly.

‘The Spanner in the Works, that’s what Jim called you, back in the good old days. It’s caught on. They all call you that now. Know why?’

She curled her fingers into his hair and pulled his head back, forcing him to look up.

‘Because you always seem to spoil the best-made plans. Don’t you? Jim tried to murder Sherlock via a cabbie driver, just to prove he could. Then John Watson comes along, waltzing in unexpectedly like a cat off the street, and he takes out the cabbie. Maybe the police never knew who fired that shot, but Jim knew. It was always hard, fooling Jim. But you. You surprised him. He didn’t expect you to try to sacrifice yourself for Sherlock, that night at the pool. It excited him. I could tell, the way he talked about it. He thought he could destroy Sherlock by dismantling his mind. You proved that the surest way was by destroying his heart. It’s the best way, isn’t it? The only way.’
Without slackening her grip on the short hairs of his head, she inclined her face closer, too close—he could smell her breath. ‘You stood in my way, too, back then. I admit it. I so dearly wanted Sherlock’s attention, but I couldn’t have it, not all of it, because he was so busy trying to impress you. A spanner in the works indeed. You distracted Seb from his primary mission, and even took out his favourite foot soldier. And today, you’re at it again!’

He swallowed, but it was hard, given the stretch of his neck. ‘What do you want?’

‘What do I want?’ She simpered. ‘Do you really have to ask? What I don’t want is you, but here you are. Now with Big Brother out of the way, Sherlock is finally exposed. I came today for Sherlock, and I got you. Today, I was going to win the game, ahead of schedule, and I. Got. You.’

She squeezed his hair forcefully and threw his head back as she finally let go.

He closed his eyes, afraid to open them, afraid that somehow she would read the truth in them, that Mycroft was alive.

‘But I’ll make it work. I’m adaptable. I’ve always been adaptable. What do we use spanners for, John Watson? To fix leaky pipes? To bash men’s heads in? Or just’—she grasped both of his pinned forearms, dug her nails into his skin, and wrenched the arms in opposite directions—‘to tighten the screws?’

He gritted his teeth together, determined not to make a sound. She’s not Moran, he thought. Not Moran, not Moran.

‘You’re going to help me, John.’

‘I won’t.’

‘You don’t have a choice.’

‘I won’t help you hurt him.’

She sneered. ‘Is this what you were like with Seb, that first day? He still talks about it. You were so defiant, he says. So brave in the face of the inevitable. So stupid, thinking you knew which way was up. How long was it, before you lost that look? Was it when they cut her throat?’

‘John.’

It was Ella. He didn’t realise it until her voice cut through the haze, but he was breathing rapid, shallow breaths in a dry mouth. His heart felt like it was pushing out of his chest, and his forehead was pearled with sweat. He had slipped into a panic attack, and Ella needed him to calm down.

‘Shut her up,’ said Irene mildly, and John squeezed his eyes shut just before the crack.

‘They think Sherlock Holmes is alive. They don’t believe me when I tell them he died three years—No!’

Moran strode up to Mary, and struck her in the face. Her head snapped back and she cried aloud in pain. Moran spun and faced John again, his eyes dark and terrible.

Count to five, Watson, he coached himself, though his body trembled. Breathe. Breathe.

‘She’s good, isn’t she? Your therapist.’

John opened his eyes. Ella’s head was inclined to the side, but to her credit, she hadn’t cried out.
He wanted to say he was sorry, so goddamn sorry that he had ever returned to her, that he had told her anything of the horror that was his life. This was his fault, all his fault. But he couldn’t say any of that. Instead, he silently continued to count. Inhale: one, two, three, four, five.

‘You didn’t give her much warning that you’d be making an appearance today, so she was a little unprepared. We had to go rummaging for her notes in her little cabinet. They make for fascinating reading. Marks, hand me Dr Thompson’s file on John Watson.’

Her man, Marks, who stood by the desk, lifted a file and passed it to her.

Exhale: one, two, three, four, five. Ella shook her head in miniscule measurement, as though to say she, too, was sorry.

Irene flipped the file open and riffled among the pages with a casual air, as if it were a pop magazine, and not someone’s life. ‘PTSD, we knew about that one. Sexual trauma, no surprises there. Ah, here’s one. Pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others’ motives and actions. So, so many issues, John. My, you are a mess. How do you even manage to get out of his bed in the morning?’ She put on a look of mock surprise. ‘You’ll have to tell me how that works with him, being so afflicted as you are with your, quote, aversion to touch. That’s what this means, doesn’t it? Dr Thompson’s latest notes: possible haphephobia, on the lower scale; treatment to discuss with client: touch therapy.’

She set aside the file and began to circle him. Her hand rested against his upper arm and trailed around his back. He had no willpower to forestall the shiver that coursed through every inch of skin.

‘They say touch is healing. I think I read that somewhere. That humans need to be touched to be whole. Is that what you need, too, John? Is that what you crave? Warm hands, strong arms? Does Sherlock do that for you?’ She paused behind him, and while one arm clamped to his shoulder, the opposite hand travelled down his chest and stomach. ‘Does he’—she placed her hand against his crotch and groped him—‘touch you?’

John’s vision turned black as an unearthly chill spread from stomach to digits, and she continued to fondle him, searching for a reaction. A well of nausea swirled in his stomach. He flung himself back as though burned, and if she hadn’t moved aside quickly enough, he was sure his head would have collided with hers. Something inside of him screamed, but he kept his teeth clenched and lips closed. No, that wasn’t just his teeth. He’d bit down on his tongue, hard. He tasted blood.

She came back around, laughing. ‘Oh, so dramatic! Relax, John, I’m not here to hurt you. Didn’t you hear me? I have no interest in you.’

‘Then leave.’ He hoped it sounded demanding, but there was a note of pleading in his voice, and he despised himself.

‘Allow me to amend: I have no interest in you as anything other than a carrier pigeon.’

‘I’ve seen how you deliver messages,’ he spat.

‘Not with you. I’ve made Seb a promise.’

‘Then why did he send you?’

She stared at him as though he had said something scandalous. Then she threw her head back in laughter. ‘Send me! Oh pet, you really do have things the wrong way around, don’t you? Seb is a foot soldier. Nothing more.’
She walked over to her man by the door, out of John’s sight, and when she returned, she was carrying a small brown envelope, which she folded in half. Then she reached for the hem of John’s jumper and lifted it up. John turned his head aside, held his breath, but all she did was slide the envelope into the breast pocket of his collared shirt. Then she tugged the jumper back into place.

‘There. Done. That wasn’t so hard, now, was it? I can see you don’t do hard anymore.’


‘Just see to it that it ends up in our dear Sherlock’s hands, yes?’ She hummed a little to herself, as though thinking fondly of an old flame. Then she clapped her hands together. ‘Boys, let’s not overstay our welcome.’ She made as though to leave. But then she stopped and turned back. ‘Oh! But just one more thing! I wanted you to know that your gift found a good home.’

John blinked, confused. Was this a trick? ‘My what?’

‘I’m sure you would be remiss if you thought your efforts were entirely wasted.’ She tugged on the chain around her neck, lifting it out of the dress. ‘What can I say but thank you, John? After all, diamonds really are a girl’s best friend.’

A gold band with a round-cut solitaire diamond swung on the end of the chain.

John’s eyes instantly began to burn. ‘But that’s— you—’

‘The jeweller was just relieved to be rid of. You wouldn’t think it to look at the guy, but he’s a superstitious one, he is. Didn’t think anyone would want it, already sized and engraved with some other woman’s name, and a dead woman at that. I offered him a fair price, all things considered. Then I had the Mary bit scratched out, and my, what a pretty thing.’

She yanked on the chain, and it broke off from around her neck. Then she dropped the ring so it slid off the chain and into her palm. With flair, she slipped it onto her own ring finger and held her hand at a distance, admiring.

‘A bit plain for my tastes, but there’s just something about it, you know?’

The shivering that had beset his skin now sank deeper, churning his insides. To see that ring, his Mary’s ring, on the hand of this woman, was almost too much to bear. His fists clenched and strained, but the zip ties pressed against old wounds and held him in the chair.

‘I hope . . .’ he began, in a whisper.

‘Say again, John?’ She stepped closer and folded her arms. Her hand lay atop, displaying prominently the solitaire diamond.

‘I hope he kills you.’

‘Oh pet,’ she simpered, reaching for his face again. He turned his head sharply and leant away. ‘He won’t. Not if he wants to keep you alive. And that’s exactly why I will keep you alive. That’s a promise. Marks.’ She glanced at her man. ‘I want to leave Dr Watson with a reminder of my promise. I have his.’ She waggled her fingers. ‘Give him mine.’

From his pocket, Marks pulled a switchblade, and with the push of a button, it sprang to life. Blinking rapidly to stave off the tears, John strained once more against the binds. But he accomplished nothing but to pinch his own skin and cut off the circulation to his balled fists.
‘I’ve told you, I’m not like Sebastian Moran,’ said Irene. ‘But I confess to just a teensy bit of jealousy. Seb left his mark on you. He left nine of them. It would be fair if I didn’t claim just a slice of you for myself. Don’t squirm, and this will barely hurt.’

At her signal, Marks stepped forward and grabbed John’s hand, trying to straighten out the fingers, but John resisted.

‘Relax, John. Don’t fight. Or I’ll have my man scoop out one of her eyes.’

Ella whimpered in horror.

*Endure, Watson. For her sake, for Sherlock, for Mary. You’ve survived this far. Endure a little longer.*

He uncurled his fingers.

John knew he couldn’t watch. Nor could he bear to look at Ella. Instead, he looked at Irene, directly into her eyes, as Marks spread his fingers, and with the tip of the blade began to slice. He felt the initial prick, but after that, it was like he could feel nothing at all. He continued to stare at Irene Adler, and she stared back, meeting his challenge, until finally, Marks stood back. From the corner of his eyes, John saw a bead or two of his own blood dripping from the silver blade before Marks fold it away and returned it to his pocket.

‘Give Dr Watson back his phone,’ Irene instructed lithely. ‘And give the therapist the syringe.’

The man guarding Ella reached into a satchel and produced a full syringe, its long needle not even covered in plastic.

‘No, please!’ said John. ‘Whatever it is, don’t—!’

But his pleas were in vain. Ella gasped as the needle plunged into the side of her neck, and her whole body went rigid until it was removed. Then she groaned, and as her head began to loll, her eyes rolled up in their sockets, and she slumped back and nearly out of the chair. They laid her on the ground.

‘Afternoon, John Hamish Watson,’ said Irene Adler.

Suddenly, he was alone.

***

Hudfield House was an Approved Premises in Mitcham of South London. On the side of the building was a purple sign bearing the logo of the National Probation Service.

‘Feels funny coming to one of these in jeans,’ Dryers commented.

Donovan didn’t reply, just readied her ID.

They let themselves in and up to the first floor, where the number 4 on the door hung upside down on a single loose screw. She knocked loudly, but needn’t have done, because the object of her visit had watched her arrival from the window and was ready to let her in.

‘Sorry, sorry, bit untidy. I borrowed you a chair from down the hall, but didn’t think to grab two.’

‘He can stand,’ Donovan said, waving a dismissive hand at Dryers.
Henry Thurgood was a twitchy fellow. Not yet fifty, he had lost most of the hair on the top of his head, and large sacks of skin hung under his eyes. He wore a v-neck white t-shirt and holey jeans, and hunched a little when he stood. His bedsit was cramped, the kitchenette cluttered, the bed unmade and piled with laundry and food wrappers. Life had not been good to Mr Thurgood, there was no mistake.

‘This to do with my probation, what?’ he asked, once he and Donovan had sat. Dryers stood slightly behind her, looking for a place to rest his elbow.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ she said. ‘I wanted to ask you a few questions about your legal activities while imprisoned in Belmarsh. You’ve been out on licence for two years now, is that right?’

‘S’right, love, and I’ve been good. Ain’t given nobody a moment’s complaint.’ His eyebrows pinched with worry. ‘Is there summat ’at’s been complainin’ of me?’

‘Not at all. Mr Thurgood—’

‘Harry’s a’right.’

‘Harry then. In 1996, you were arrested for the murder of a man name Tomasz Jankowski and sentenced to seventeen years.’ She consulted her notes. ‘During that time, you submitted nine different requests to repeal the Crown Court verdict. Without success, obviously.’

Thurgood nodded subtly, if not nervously, his eyes darting between Donovan and Dryers. ‘No one would give me the time of day. No one.’

‘You wanted a new trial?’ asked Dryers. ‘What for?’

‘Like I told my solicitor. I wanted to take it back.’ He sniffed and rubbed his nose vigorously. Donovan suspected cocaine. Not a good plan for a convict.

‘Take what back?’

‘My confession.’

‘You wanted to retract the murder confession,’ Donovan restated. ‘What are you saying, Harry? That you’re innocent?’

Of course that’s what he was saying. But she was getting excited and wanted to hear those words come from his own lips.

‘I never killed no one me whole life. Hand to God, I never.’

Donovan sat forward but tried not to appear too eager. ‘Why, then, did you ever say you had?’

Thurgood closed his eyes and shook his head morosely. ‘I been tricked.’

‘What?’

‘He lied to me.’

‘Who?’

With that, Harry Thurgood told his story.

_He was twenty-nine, a child of the streets, and a homeless sod going on eleven years. When he was_
tired, he found a spot of earth or a cement slab and fell asleep. When he was hungry, he ate from a
skip or stole from a corner shop. Sometimes, his number came up, and for a small string of nights
he would have a bed in a shelter and food in a canteen. But one way or another, it wasn’t a life. He
didn’t want it. That’s how he found himself, one cold night in October, standing on the Waterloo
Bridge.

‘Not a pleasant way to go, friend. Falling is just like flying, but I don’t think you’ll like how it
ends.’

He didn’t know where the man had come from. Suddenly, he was just there. An unexpected
saviour.

‘Good bloke, I thought,’ said Thurgood to Sgt Donovan. ‘Talked me down. Took me to a pub, fed
me up. Best meal I’d had in ages. But I was out of sorts, you know? And I told him, I was tired.
And he said, what if I could have a regular bed every night, and three square a day, and never have
to worry ’bout nothing at all?’

The stranger leant across the table and laid a warm hand on his arm. ‘Ever thought about prison?’

Could it be so simple? He didn’t really have to be a criminal, just take the fall for one. He’d be
taken care of for a few years, no skin off his nose, and when he got out, there would be a reward: a
fat bank account with his name on, no less than a hundred grand. ‘Just say yes,’ said the man,
‘play along, and I’ll do the rest.’

He said yes.

He never saw the man again. A fortnight passed before anything happened. He was sleeping in a
nightshelter when the police came. They found a pair of shoes beneath his bed, shoes he’d never
seen before in his life, along with the wallet of a man he’d never even heard of. They arrested him.
Just like that, he confessed. But he was in shock. He hadn’t known it would be like this. He hadn’t
known it would be murder. Someone was dead, and it was like he was standing outside of his own
body, watching himself take responsibility for it. He wanted to tell himself to shut up, and if not
that, then deny it until he was raw in the throat. But he didn’t. He was promised rest and food and
a grand reward. He did what he’d promised and played along.

But Belmarsh was no respite. It was not kind. From his first day there, his first hour, Harry knew
he had made a terrible mistake. He’d given away his life, and for what? A place where he was too
terrified to fall asleep, eating the same horrid meals day after day, week after week, getting
screamed at by prison guards and bullied by other inmates. It was hell. He’d made a deal with the
devil!

‘This man,’ said Donovan. ‘What did he look like?’

‘Been a long time,’ said Thurgood. ‘I don’t remember no more.’

‘Anything you can remember, anything at all. How did he dress, maybe the colour of his hair, how
tall he was—’

‘There was one thing I ain’t forgot.’ He screwed his eyes shut, remembering. ‘Sound of his voice.
It was . . . soft. Nice. I think he had an accent.’

‘An accent?’

‘Irish.’
Dryer’s elbow slipped down the wall, and his shoulder crashed into it. ‘Wait, are you saying—?’

‘Just cottoning on, are you?’ Donovan said. ‘Do you think you’d recognise the man in a photograph?’

Thurgood looked stunned. ‘You mean, you believe me?’

‘Maybe.’

He started flapping his hand against his chest in excitement. ‘Because it weren’t just me! There was loads of us at Belmarsh.’

Donovan blinked, not expecting this turn in the narrative. ‘What do you mean? Loads of you?’

‘I didn’t tell nobody what I’d done. Taking the fall, I mean. Not for years. But then I did, couldn’t keep it inside me no more, and in a place like that, word gets around. Turns out, it weren’t just me. There were others. On the outside, homeless sods, like what I’d been, confessing to murders we’d never done. Tricked into it, see. Like me.’

But Donovan wasn’t so sure. In a place like that, it was more likely, wasn’t it, that others just repeated his story. No matter the stories on telly and in film, prisons were filled with the guilty, not the innocent. Other murderers simply heard his story and liked it, and so made it their own. Of course they did.

But Thurgood continued.

‘So I tried to appeal. If it weren’t just me, if others did it, too, maybe someone would listen. But then . . .’

‘Then what?’ Donovan urged.

‘They started getting picked off. One by one. Thought it a fluke, you know? You cross the wrong blokes in the jug, they get it out for you. But something were fishy about it. Us innocent ones, the ones who’d been scammed—we was dying. I ain’t no dummy. I know when to shut up. So I shut up.’

‘How many others?’

‘Enough.’

‘How many died?’

‘Of men like me? ’Crost seventeen years? A dozen at least. But most of us knew to keep our mouths shut.’

‘And the last one you knew of?’

‘2009. I remember. Friend of mine, you know. That’s when I decided it weren’t worth it no more. I’d serve the rest my time and cause no fuss. Got out four years later, if you could call this ramshack hostel getting out, and I ain’t talked to no one about it since. Not till you come knocking at my door. And I can tell you true, now that I know. There weren’t no hundred grand waiting for me. Lies, all of it. Someone else died, but it were my life lost, just the same.’

Donovan pulled out her phone and began scrolling until she found what she was looking for. The she turned the screen around to show him.
‘Is this the man who talked you off the bridge?’

Thurgood took the phone and squinted. He studied the screen with a grim expression and tight mouth. Then he lifted his eyes. ‘I remember now. That’s him a’right.’

She stood abruptly. ‘Mr Thurgood, I’d like you to come with me straight away. We’re moving you to a safe house.’

He blanched, and Dryers choked on his own spittle. ‘Why? What’d I do?’

‘It’s a precautionary measure, nothing more,’ she assured him. ‘Take a moment to gather your things.’

While Thurgood turned madly in circles, grabbing unfolded shirts and socks and stuffing them into an old backpack, Donovan turned confidentially to Dryers, who, before she had a chance to say a word, whispered tightly, ‘What’s going on, I’m not following.’ His eyes dropped to her phone. ‘He’s dead.’

‘Doesn’t mean he’s not still dangerous,’ she whispered back. ‘Ready for round two of To Posthumously Catch a Killer?’

‘You bet I am,’ he said, grinning down at her. ‘Though I’m still not quite clear on what it is we’re trying to prove.’

‘Me neither,’ she confessed. ‘But one thing seems certain. Tony Pitts wasn’t just Moran’s man.’ She looked down at the picture on her phone one more time, before clicking it black. ‘First, he was Moriarty’s.’

***

‘Ella.’

John looked on helplessly at her unmoving form. He had already tried calling for Naomi, but she wasn’t answering. Unconscious? Worse? They needed help, his help, but here he was, strapped down and not strong enough to bust himself free. He had no leverage to move his arms.

His left hand dripped blood onto the floor from where Irene’s man had carved a line of red around his ring finger. Stitches, probably, he thought, and if he could just get himself out of that chair in good time he wouldn’t lose that finger entirely. His phone rested on his thigh, frustratingly right there and yet wholly unreachable.

‘Ella, wake up.’

He didn’t know what they had given her, or how much, but whatever the case, she needed urgent medical attention. Was she even still breathing? Was there still time? Was someone else coming? Someone . . . worse?

He grunted and groaned and fought the binds, and in his jostling, the phone slipped from his lap and landed face down on the floor. ‘Dammit,’ he muttered, sweating.

As he struggled to free himself, he repeated his mantra. *I know he’s not here. I know I’m not mad.* But he was on the edge. The hairs on the back of his neck were raised, and he believed that if he turned his head, he would see someone who wasn’t even there. *I know he’s not here. I know this will pass.* The chair rocked against his efforts, and he stilled himself, and breathed. It would not do to topple himself and the chair both. *One limb at a time, Watson,* he thought. *Slowly. Patiently.*
He twisted his right leg at the ankle, the torque straining the binds. And even though it pinched and scraped and every effort grew more painful, he didn’t stop. He grunted and shouted, and gritted and groaned, until at last, the tie snapped. He let out a whoosh of air and short laugh of relief. ‘Yes! Yes. Okay, okay. Keep going. Keep going. You’re okay. Not here, not coming, you’re okay.’

With the success of the first, he felt bolstered, and he set to work on the left leg. In short order, that tie too snapped, and his legs were free. He allowed himself ten seconds—to breathe, to rest, and to think. He needed help. Ella needed help. Irene Adler wanted him to call for Sherlock. So that was precisely who he couldn’t call. But calling 999 would invite a police presence he didn’t trust. That left just one person he could still rely on.

He pushed off his shoes and with the toes of his left foot pulled off his right sock. Then he flipped the phone over so the screen side was up, and with his right foot tapped his in own password. Then he made a call.

‘John, any updates?’

‘Greg,’ he spoke to the floor, going for composed.

But his voice caught momentarily in his throat. Ten minutes ago, he more than half believed he was done for. Now, and with startling force, he remembered the moment during in his first captivity, when he’d learnt that Lestrade was searching for him. Even though John had cut him out of his life, Lestrade had not forsaken their friendship. What he would have given just to hear Lestrade’s voice on the other end of the phone that day. Hearing it now almost overwhelmed him.

John roughly cleared his throat.

‘Everything all right?’

‘I need your help.’

There was an anxious pause. ‘What is it?’

‘Ella, Dr Thompson, my therapist, she . . . she’s been attacked in her office. She’ll be okay, but . . . Can you come?’

‘Of course! Yes, I’m just finishing . . . yes, I’m on my way. What happened?’

‘Not over the phone.’

‘Oh. Okay. What’s the address?’

John gave it to him. ‘How long, do you reckon?’ He hoped he sounded calm, but he couldn’t disguise the strain of worry colouring his tone, and he knew Lestrade heard it.

‘Ten, fifteen minutes. John. Does she need an ambulance?’

‘No! No police, no ambulance. Just please. Hurry.’

‘I’m on my way.’
By the time he heard Lestrade force his way in through the front door, his hands were swollen with blood, and Ella still had not stirred. He was about to call out when he heard not one set of footsteps in the foyer, but two, and then a voice that was not Lestrade’s.

‘The receptionist. Check on her.’

John’s heart stuttered and his eyes welled. He twisted his head sharply just as Sherlock threw the door open and strode into the room, eyes wild with concern and mouth set in a severe line that meant he was angry. But he stopped short at the sight of John, restrained.

‘Ella,’ John said. He felt choked. He had steeled himself for when Lestrade showed up and knew he could handle it. But he’d not been counting on Sherlock. He should have been with Mycroft. ‘She needs help.’ John directed, needing time to collect himself.

But Sherlock didn’t give him any. ‘Lestrade!’ he bellowed, and Lestrade ran in, gun pointed to the floor but ready to engage; his mouth fell open when he saw John. ‘Her too.’ Sherlock pointed to Ella’s unconscious form, but he himself went straight to John.

Not for the first time, John found himself under Sherlock’s scrutinising eyes, which took him in part by part, from his tousled hair, to bound wrists and bleeding finger, to his bare right foot beside the phone on the floor. The detective read the story there, at least enough of the story, and his eyes went wide with rage. He leant down and touched John’s face, as though to assess his state of mind, then dropped to his knees and began tugging uselessly at the zip ties. ‘Moran,’ he said. ‘Was it Moran? Was he here?’

‘Scissors,’ said John thickly. He cleared his throat. ‘In the cup on the desk.’

Sherlock ran for the scissors. John wanted to tell him to slow down, not to panic. It wasn’t like the convent. He wasn’t hurt. Not like before. But before he could utter a conciliatory word, Lestrade, who was crouched over Ella, searching for vital signs, announced, ‘She’s breathing. Strong pulse. What happened, John?’

‘They stuck her,’ he said. ‘Sodium pentothal is my guess.’

Lestrade looked up sharply. ‘That’s what they used on Anthea.’

Sherlock whirled, scissors in hand. ‘Correction: That’s what she used on Anthea.’ He flew back to John and lifted his chin, his eyes fixated on John’s mouth, looking for the evidence he feared to see. ‘Did she kiss you?’

John pulled his head away. ‘No. Just get me out of this chair.’ He knew he sounded fearful and tried to quell the quaver in his throat. ‘Please.’

While Sherlock cut away the zip ties, John told them succinctly what had happened: and how Irene Adler had been waiting, not for John, but for Sherlock. But he couldn’t relay it all. Not the things she had said, not the way she had put her hand on him.

The last zip tie at John’s left elbow snapped away. Instantly, he covered his face with both hands and tried to breathe. But his cut finger smeared blood across his cheek. Sherlock took his wrists and pulled them away. John tensed.

Is that what you need, John? Does he . . . touch you?

‘I should have kept my appointment,’ Sherlock murmured.
‘Let’s call it serendipity that you did not,’ John responded tersely, pulling his hands free.

On his knees, Sherlock looked up into John’s face, his own troubled.

‘I need to see to Ella,’ said John. He pushed abruptly to his feet, but his legs were shakier than he expected, and he most certainly would have fallen over, if Sherlock had not risen swiftly to steady him. Reflexively, John pushed him away, shouting, ‘Don’t!’

Sherlock fell back, stunned.

‘Sorry, just— Just don’t.’

Unable to face him just then, John stumbled over to Ella. His vision darkened momentarily, and when it cleared again he was on his knees at her side.

‘Your finger, John,’ said Lestrade. Then, to Sherlock, ‘The tissues.’

With his unwounded, non-dominant hand, John checked her pulse. Behind him, he could practically feel Lestrade and Sherlock exchanging worried looks. But it was fine. He was fine. Nothing had happened.

‘What did she want, John?’ Sherlock ventured, passing him a tissue.

‘I told you. She wanted you. She got me instead.’ He knew it wasn’t an answer. Not a useful one. But he was upset. He couldn’t think straight. Her hands were still on his skin, and he wanted to tear it off to rid himself of the feel of her. He balled his fist around the tissue, what little good it did, and with his other hand lightly patted Ella’s cheek. ‘Come on, Ella, wake up.’

‘She needs an ambulance, John,’ said Lestrade. ‘I’m calling it in.’

‘No!’ He twisted sharply to Lestrade. ‘No, she’ll be okay. She’ll come out of it on her own. Greg, lift her feet. Keep the blood flowing to her brain. Where’s Naomi?’

‘On the ground. Unconscious, just the same. Look, you’ve had a bit of a shock, you’re not thinking clearly. They need help.’ He pulled out his phone. Instinctively, John snatched it out of his hand and tossed it clear across the room, where it clattered against the wall before hitting the rug.

‘John!’

But John was backing away, holding a hand out in front of him to keep him at a distance. ‘No police. No police, I just . . . No, no, they can’t be here.’ There was a rushing sound in his head, and nothing in the room would stay in focus. He turned in circles, looking for something that might serve as an anchor, but everything was sliding across the floor. He was sliding. ‘Don’t bring them here, send them to Sherlock, make sure he’s safe. She’s back, and he’s in danger.’

‘John, I’m here.’

Startled by the voice, John turned, and his eyes fell upon Ella on the floor. ‘Is she dead? She wasn’t supposed to die! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. He promised he’d go after my friends and loved ones. He promised, and I knew it, I knew it all along, so it’s my f—!’

He jumped and whirled. Was that whistling at the door?

There was an awful silence in the room, and the fluorescent lights shivered overhead. John looked down at his blood-smeared hands, cut by wires.
‘Is he—?’

‘Intrusive memories. He’s not slept in two days.’

‘What do we—?’

‘Stand back, don’t say anything. I’ve got this.’

There were voices, familiar voices, but they sounded so far away, like they were in another room, like there was a steel door between them, like they were phantoms merely replicating the voices of men he had once known. He needed to get out of the basement. No, that wasn’t right. He had got out. He remembered now. But when? How? Had he walked out? No, that wasn’t it. He couldn’t walk anymore, not with his feet all cut up. John looked down at his feet. No shoes, one sock, the other bare. How—?

Someone stepped into his field of vision, several paces away. Startled, he fell back a couple of steps and hid his face with his bloody hands.

‘John, it’s me, Sherlock. Look at me, please.’

Sherlock? Was it a trick? Slowly, he lowered his hands and lifted his head. There stood Sherlock. Not a memory, not an apparition. Flesh and blood. And John remembered the freezer, and in the same instant the cupboard behind the louvre doors, and he realised, as the fog began to lift from his mind, that here again stood his friend, just as ready as he ever was, to throw him a lifeline and drag him from the sea.

‘Jesus,’ he moaned into his hands.

Sherlock stepped closer. He placed a hand on John’s shoulder, and when John didn’t push him away this time, Sherlock pulled him in, and suddenly both arms encircled him. ‘It’s okay,’ Sherlock breathed. ‘She’s gone. We’re getting out of here, okay?’

John shook his head against Sherlock’s chest. ‘Ella.’

‘Lestrade’s taking care of her.’

Lestrade? He opened his eyes and peered over Sherlock’s shoulder to where Greg Lestrade stood as witness to this moment, looking half worried, half terrified. John felt the heat of embarrassment rush to his cheeks. People weren’t supposed to see him this way, disoriented, out of his own skull, acting like a child with a bogeyman under the bed. With Sherlock it was one thing: he’d been there from the start, he understood, he suffered his own nightmares. With Lestrade, it was mortifying.

‘Any chance I can take your car?’ Sherlock murmured.

‘Yeah, go for it,’ said Lestrade, reaching into his pocket. ‘I’ll get a ride with one of the boys.’

John wanted to push Sherlock away and stand on his own two feet. But he didn’t. He felt like he couldn’t do anything. Then Sherlock let him go and collected the keys from Lestrade, but John, downcast, hadn’t moved, not even to turn himself aside, and when Sherlock asked if he was ready, he couldn’t reply, not even to open his mouth. Next moment, Sherlock took his bloody hand and pulled him toward the door.

‘Where will I find you?’ Lestrade called after them. ‘Mycroft’s?’

‘Baker Street,’ Sherlock answered, and guided John home.
Sherlock pressed down on the gas, but it was no use. Another traffic light red, and the line of cars ahead of his slowed to a crawl, then stopped completely.

‘I’m gonna . . . I’m . . .’

In the passenger seat, John sat curled forward, holding his hands together in his lap while pressing the wound beneath a ring of twisted tissue around his blood-stained finger.

‘I’m gonna throw up,’ he said.

Sherlock hit the button for the window, and cold April air rushed into the car. It wasn’t squeamishness at the sight of his own blood, nor a reaction to the pain. It was the dregs of the panic attack, no longer all-consuming but still in force. That meant it was a matter of the mind, and convincing it the danger had passed. Oxygen would help.

‘You won’t,’ said Sherlock. ‘Just breathe.’

‘I’m breathing, but . . .’ John was shaking his head back and forth, looking fairly green.

‘Do your exercises. Inhale one, two . . .’

‘I’ve been bloody well counting for an hour!’ said John crossly.

‘Almost there, John.’ He swung a hard left on the A5. ‘Last time I ask: home, or A&E?’

‘Home, home.’ He took a deep, shuddering breath and let his head fall back to the headrest, then angled it toward the window. ‘I need to be home.’

The air helped. By the time they reached Baker Street, John’s nausea had passed. Sherlock dropped him off at the door, then drove off to find parking. Another three minutes passed before he jogged to the front of his own front door, and once inside, found Mrs Hudson a few steps up the stairs, hand bracing on the hand rail as she cricked her neck looking up to the first storey.

‘I heard a crash,’ she whispered when he had closed the door behind him.

He held up four fingers to her, their secret sign of warning for John’s state of mind. She frowned, but he smiled to reassure her that he would handle it.

‘If you need me . . .’ she said.

‘I know.’ He squeezed her arm appreciatively, then hurried on up to 221B.

The crash Mrs Hudson had heard from her kitchen had happened directly above her head, in Sherlock’s kitchen. There, he saw that the table was off-centred, a chair overturned, and the medical kit on the floor, its contents scattered across the lino. John was at the sink, the tap running as hard as it would go, and he scrubbed, scrubbed, scrubbed his hands together, a manic energy about him.

Stepping over the spilt plasters, scissors, medicated creams, Sherlock reached John’s side, lifted a tea towel, and twisted the water off. He dropped the towel over the wounded hand, then covered it
‘Needs surgical spirit,’ John said weakly. His eyes were wet, his throat thick. He was seconds away from breaking down altogether. ‘Glue.’ His eyes flicked up to Sherlock’s but couldn’t hold it. They darted, unable to rest on anything for two seconds together. ‘I— It— She— Sher—’

‘Don’t, don’t,’ Sherlock whispered. He put his other hand around the back of John’s neck and quietly drew him in until John’s forehead rested against him. John’s skin jumped, shoulders hunched, and muscles stiffened. It seemed the tension was building in him, and Sherlock braced for the rejection, or a body that might fight or flail. Until that happened, he wouldn’t let go, and maybe not even after. But the mounting energy suddenly drained. John let out a shaky sob, and his whole body sagged against him.

‘Sorry!’ John said, voice pitched, embarrassed he couldn’t maintain composure one second longer. ‘I— I can’t—’

‘Shhh.’ He let go of John’s hand to wrap his arms more securely around his friend. ‘Don’t talk.’

The chill became a tremor, and he was holding back. With that, Sherlock let go all the questions he was holding inside. What had the woman said, her exact words? What threats had she made? Did she mention anything of Moran? Why had she cut him as she had? He let it all go. Now was not the time for an interrogation. There were more important matters at hand. Softly, he stroked the back of John’s head until his breathing evened out and the tremors lessened.

‘Sometimes,’ John said, his voice muffled and strained, ‘it’s like I can’t breathe.’ His head was heavy against Sherlock’s shoulder.

‘Sometimes, it’s like I’m still falling,’ Sherlock said in kind. And sometimes, when he closed his eyes, he still saw himself on that precipice, and John standing below with his hand outstretched, and the distance between them stretched into years—three years, and four months—and a world in between. He pressed him tighter.

‘I thought I saw him,’ said John. ‘I didn’t, but I thought I did. I smelt him. It wasn’t real, but I thought . . .’

‘It’s the exhaustion,’ Sherlock replied. ‘You need to sleep.’ He massaged John’s neck with his fingertips and heard him sigh.

‘I can’t. . . If I do . . .’

He didn’t need to finish. His mind was overworked with fear and had not properly calmed since the cottage; he was already suffering from intrusive images, and if he slept, he would be trapped with them. Sherlock knew this. He also knew John couldn’t persist in waking, or it would get worse.

Sherlock gave the back of John’s neck a gentle squeeze. ‘Come on,’ he said softly. ‘Sofa. First, we’re going to take care of that finger.’ He steered him toward the sitting room as he continued. ‘Then you’re going to lie down, right in this room, in the light, and I’m going to play. It’s been a while since I’ve played.’

Though they had never acknowledged it openly, both knew the effect Sherlock’s violin had on John. It was like a balm, violin strings and heartstrings vibrating at the same frequencies, instruments in harmony. It was a romantic notion, and an unscientific one. More accurately, it was because the same brain structures responding to other euphoric stimuli, like food or sex or drugs,
were also activated when listening to music, and these kinds of stimuli were also influential in therapies for anxiety and depression. But no matter the science, the truth of it remained unaltered: his music helped. Sherlock knew it, and John knew it, and accepted it.

Following John’s instructions, Sherlock cleaned the wound, working with the clinical detachment he had so often observed in his capable friend. It was a single line slicing a circle around the third finger of his left hand, near the knuckle, like a wedding ring. He forestalled his questions for another time as he traced that line with glue, and blew on it to dry the glue faster. Then he wound a length of bandage around the hand to protect it while John slept.

‘Shoes off,’ he said. ‘I’ll grab a pillow.’

They each situated themselves. With the pillow beneath his head, John lay back on the sofa, shoes kicked to the floor and arm covering his eyes. Sherlock opened the case to his new violin, remembering Mycroft, and tuned it to the fork. Then he stepped to the window, and softly, sweetly, began to play.

Within minutes, John rolled to his side, back to the room, and he was fast asleep.

***

John slept for five hours, never moving once, and when he woke, other than some stiff muscles and a throbbing finger, he felt calm, and rested. He didn’t remember dreaming.

At some point, Sherlock must have laid a blanket over him. A sensation of familiarity settled on him like falling snow, like déjà vu, but it melted through him and disappeared, and he couldn’t put his finger on the memory, nor grasp it enough to know it was real. And then it was gone.

He sat up and found Sherlock in his chair, on his phone, the violin resting in an open case on the table, easily at hand, should he need it. But the light in the room had changed; the sun was lower in the sky, and the room was cast in an orange glow. Absorbed as he was, Sherlock made no acknowledgement of his rising, or maybe he was letting John set the pace, the mood. There were things they had to talk about, an accounting to be made, and it was in his hands. He knew it, and Sherlock knew it. And with his mind again his own, he was ready.

But first.

He stood and stretched his back. He needed the toilet, his meds, and some cool water on his face. He stepped around the coffee table, passing by Sherlock’s chair.

**Does he touch you?**

Damn that woman. What did she know about touch? All touch to her was titillation and precursor. Had she herself never known the warm embrace of a friend, the reassurance of a hand grasping your own, the calming presence of another’s body just being there? How the hell could she possibly understand what Sherlock was to him, what there was between them? The woman and her perversions of touch and intimacy, they had no place on Baker Street—they had kicked her out long ago. So, perhaps needing to prove something to himself of what she couldn’t possibly understand, he paused at Sherlock’s elbow and laid a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently, a kind of thank you he didn’t know how to put into words.

Sherlock looked up in surprise.

‘Five minutes, yeah?’ said John, a little embarrassed. He dropped his hand and walked away to the bathroom.
By the time he returned, Sherlock was already setting a mug of tea on the small table beside his armchair while his own steeped beside his laptop.

‘She has Mary’s ring,’ John said without preamble, still standing at the threshold to the sitting room. He was relieved to hear his voice so steady, so normal. A few hours ago, he would not have been able to say those words.

Sherlock’s head came around sharply, his mouth curving into a frown.

He indicated his neck. ‘She was wearing it on a chain, like a necklace. The ring I picked out, what I was going to propose with. She must have got it while . . . ’ He breathed. ‘While I was laid up in hospital.’

‘Is that what this is?’ Sherlock asked, pointing to his wrapped finger. ‘Some sort of wedding ring?’

John nodded once. ‘She wanted to mark me, like Moran did with all his . . . messages. She called it a promise.’

‘What promise?’

John walked into the room. ‘To keep me alive. She said, as long as I’m alive, you won’t kill her. Because if you do, someone will kill me. She’s using me as insurance.’

Sitting in his leather armchair, Sherlock said, ‘Not to be flippant, John, but you and I are already marked men. How is this any sort of new threat?’

‘I suppose,’ John answered, reaching into his back pocket to where, in the bathroom, he had transferred the envelope after examining its contents on his own, before deciding to hand it over, ‘because now she has a plan.’

He stretched out his arm to Sherlock, gravely placing the envelope in his hand. Then he resumed his chair as well.

It was as if John had handed him a grenade and pulled the pin. Sherlock’s jaw was rigid and eyes chary, and it seemed to be only with concerted effort that he didn’t ball it up and cast it into the fireplace. Instead, he calmly turned over the flap and removed a single slip of white paper with a handwritten note. It was torn from a notebook, presumably in Dr Thompson’s office, when Irene had perceived the need to adapt and change her plans. It read:

_Darling Sherlock,_

_Today was supposed to be all about us, but your little doggie got in the way again. No matter. If I can’t go to you, you will come to me, and you will come alone. Last game, my love._

_If you solve it, I make you this promise: Sebastian Moran will never again lay a finger on John Watson. Ever. He will be safe, and free to live out the rest of his days in peace. I’m sure that’s of some importance to you._

_I’ll meet you at the gate to the port, where old things are new._

_All my love,_

_Irene_

Slowly, he lowered the letter to his lap.
‘Don’t you dare,’ John said softly.

Sherlock raised a questioning eyebrow.

‘Don’t you dare even think about meeting her. Not for anything. Not for anyone.’

‘John—’

‘You made me a promise. Good, bad, and worse, do you remember that? Because I sure as hell do. I remind myself every day. So don’t. You. Dare try to save me. Not like this.’

‘I did promise.’ Sherlock fixed him with a hard look. ‘I’ve not forgotten it.’ He glanced down again at the letter. ‘I shouldn’t think of meeting her without you at my side.’

‘I don’t want to play her game, Sherlock. Whatever riddle she’s given you? Whatever puzzle she wants you to solve? Forget it. We’ve wasted too much of our lives playing their damn games.’

‘So do what?’ Sherlock asked, waving a hand over the letter. ‘Just ignore this? Get on with our lives, knowing they’re still out there?’

‘We don’t get distracted. We find Bill. We toss the letter and seeds in the bin.’

‘Seeds?’

‘You see, you just don’t observe,’ John said. Sherlock cracked a smile. ‘Check the envelope again.’

Sherlock looked inside, and when he saw what lay at the bottom crease, he cocked his head in confusion, then spilt the remaining contents into his palm.

‘Lemon seeds, I reckon,’ John said.

‘I observe just fine, thank you,’ Sherlock muttered, but a half smile still pulled on his lips. He brought the seeds to his nose and sniffed. ‘And I think you’ll find, John, that they are oranges. Five dried orange seeds. Interesting.’

John sighed. Not only because Sherlock was already, despite all cautions, engaged in the mystery, but because he, too, wanted to know what Sherlock was thinking. He was hopeless, really. ‘So?’ he asked.

‘If I recall correctly, and I do, orange seeds—pips—are a traditional warning of avenging death, originating in America. Irene had not intended to write that note. She thought it would be I who turned up for the appointment, so there was no need for a note. But she prepared the pips, and meant for me to have them.’

Shaking his head, John said, ‘We know this. Moran wants vengeance for Moriarty. We’re marked men, you said it yourself. This is nothing new!’ He crossed his arms. ‘That’s why we should just forget it, and go after Bill.’

But Sherlock’s mind was not to be dissuaded from its current course. ‘I need you to tell me everything that happened today at Ella’s office. Everything.’

For the next twenty minutes, John related everything he could remember, with the exception of the sexual taunts. That was irrelevant, just a goad. A few times, Sherlock asked a question of clarification. John, however, had improved greatly in his ability to anticipate Sherlock’s questions
and needed very little prompting for the details, and he spared none of them. It was simply easier, he knew, after all this time, to lay all the cards on the table for Sherlock to examine.

He was the storyteller, and having done his part, he sat back and waited for Sherlock to do his.

Sherlock’s fingertips were pressed together, and his eyebrows knitted, in concern for what John had experienced, yes, but also in deep thought, like he was piecing together a puzzle in his mind and needed absolute concentration. For a few minutes’ silence, Sherlock thought and John drank his tea. Then:

‘Brilliant.’

John blinked and his jaw hardened. After all, he’d just finished explaining how the perpetrator of so much of their misery had degraded and terrorised him, all while tormenting him with Mary’s memory. ‘What’s that?’ he asked stiffly.

‘The schism, John.’ He had one foot in the sitting room, one in his mind palace; John could see the wheels still turning behind the slightly unfocused eyes.

‘What schism?’

‘Obvious, isn’t it?’ He cocked his head and said, partly to himself, ‘Is it? Why didn’t I see this until now? Am I seeing it clearly at all? Maybe I’m wrong.’

‘Sherlock,’ John interrupted. ‘To me, please.’

Straightening his head, focusing his eyes, Sherlock returned to the present. ‘You know, of course, that they are divided: Moran and Adler.’

‘I did not.’

‘They stand in opposition, not solidarity.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I heard it from their own mouths. You were there, John, you did, too. Moran declared that he is building a kingdom, and he murdered four men he believed to be defectors. Defecting to whom? One shouldn’t wonder. Who is it that derided Moran by calling him a foot soldier, a man who is called by his own people ‘colonel’, who thinks himself a king? But he’s not an unchallenged inheritor. Irene Adler stands as rival for what Moriarty left behind: a network of criminals that spans the world. We know it now. The kingdom is named.’

‘Named what?’ But then John saw it. He nearly gasped. ‘A.G.R.A.’

‘Just so.’ Sherlock pulled his hands apart and leant forward, fixing him with a schoolmaster’s eye. ‘How did you arrive at it?’

John shrugged. ‘I don’t know, I just . . . Well, A.G.R.A. is a crime network, isn’t it? Blackmailers and money launderers and businesses that clean up after other people’s messes. Those initials led us to Murray’s cottage. That’s where . . .’ He was thinking quickly now, trying to understand how the pieces fit. ‘That’s where Moran—or someone who works for him—held Karim. Where Daz tortured and raped him. But when we saw it, the place was spotless. Because Andre’s cleaned it up. If Andre’s is a member of A.G.R.A., and they’re connected to Moran, well then, they’re connected to Moriarty. That’s the code name for his syndicate. Whatever it really stands for, it’s his. Isn’t it?’
Sherlock smiled. ‘My Boswell is learning.’

John shook his head against the compliment but couldn’t control the blush.

Dropping his hands the armrests, Sherlock’s fingers began to drum. ‘I’m beginning to see the bigger picture, the longer story. Their motives are becoming clearer, and I’m an idiot for not identifying it sooner. I’ve closed one chapter and forgotten it. I’ve divided the book between a live Moriarty and a dead one, and that has been one of my biggest mistakes.’

‘You’re doing that riddle thing again,’ said John.

‘Moriarty knew he was going to die. He was planning for it. He wanted to destroy me, as well, and he had designed a sure-fire way of doing it.’

‘Yes, I remember.’

But to his own surprise, he felt no ire. God, he loved this. Sitting across from Sherlock, listening to his rapid-fire deductions and elucidations. It was precisely what he needed right now—brainwork, to override the emotional misfiring circuits. He thought he understood his friend a little better each day.

Sherlock’s eyes all but twinkled, like he knew. ‘Again, my apologies. But what was Moriarty going to leave behind once he was dead? His network. His masterpiece. What would happen to it? Did he think it would crumble? Would he allow it? His *masterpiece*, John. If it was allowed to erode without a head to maintain it, then the law would reign in its stead. That’s not Moriarty’s style. Chaos—*that* is what delighted him. And how can he ensure chaos from beyond the grave? Easy. Make his people vie for the throne.’

In his mind’s eye, John saw Sherlock once again standing atop St Bart’s Hospital, like he had so often whenever he closed his eyes. For weeks, months, it had been only a visage of tragedy. Now, he was seeing the battle. Sherlock was the order to Moriarty’s chaos, the sanity to his madness, the only thing that could set right all the many wrongs the genius madman had committed against the people of London, and beyond. It was no wonder he had plotted for Sherlock to fall.

‘The question, then,’ Sherlock continued. ‘How to determine a new king?’

John nodded slowly. ‘And how to let them all recognise the winner?’

‘Ah, but John, *you* know how. He told you, too.’

‘Come again?’

‘He told everyone. In the Tower of London, when he stole the Crown Jewels, just to prove he could.’

With a start, John recited the vindictive, written on glass before being smashed into thousands of crystalline shards: ‘*Get Sherlock.*’

‘Just so.’

‘But . . . that was for the code. The code that didn’t exist. It was a ruse, a red herring.’

‘A misdirection,’ Sherlock corrected, ‘a misinterpretation, my mistake. He told me, on the roof: *Last one to Sherlock is a sissy.* That’s the game, John! The first person to “get” me, kill me, inherits A.G.R.A. and becomes the new Moriarty. But then, the roof. It was Moriarty himself who
got me, or so it seemed. But none of his people knew his plan to off himself. In fact, they believed I had done it. So Moran named himself inheritor, without being legitimised. And for three years he acted as though he were the new Moriarty. He took the reins and began to build up his power. I know, I saw it. I followed the spider’s silk wherever it led, and the network was still strong. Whatever I dismantled, he rebuilt. It was like trying to thaw ice in the Antarctic. The moment I’d step away, everything would just freeze over again. He was effective.

‘What happened, then, when Adler told him I was still alive? Suddenly, his claim to Moriarty’s throne stood in question. All his work, his presumed authority? It didn’t matter. I hadn’t been destroyed after all. You see? It wasn’t just vengeance for his fallen master Moran wanted. It was legitimacy for himself. Because all of the sudden, there was a challenger: the Woman. Moran and Adler may have conspired together to bring me back from the dead, but they are not allies. They both want me destroyed, need me destroyed, just not at the other’s hand, lest the other be recognised for having got me. Now, each is laying claim and recruiting to his or her own side. And what is it they say about a house divided?’

‘It cannot stand,’ John said, breathless.

‘It cannot stand,’ Sherlock reaffirmed. ‘That’s it, John, right there! The schism in Moriarty’s house. We need to exploit it.’

John nodded slowly. He did see it, as Sherlock did, the chink in the armour, the hole in the dam, and the pressure building. What they could do about it, he did not know. But for the first time, he saw the enemy’s exposed belly.

Only one thing was unclear, a hole in Sherlock’s logic.

‘She could have have done it, though,’ said John. ‘That night you found me at the convent. She stopped Moran from shooting you, but she could have done the deed herself and won the game. Why didn’t she?’

Sherlock frowned and said the thing he despised most in the world. ‘I don’t know. There’s something else, something I’m not seeing.’

‘She didn’t try to kill you in Libya, either,’ John pointed out.

Pensive, Sherlock hummed his agreement.

‘Maybe . . . she doesn’t want you dead after all.’

Slowly, Sherlock lifted his eyes. ‘Why wouldn’t she?’

It was true. If Sherlock’s theory were correct, then Irene would need him dead to take the crown. Unless . . .

‘You may have missed it,’ John said sardonically, ‘but she did try to seduce you.’

Sherlock gave a deliberately dismissive shrug. ‘And?’

John returned it, but with an icy stare. ‘Why else? Queen needs a king.’

**TUESDAY, APRIL 28 - MONDAY, MAY 4, 2015**

Later that evening, Lestrade came to Baker Street. Ella Thompson and Naomi Mosaku were recovered, and with no lasting effects from the sodium thiopental, John’s assumption on the drug
having proved accurate.

‘Where are they now?’ Sherlock asked. John was sleeping again, but Sherlock was too keyed up to even sit. He’d been pacing his floor for hours.

‘Safe house. Likely, they’re no longer in danger. From what I gather, holding the women was a stunt to get John to cooperate, nothing more. Clearly, Adler has no qualms with secrecy, not if she let both Naomi and Dr Thompson live. And John, for that matter. All the same, we’re taking no chances.’

Sherlock nodded solemnly. ‘And they’re all right?’

Lestrade let out a long breath. ‘Ms Mosaku is pretty upset, understandably. Doesn’t like the thought of going into hiding, especially because we aren’t letting her boyfriend go along. Dr Thompson? Well. She’s a bollard, that one. As rooted and steady as they come. She wanted to come over tonight and talk with you—talk with you both—but I told her now wasn’t the time.’

‘Thank you.’

‘She also gave a very thorough accounting of what happened.’ Lestrade gave Sherlock a meaningful look. ‘May I see the envelope, please?’

Sherlock pointed to the letter, lying face-up on the desk, and the seeds beside it.

‘What’s this mean?’ Lestrade asked, once he’d finished reading. ‘Gate to the port?’

‘No idea.’

Lestrade thought. Giving the note a little shake, he asked, ‘Is this another of those riddle things, do you reckon? A nursery rhyme?’

Sherlock didn’t know. He didn’t object when Lestrade took the note for evidence, and then the seeds, and he made no comment whatsoever when he went on about alerting his people to Irene Adler’s activities in the city and they were out there even now, looking for her. The police did what they had to do. But they wouldn’t find her. Sherlock suspected Lestrade knew it, too.

Next day, Sherlock and John returned to the penthouse. Mycroft, though spending much of the day asleep, was more lucid when he woke stayed awake longer, enabling more thorough examinations of his state of recovery. He was weak, unable to hold even a spoon well enough to feed himself. His lack of gripping power prompted the initial concern of muscular nerve damage, but as the weakness was apparent in both hands and arms, Dr Nash discounted this possibility. Nerve damage was unlikely to affect both sides of the body in equal measure. More realistically, the weakness was due to the prolonged state of disuse, which had to be recovered. Already this was proving true. After just two days, Mycroft could grip a pen, though they still didn’t trust him with a cup. It would take time, therapy. And he needed more help.

Under the strictest measures of secrecy, Anthea arranged for more medical personnel to come and go—consultants, neurologists, physical therapists, and the like—but Dr Nash was growing concerned that the treatment he could receive in-house was too limited and wanted to move him to a larger care facility. Anthea denied him a long-term move, but she made arrangements for temporary transport to a private hospital to receive MRI scans, sending him under the name William Sherrinford.

The scans revealed no more answers than they had while he was still in a coma. But as the days drew on, the effects of the aconitine became apparent, with or without the brain scans.
‘You don’t need . . . stay . . .’ Mycroft said weakly, shifting tiredly in the bed. One leg bent. A shoulder rolled. His head came off the pillow. Every movement seemed to cost him, and he sank back, exhausted. ‘I’m . . . alive.’

‘More or less,’ said Sherlock. He put a hand around Mycroft’s neck to lift him, then swapped out his flattened pillow with another, freshly fluffed.

‘Where . . . ?’ Mycroft’s eyes searched the room, sluggish. He made a circling motion with his hand. ‘Where’s . . . er . . . little one?’

‘Sorry, what? Dr Saluja?’ Sherlock guessed, thinking he meant the shortest of the medical staff.

‘No no, little . . . erm . . . friend.’

Sherlock wrinkled his nose in confusion. ‘John?’

‘Yes.’

It was true. Mycroft struggled to remember names, of both people and things. He just couldn’t seem to get his words out. Early assessments did not reveal any trouble with his comprehension, and he seemed to follow conversations well enough. But speaking fluidly was another matter.

Dr Barlow, Anthea’s hand-picked speech therapist, ran a battery of tests before she concluded: ‘His speech patterns are characteristic of what’s called anomic aphasia.’

‘Like with stroke victims?’ asked John.

‘Most commonly.’

‘So it’s not a result of the neurotoxins?’ Sherlock asked.

‘Not directly. If there were neurological injury, like with dysarthria, it would most likely manifest in the motor-speech system as well, the muscles that control the articulation of phonemes. That’s not what we’re seeing here. This form of aphasia results from lack of oxygen for a short period, affecting the parietal lobe. Now, the speech you’re hearing from your brother may sound distressing, as though his cognitive abilities have been greatly damaged or that he’s reverted to a child-like state of comprehension or mental capacity. That’s one of the most common fears of family and loved ones. But that’s not what’s going on inside his head. He fully comprehends speech by others, even complex sentence constructions. But when he goes to talk himself, he can’t remember the names of people he’s known his whole life. He searches for basic words and gets frustrated when he can’t find them. I want to stress that this is normal for people with his condition. What is also normal is that most patients undergo spontaneous recovery with time. Therapy helps it along, of course, but I think you’ll begin to see improvement even with minimal exercises.’

‘How long?’

‘I can’t promise. With some patients, it’s a matter of a few short weeks. Others, years. It all depends on the extent of the injuries. I will tell you, many never fully recover. But we’re still in the early stages of assessing the extent of the damage, and I’m quite optimistic, Mr Holmes. Your brother has passed through the worst of it.’

That may have been true, but knowing it didn’t make it easier to cope. Mycroft was aggravated with his circumstance. He wanted to get out of the bed but was not strong enough to stand. He wanted to feed himself but could barely hold a fork to his mouth. And he wanted to speak, but the words just wouldn’t come.
‘Doctors . . . child . . . hard . . . brother . . . er, time, time . . .’

He slapped his hand down on his leg in frustration, though with little force.

‘It’ll come, Mycroft,’ said Sherlock, trying to be patient, which he himself found difficult. The isolated words Mycroft spit mostly seemed meaningless, though sometimes he was able to make sense of them. ‘You think the doctors are treating you like a child?’

‘Yes.’

‘They’re not. They’re treating you like a patient. Which you are.’

‘None . . . hurt . . .’

‘I beg to differ.’

‘Water . . . cat . . . er, cat, er . . .’

‘You want your cup?’

‘Yes.’

Sherlock helped him drink.

‘The doctors . . . doctors, they’re . . . this.’ He slapped the side of his head.

‘Idiots, yes, yes, you’re still the smartest man in the room,’ said Sherlock, smirking at him.

Mycroft glared.

Dr Barlow likened the aphasia to having a word on the tip of the tongue and not being able to find it. As the days passed, Mycroft’s language became more fluid, but he still struggled to find the right words. He would confuse words of similar sounds (like substituting cat for cup) or belonging to the same category (calling his spoon a pen) or making up words altogether (saying mrem-mrem when trying to indicate the IVs and medicine, or so they surmised; they weren’t quite sure with that one). He’d taken to calling Anthea, Ann, presumably shortening it for simplicity. He called Sherlock only brother, and John was called the little one, which John was learning to take in stride. They found humour where they could. John’s favourite substitution was when, during physical therapy (they had begun to work the muscles in his thighs and calves, restoring strength to his legs for walking), he called John’s cane, candy.

John was alone in the room when he woke one morning, reviewing the doctors’ most recent notes and test results. Slowly, he became aware that he was being watched and turned his head to see Mycroft awake, propped up against the pillows where just minutes before he’d been fast asleep.

‘How am I, doc?’ he asked wryly. He could never remember John’s name.

Returning to the charts, John bobbed his head and answered positively, ‘You’ll be back to running the planet again in no time.’

Mycroft snorted, hacked a little to clear the phlegm in his throat, and reached for the plastic mug of water. John set aside the file to help him.

‘You think I’m a . . . a . . .’

‘Pain in the arse?’ John supplied, jokingly.
Mycroft pointed to John’s leg.

‘Oh. Invalid.’

‘Yes.’

‘Cheers. I didn’t realise you’d been playing tactful all these years.’

Ignoring that, like he didn’t hear it or didn’t care, Mycroft turned his eyes to the ceiling and said, ‘My driver is dead.’

John frowned. Maybe he wasn’t the best person to be here right now. There was something uncharacteristically melancholic about Mycroft, a kind of sorrow John had never seen in him, even in those first few days of his waking. For a moment, he considered retreating and finding Sherlock. But retreat felt heartless. He knew how he’d feel about it. He’d been in that bed once himself.

‘Davenport,’ he said, providing the name. ‘I don’t think he suffered.’

‘Driver, yes,’ said Mycroft. ‘He’s dead.’

‘I know.’ He didn’t know what else to say. There were no words that could make it right.

‘When was . . . er . . . with the . . . ?’ He mimed something large and box-like.

‘The funeral?’ John guessed. At Mycroft’s nod, he continued, ‘A week ago, I believe.’

‘He had a wife. Two sons. A little . . . little . . .’

‘Grandchild?’

‘Yes. A girl. Grandgirl.’

‘Granddaughter.’

‘Yes.’ There was a pause. ‘I’ll make sure . . . all of them. Care. Money. All of them.’

‘Like you took care of me?’

Mycroft’s eyebrows rose at the unexpected comment. ‘He told you. My brother.’

‘Lestrade. He said he probably shouldn’t’ve done. But I’m glad he did. I went too long without knowing all you did for me. Back then, though, I wouldn’t have wanted it. I was pretty angry with you, and for that I’m sorry. I’m not angry anymore. Just . . . worried I would never get to say thank you.’

‘Don’t.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know,’ John said, smiling sadly. ‘Sentiment.’

‘I did it for him.’

John nodded without offence. ‘Doesn’t mean I’m not grateful.’

Seeming desperate to change the conversation, Mycroft’s eyes flitted to the door. ‘Is . . . she here? Ann?’

The pain on Mycroft’s face startled him. It seemed unnatural in the man who had so long been the
epitome of stalwart suppression. ‘Anthea? Always. Probably waiting for her briefing. Shall I go get her?’

Mycroft shook his head tiredly. ‘I hoped she would . . . erm . . .’ He searched fruitlessly for the word, flinging his hand toward the door. ‘S-stop.’

John quirked his head. ‘Stop what.’

‘Stop. Stop.’

‘What, you mean *quit*?’

‘Quit. Yes.’

‘Why!’

‘I don’t want . . .’ Mycroft frowned, unable to express his thoughts. He slapped his hands together. ‘I have to . . .’ He slapped his hands again.

‘Sack her?’

‘Yes. She’s been . . .’ He squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his face. ‘Compromised.’ While John gaped, Mycroft fumbled with his words to express his well-ordered thoughts. ‘I’ll give her a . . . good . . . redundancy . . .’ He made another shape with his hands, like a bundle. ‘New identity. New name. She has experience. It will be fine.’

‘All right, listen.’ John stepped closer so Mycroft couldn’t comfortably pretend not to see him. The man might be still be recovering, but he couldn’t let this sort of thinking abide. Though Mycroft was endeavou Ring to be cool and rational in the way he thought and spoke, John sensed what only someone who had spent a lot of time around a Holmes could pick up on: worry and affection and trying to do right by someone by doing exactly the wrong thing. ‘I get it. You’re trying to save her from getting hurt again. Don’t.’

With a put-upon sigh, Mycroft opened his mouth to berate him, but as he couldn’t remember John’s name, he couldn’t get anything out, and John took advantage.

‘So like a Holmes. Intent on saving everyone but yourselves. You know, some of us are actually trying to save you. Don’t take that away from us. It may be the only thing worth it to us in the end.’

‘You love him,’ Mycroft said, a tear in the corner of his eye.

John blinked. ‘Of course—’

‘And he loves you. More than me.’

‘You don’t give him enough credit.’

‘You are the family he should have had. The . . .’ He tapped his own chest, and John understood: *brother*. It seemed strange that he could remember to call Sherlock *brother*, but not remember the word for himself. Softly, he whispered. ‘Should have had. I’ve only . . . ever . . .’ He made a helpless gesture that John didn’t understand.

‘Mycroft—’

‘All my life. All my life.’
John gripped the side of the hospital bed and leant toward him. ‘Sherlock is alive today because of you. You’ve protected him. You did that. Not me. You told me to look after him, remember? And what did I do? I watched him fall.’

‘I told you.’ Mycroft’s eyes flashed, and he looked suddenly panicked. ‘Before. I told you. About . . . them.’

‘Who?’

‘Them, the . . . the’—the word wouldn’t come—‘four. Them.’ He touched the centre of his forehead.

‘I don’t understand. Who is them?’

‘We knew. I knew. I told you. I told you. You need to know. Them.’

***

Sherlock was in the bathroom, dressing after a short but hot shower, when his phone lit up with an unfamiliar number.

‘Hello?’

There was a pause, and Sherlock, who was wary of silence on the other end of a phone, almost hung up. Then: ‘Hiya. This Mr ’olmes, is it?’

He recognised the voice, and his heart picked up the pace, not for fear, but for intrigue. He ran a hand through is wet curls excitedly. ‘Ms Heslehurst, hello.’

‘You said I should call, eh? If and when I ’eard from Bill?’

‘I said exactly that, yes.’

‘Well, I just been on the phone with him, ’aven’t I? So, I’m ringing you up.’

Sherlock resisted the urge to shout, or leap into the air, or crash through the door calling for John. Barely containing himself, he said, ‘And? What did he say to you? Do you know where he is?’

‘Don’t know where ’e is,’’ she said. ‘Only where ’e’s gonna be. See, he wants me to meet him. Tonight. And I said I would do. Promised ’im and everything, lying through my teeth, like, and now I’m calling you.’

‘Where, Anita? Tell me exactly where.’

Two minutes later, Sherlock pushed open Mycroft’s door and all but slid into the room where he found Mycroft and John conversing together, though surely it was a frustrating conversation for each, what with the aphasia. The strain showed on both their faces.

‘John,’’ he said.

John stood, looking concerned at the phone in Sherlock’s hand.

‘The game—’ he began.

But it was Mycroft who finished: ‘Is on.’
A Future, of a Sort

MONDAY, MAY 4, 2015

The detective inspector said it was a gamble, their being home, and was she sure she didn’t want to call ahead? But Ella was sure. She knew John well, and had a pretty good sense of Sherlock: if they knew she wanted to see them, one more time, in their own flat, they would say no. They would be polite and reasonable, but they would say no. John, assuming guilt for what had happened in her office, would argue that it wasn’t safe, and Sherlock would thank her curtly for her concern before insisting that they would manage just fine on her own. He would be wrong. So she intended to help them along in her absence.

It had been challenge enough getting DI Lestrade to agree to bring her from the safe house to Baker Street, let alone without announcing themselves. In the end, though, he must have trusted she had their best interest at heart. He did, too. So they arrived at 221B in the drizzling early afternoon, Ella with carefully prepared, plastic-shrouded manila envelopes tucked under her arm, and Lestrade with constant lip-licking and finger tapping. She suspected he was craving a cigarette.

But he didn’t ring their flat. Instead, he buzzed for the landlady, a cheerful old woman who was surprised but pleased to see Lestrade and embraced him warmly while regarding Ella with a chary eye.

‘This is Dr Ella Thompson,’ said Lestrade, and a light of recognition came over her. She knew the name. ‘She’s just going to pop upstairs to have a word with John and Sherlock. While they’re at it, I was hoping you might enjoy some company? I hate to intrude, but—’

‘Intrude, please, intrude! I’ll put the kettle on. Isn’t it my lucky day?’

John had mentioned Mrs Hudson frequently in their sessions, with affection, and now Ella could see he was not exaggerating about her warmth and intellect. She cottoned on quickly to the situation without needing to ask a single question, and gracefully played her part in keeping Lestrade occupied until they were ready to leave.

‘Be back in a tick,’ he said to Mrs Hudson with a wink. Then he gestured to Ella and led the way up the stairs.

The door stood open, and Lestrade paused only briefly before letting himself in. Ella followed. The sitting room was empty, but they heard footsteps pacing the floor above, and noises from the back of the flat, like drawers opening and shutting. Lestrade told her to wait a moment, then headed into the kitchen and toward the hallway. ‘Sherlock? It’s me,’ he called, a warning that he’d entered the flat uninvited.

Ella was left to wait. She heard the voices in the back of the flat but couldn’t make out their words, only their tone. Sherlock’s dark timbre was unmistakably put out, so she would have that to contend with. She drew in a breath to ready herself, and moved to the centre of the rug so she wouldn’t appear to be hiding. That was important, if she was to get him to listen. But while she steeled herself, she couldn’t help but take in the flat itself. She liked it. It was rare, anymore, that she saw the inside of a patient’s flat. Earlier in her career, she had made more house calls, and she had come to believe that the home said quite a lot about a person. John and Sherlock’s was surprisingly domestic, cosy, not quite what she would expect of two bachelors. It bore the signs of two lives comfortably entangled, a relaxed sort of chaos, order in the clutter that promised to be around for months and years to come. She smiled at the thought. John had recently begun to speak
in future terms, but his living was proof of a mindset already in action. He was as much in the clutter as his friend, and not easily extracted. A good sign.

‘Ella?’

She had been caught up in her own thoughts and intent on the kitchen; she hadn’t heard John descend the stairs from above, then suddenly there he was, dressed in a light jacket and slowly setting an overnight bag down at his feet, just on the inside of the doorway.

And then there was Sherlock, striding through the kitchen looking resolute, Lestrade on his heel. ‘Dr Thompson, I’m sorry you came all this way, but it’s really not a good time.’

John was less dismissive. ‘Are you okay? God, I am so sorry, Ella. I am so sorry.’ He came closer, shaking his head with remorse. ‘I should have known. No one around me is safe, it’s like I’ve been telling you all this time, it’s my fault. Now you understand—’

‘John,’ Ella and Sherlock said together, chiding.

Lestrade cleared his throat. ‘Mrs Hudson and I are having tea and a chat. So I’ll leave you to it, eh? You know how she can talk the ear off an elephant, so please, take your time.’

Without awaiting further protests, he excused himself, leaving the three to stare discomfitingly at one another until at last, Sherlock said, ‘I suppose I should invite you to sit.’ She watched him cast a glance at John, as though expecting objection.

But John waved a hand at the cozy armchair by the fire and dragged a chair from the desk by the window. They three sat, Ella resting the rain-dotted plastic sleeve on her lap while the two men looked at her expectantly. Sherlock, she saw, was bracing, shoulders taut and back straight, still clearly uncomfortable around her, maybe even embarrassed by the things he had allowed himself to say in her office. He wasn’t going to like what she had to say now.

‘Naomi has asked for a letter of recommendation,’ she started.

‘God,’ John groaned, and she knew he was on the verge of apologising once again, so she headed him off.

‘I’ll write her one, of course, once we are safe to return to our homes and she begins looking for other reception work. As for myself, I intend to keep on with my practice, and I hope you will return to me. Both of you.’

‘Paycheck’s a paycheck,’ said Sherlock blithely.

It was John’s turn to chide: ‘Don’t.’ His glare was parental. Then he turned to Ella. ‘I never wanted you to get caught up in this. And don’t tell me there’s no way I could have known they’d target you. They knew about you because Kitty Riley was their informant, and she stalked me, knew I was seeing you. They told me they’d go after people I care about. They have guys who can do it all—hack computers, bug phone, break into locked rooms. So you can’t say it’s not my fault.’

‘I can, and I do,’ said Ella calmly. ‘John, I’ve known about the danger you’ve in since you returned to me. I never doubted the seriousness of that. Though, I will admit, it has become much more real for me now. And I have also gained quite a heightened appreciation for the fear you’ve been living with for so long. Even so, I have an obligation to you, both professionally and as a fellow human being, because I believe I can still help.’

‘I can’t keep seeing you,’ he said regretfully.

‘I can’t keep seeing you,’ he said regretfully.
'Not right now, no,' she agreed. She didn’t know how long she would be kept in the safe house, but the detective inspector had made the vague estimate of ‘until the danger is passed’. It wasn’t a useful measure. ‘But that doesn’t mean I can’t help you both.’

‘Can you crack into the mind of a psychopath and tell me how to dismantle it?’ Sherlock said, a bit snidely, but she took his inquiry as sincere and responded accordingly.

‘My expertise, as you know, is in trauma therapy. It’s what I’ve been studying and practising for seventeen years. But since working with John, I’ve been reading up on psychopathy and personality disorders. Specifically, sadistic personality disorder, and paraphilic coercive disorders.’

‘Because of what I’ve told you of Moran,’ said John.

‘And Darren Hirsch. It was professional interest.’ She had never before been drawn to such disorders, not even in school, when it was a morbid fascination with all her peers. Helping the victim, not understanding the victimiser, was what drove her. But the more she worked with John, the more she knew the foci could not be held at arms’ length from each other. To help John, she needed to understand what he had suffered, and the men who had inflicted it. This was not something she tended to share with her usual patients. But neither John nor Sherlock quite fit the category of the ordinary.

‘The woman,’ she said slowly. ‘Irene, is it?’

‘Irene Adler,’ said Sherlock, a sudden tight edge to his voice he didn’t quite understand.

It was a name Ella had not heard from John. So when the strange woman had strode into her office with her pack of armed men, she was more confused than alarmed. That is, until she said she had come for Sherlock. It was then Ella began to understand the danger. Not long after, when this Irene Adler had learnt that it would be John, not Sherlock, who was on his way, she had referred to him scathingly as ‘Seb’s little plaything’, and the connection was clear. What more Ella knew about her, she picked up during her harassment of John in the chair, a sight she was having trouble scrubbing from her mind. She could still hear him begging not to be tied down, which made her want to weep. This is what it was like, she had thought. I’m seeing it in the flesh.

She turned her eyes to John now. ‘I’m sorry for the things she said to you. And did to you.’ John’s jaw hardened, but she continued. It was important they both acknowledge what had happened in that room. ‘She shouldn’t have touched you like that.’

Sherlock’s head twitched sharply and his eyes narrowed. Oh. John hadn’t told him. Not everything. This was going to be more difficult than she wished.

John cleared his throat gruffly. ‘She didn’t do anything to me. Not really. You heard her—she doesn’t want me at all. She wants him.’ He nodded to Sherlock.

Ella cocked her head in concern. ‘How do you mean?’

They were silent, looking at one another as though each expected the other to concede or refuse on their joint behalf. Sherlock’s eyes were shooting daggers, but John’s were likewise steely, and unrepentant. But something visibly shifted as they continued to hold one another’s stare. Maybe they were making a decision between them. Yes, that seemed true, because after a short stretch, John’s eyes closed as he sighed, and in the same moment, Sherlock said, ‘Fine. Adler says she wants to have me. In some form or other.’

‘Not quite,’ John said tightly.
‘How would you put it, then, John? She means to defeat me. Through sex, presumably.’

‘Call it what it is.’ John was visibly angry now. ‘She wants to force you to have sex with her. That’s rape.’

‘Her reasoning, certainly, is nonsensical.’ Sherlock said, mechanically, like he was less bothered by the act than by the illogic of it. A defence mechanism, Ella thought. ‘But really, it’s quite unsurprising. She will utilise the tools of her trade. She is, after all, a professional dominatrix.’

Ella frowned. ‘I’m afraid I don’t understand. Her interest in you is . . . or was initially . . . sexual or professional?’

‘It was a case,’ Sherlock was quick to correct. Then, just as quickly, he relayed the history: He took the case at the behest of what he called ‘a higher power’; it was 2011, and at their first encounter with the woman, she greeted them entirely in the nude, a tactic, Sherlock believed, to throw him off his game. He spoke of a faked suicide, a series of flirtatious texts, and how he had finally cracked the code into her phone, an action which sent her into exile, which might have very well ended in her execution, had he not intervened. In more clipped terms, he mentioned an unexpected reunion abroad that ended badly for him—though he didn’t elaborate—and ultimately her return to London and her reappearance the night he found John in the convent. All the while, Ella remained silent, fitting the narrative with what she knew of John’s abduction the workings of Sebastian Moran.

‘A dominatrix,’ she said slowly, ‘does not seem to accurately describe this woman.’

‘How do you mean?’ John asked.

‘Well . . .’ She was working off the cuff and with little information, which she did not prefer. It wasn’t like she spent much time studying the world of pro-domme. ‘The recreational world of erotic domination is, at its core, all about consent, and ultimately pleasure. What you are describing entails neither of those things. It’s possible—and I hesitate to say this of a woman I haven’t evaluated in a field I have no real expertise in—that her identity as a dominatrix may be a costume, of sorts, constructed to exaggerate or accentuate how she really sees herself, or who she really wants to be.’

‘And who is that?’ Sherlock asked, cocking an eyebrow.

‘A woman intent on subjugating men. Who fantasises about forcing them into submission, a reversal of traditional roles but taken to extremes. Possibly she has had fantasies along those lines for a very long time, and needed an outlet. She found specialised sex work to feed that need. You see it, sometimes, in women with a history of abuse at the hands of men. But I really shouldn’t speculate about history or motive, not without evidence.’

Sherlock’s lip twitched in a sardonic grin.

‘But the things you describe, Mr Holmes, with respect to her interest in a powerful and ubiquitous crime syndicate that was created by a man, controlled by a man . . . She wishes not to simply usurp the masculine, but to fill that space with the feminine, which is herself. All I’m saying is, it would not surprise me that taking control of it herself has become an obsession. The trouble is, the only thing standing in her way is you.’

‘Yet another man,’ said John.

‘But one she cannot manipulate, like she has manipulated all the others. You don’t desire her as other men do. She is a woman driven by the need to dominate, and not just anyone, but men
especially. Her modus operandi for doing so—according to what you have told me—is through sexual domination. She forces her subjects into submission. That is, she has to eliminate the male threat through removal of their power. A symbolic sort of emasculation.’

‘It may be symbolic,’ said John, ‘but that doesn’t mean it’s not violent. Look at what she did to Mycroft. If that’s not removing a threat, I don’t know what is.’

Sherlock looked pained, but quickly schooled his expression.

Ella nodded. ‘Once the male power is removed, she supplants it with her own.’

‘That’s why she’s been so bold lately,’ John surmised, ‘in the wake of what she did to Mycroft. She’s gaining in confidence.’

Clearing his throat, Sherlock added, ‘Moriarty fell, and she endured. Moriarty, the symbol of the greatest power and threat on the planet, died, and she survived. She believes she’s the new force of power, and she has to remove her competition. Moran, for one.’

‘And you, for another,’ John said glibly.

‘Forgive me if I’m being crude,’ Ella said, ‘but in you, I doubt she sees the same sort of threat. Moran’s power is concentrated in a corrupted masculine conception, with its predilection to dominate and destroy. Your power is... something different. Something she doesn’t understand.’

Eyebrows lowering in suspicion, Sherlock asked, ‘What do you mean?’

‘Excuse the Freudian overtones. But if we substitute the symbol of a phallus when we talk of male power, it may be easier to understand. With Moran, there is an emasculation for her to perform, a phallus to remove, which she replaces with her own female power. But with you, there is no phallus to remove.’

‘Pardon?’ Sherlock looked bemused now, a little insulted.

‘What I mean is, a lack of desire. You do not want her, as other men historically have. Perhaps as Moran himself does, or maybe did once. In you, there is a kind of absence, and she doesn’t know how to fight an absence. So she has to create a sexual being in you, a familiar villain to destroy. If she can get you to feel desire for her, or subjugate yourself to her, she can control you, dominate you, and ultimately destroy you. This is the psychology of one who is a pathological dominatrix. This is not a game to her. It’s life and death, fertility versus sterility, power versus impotence. You, Sherlock, are her largest threat because you do not desire her as other men do. Untouched and untouchable. It is a weapon to use against her.’

‘God,’ John whispered.

‘How?’ Sherlock asked, a note of desperation in his voice.

‘I wish I knew, precisely,’ said Ella. ‘I just hope it is of some benefit, understanding how she thinks. In the end, though, you may just have to rely the two greatest assets already at your disposal: your own brilliant mind’—she gestured with her head—‘and John.’

She could see that they were perplexed, and at last she brought out the two manila envelopes, sliding them out of the plastic. ‘That’s why I’ve come. Because you need help, and I mean to help.’ She passed each man an envelope.

‘What’s this?’ John asked, fingering the top flap, unsure whether he should open it.
‘Your best shot at defeating your many foes. A healthy mind is a powerful tool. For the time being, you can no longer continue with me as your therapist. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t continue with therapy. A common and very effective practice is that of group counselling. You are only two men, but I believe we can apply the same principles.’

‘Wait . . . ’ John began, but Sherlock finished the thought: ‘You want us to therapise each other?’

‘I want you to talk to each other. I’ve told you many times before, John, that in physical therapy you exercise the body. In psychotherapy, you exercise the mind. You talk. You put words to your feelings, you give expression to your struggles, you share with another living person the burden of your own mind. You have both experienced similar traumas, and you need to talk about it. Together. And you need to listen to one another. The things you won’t share, the secrets you each keep, for whatever reason—to protect each other, spare one another, whatever it is—cannot continue.’

‘We talk all the time,’ Sherlock argued.

‘It’s true,’ John said. ‘I’ve never been more honest with him.’

‘But you didn’t tell him everything about your encounter with Ms Adler, did you?’

John shifted uncomfortably. ‘I told him everything of importance—’

‘And you don’t tell John about your dreams,’ she said to Sherlock.

‘They’re dreams,’ Sherlock huffed.

‘Then why are you so afraid to talk about them?’ she countered. ‘Listen. You can’t truly help each other if you don’t completely and utterly trust each other. With everything. With you two, that is what it will take. You are strongest when you’re working together. I’ve seen it for myself. And you will need that strength moving forward.’

Sherlock sighed. ‘So what will it take?’

‘I’ve prepared an envelope for each of you to help guide you in talking to each other about more difficult subject matter. You will each find a stack of cards on which I’ve written questions, one per card. I recommend that you take turns, one card a day, one hour a day.’

‘So,’ said John, for clarity, ‘the questions in my envelope are for Sherlock to answer?’

‘Yes. And his envelope contains questions for you.’

‘The kinds of questions that, normally . . . you would ask me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah, hell,’ he muttered.

‘It will be uncomfortable, to begin with,’ she said. ‘I know that. But I promise you, I promise you, this will help.’ She paused. ‘Will you do it?’

Again, that shared look between them, and it seemed each was waiting for the other to come up with a compelling reason to object. But no, she was wrong—they were coming to a mutual agreement.

‘Okay,’ said John.
‘Fine,’ said Sherlock at the same moment.

‘Thank you.’

At last, she rose to her feet, insisting she could show herself out and collect the detective inspector on her way. But before she left, she shook their hands and wished them well, wondering whether they would return to her having passed through new and unspeakable terrors, or whether they would return as conquerors. Or whether they would return to her at all.

***

They had stayed up all night working—making notes, talking through timelines, imagining a host of scenarios—until, in the wee hours of the morning, Donovan crashed on her own sofa, exhausted. She only had the one sofa, though, and Dryers wasn’t about to lay claim to the bed. He could have gone home, he supposed, but with daylight only ninety minutes away, he saw little point in it. So, he lay on the rug and stretched out on his back—knees bent and pointing to the ceiling, among the notecards and open laptops—and dozed.

But when the sun came up, Donovan did not, and Dryers was getting his second wind. He rose, stretched, yawned, and snagged Donovan’s house keys from the coffee table where she’d tossed them. Then he let himself out the front door, headed for the cafe on the corner.

It was busy; the queue was practically out the door. Still yawning, he double-checked his wallet to make sure he had enough cash for two coffees (they were going to need a jolt to keep going this morning, unless Donovan conceded to taking a break, which he doubted), all the while shuffling forward by minute measurements and glancing around at the other haggard faces of Londoners at the start of another work week.

That’s when Dryers spotted him, at a table in the corner reading a newspaper. He’d grown a beard and looked a little more raggedy than usual, what with the jeans, trainers, and dark-blue hoodie. But there was no mistaking Philip Anderson, former Head of Forensics at New Scotland Yard.

He groaned inwardly when Anderson, perhaps feeling watched, looked up and spotted him, too. There was a moment when he thought they could ignore having seen one another. Then Anderson folded the paper and got to his feet. To leave in shame, presumably, when he suddenly veered off course and came up to Dryers as though a chance happening between friends.

‘Morning,’ said Anderson.

‘Yeah, it is,’ returned Dryers.

‘Oi, no cutting in the queue!’ decried someone behind him.

‘I’m not cutting, I’ve already been through!’ Anderson shouted back, then muttered under his breath, ‘Wanker.’

He dug both hands inside his pockets, looking uncomfortable. He should, thought Dryers. He started this.

‘So,’ said Anderson, casual as all hell, ‘day off, is it?’

‘Eh?’

‘What I mean is, you’re not in uniform.’
He wasn’t about to confess to his suspension. ‘Right. Yeah. It’s my day off.’

‘Things going all right, down there at the Yard?’

‘Like a well-oiled machine,’ Dryers lied. ‘You know, you get the bugs out of the engine, and she runs like a dream.’

Anderson seemed to miss the dig. ‘You, uh . . . You see Sgt Donovan around much? Still assigned to that case?’

_That case. The one you bungled, you mean?_ Dryers willed the queue to move faster. ‘Yup. I see her plenty.’

‘She, uh . . . She ever mention me?’

Dryers felt a flare of irritation. ‘By name? Never. Though she may have alluded to you a couple of times. What was it she said? “Shit piece of unreliable junk”? Hm. Might have been talking about her microwave.’

Anderson’s mouth pinched in offense, making it disappear beneath the unkempt beard.

‘Fuck you, Dryers,’ he said, stabbing a finger at his face. ‘Fff—’ But he seemed to think better of it and spun on his heel to storm away.

Almost instantly, though, he was back. ‘Hang on. What the hell are you doing on this street? You don’t live around here. And what do you know about her microwave, anyway?’

Dryers feigned terrible insult and put a hand to his heart. ‘Just what are you insinuating, sir?’

‘Because if you think she likes the smart-arse, pretty-boy type, you don’t know who you’re dealing with. You don’t. She, she, she . . .’

“You think I’m smart and pretty? Why, thank you.”

_Rebound. That’s what you are._

‘Here’s a question for you, Philip. Does Donovan know you’re stalking her?’

Anderson blanched beneath the beard. ‘Pardon?’ he spluttered histrionically.

‘Her flat is a two-minute walk from here. _Yours_ is in Reading with your mum. Come here every morning hoping to spot her? What might she think of _that_?’

‘I’m not _stalking_ her! I was told I had to . . .’ But Anderson closed his eyes and shook his head. ‘Forget it.’ He started away.

Something of what he said, or stopped himself from saying, resonated in Dryers, something he didn’t understand—his morning brain was too sluggish; damn, he needed that coffee—but which compelled him to act. He left his place in the queue and grabbed Anderson’s sleeve before he could get away. Anderson, thinking he was being attacked, threw his arms up around his face, sending the newspaper flying behind him, and let out a high-pitched yelp of fear.

‘Hey you!’ shouted someone from behind the counter, waving an admonitory hand. ‘None of that in here!’

‘We’ll take it outside then,’ said Dryers, and dragged Anderson out onto the street.
Flailing and whimpering, Anderson wrested himself from Dryer’s grip and stumbled back a few steps. ‘Get your hands off me!’

‘No, no, finish what you were saying. You were told what? You had to what?’

‘Nothing! That is’—his eyes darted guiltily to the sides—‘I have to talk to Sally.’

‘Not happening, mate.’

‘You don’t understand. I can only talk to Sally.’

Dryers stepped forward menacingly. ‘About what? Who sent you?’

‘Sent me?’

‘That’s right. Out with it, Anderson. Someone told you to contact Sally Donovan, right? Her and only her, and tell her something in absolute confidence. Who was it?’

Anderson laughed nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. He really could use a haircut.

‘An old man in a suit, perhaps?’

‘How . . . ?’ Anderson was positively shaking now. ‘How did you know that?’

Fifteen minutes later, Dryers returned to Donovan’s flat carrying two coffees, still piping hot, and something in his pocket.

‘I see you stole my keys,’ Donovan said. She was sitting up now, but hadn’t got much further than the sofa, still rubbing her face and tamping down her hair with both hands. She gratefully accepted the steaming cup from him, and he waited for her to sip appreciatively before sitting beside her, tapping his thumbs against his own paper cup.

‘I ran into someone while I was out,’ he began. ‘A mutual friend.’

Eyeing him with heightened suspicion, perhaps sensing this was important, she set the cup down on the coffee table. He followed suit. ‘Oh?’

‘He had something for you.’ He reached inside his jacket. ‘Along with a message.’

He handed her a small but stiff envelope, padded with bubble wrap. Quite serious now, she opened it up and peered warily inside. Then she turned it upside-down, and a small brass key fell into her palm.

Donovan lifted it close to her eye, examining it. To Dryers, it looked like an ordinary house key.

‘And the message?’ she asked.

Dryers took a deep breath. ‘Work faster.’

***

Lestrade was circling the rubble of what had once been a farmhouse-style cottage. Thames Valley Police had already combed through the ruins and removed four corpses. Victims. It had been murder, investigators were positive. Two had taken bullets between the eyes; two others were shot in the backs of the skulls. Precision shots. But though the gruesome murders had made headlines and shaken the peaceful Wingrave community, the case had not landed on Lestrade’s desk until
one of the constables from the Aylesbury Police Station, cataloguing all the evidence from the
cottage, was transcribing items and descriptions into the computer when he came to a red bowl, the
kind a dog might drink from. He was typing in this description and its measurements when a
debriefing from many months before resurfaced in his mind related to a manhunt and the features
of a London crime. The Moriarty Mayhem. He contacted his detective sergeant at once, and within
the hour, DI Greg Lestrade was on his way to Buckinghamshire.

Was it the same dish? They were still running labs and making comparisons to the photos taken
from the Slash Man’s lair, but Lestrade wasn’t waiting for the confirmation. This had Moran’s
name all over it. And what was more, the deed to the house belonged to a Mr Clement Martin
Bailey. They tried to track down said Mr Bailey, but to no avail. It seemed he did not exist. So they
looked into the sale history, and who had sold the cottage to Mr Bailey? None other than William
Murray. The sale had gone through in December of the previous year.

He needed to take this one back from Donovan. No, he needed Donovan here. They needed to
work this case together.

Digging his phone out of his pocket, he went to make the call. But before he could dial, the phone
lit up with an incoming call from Angela Moss.

Lestrade groaned loudly, earning him looks from some of his team, who were sectioning off a
corner of the back garden. He turned away from them, but debated. If he answered, he knew he’d
spend the rest of the day in a sour mood; if he did not, she would just keep trying, and the
forthcoming conversation would hang over his head like a black cloud until it burst.

He spit on the ground and answered without greeting.

‘I’m working, Angela,’ he said. ‘Make it quick.’

There was a long pause, and he thought maybe she’d hung up on him straight away. Then: ‘Greg?’
He had been expecting the sound of nails on a chalkboard. Instead, her voice was small and
quavering. He almost didn’t recognise it.

‘Yes, I’m here,’ he said, a touch impatiently.

‘Greg, I . . . Look, I know we’ve had our problems. God knows you’re not my favourite person in
the world, and yes, in many ways I hate you—’

‘For the love of God, Angela, why are you calling? I don’t have your money yet.’

‘What I’m saying is . . . You’re not a dangerous person! You’re not, I know you’re not, and, and,
you’re a police officer! You wouldn’t hurt anyone!’

‘What the devil are you on about?’

Another long pause, but his heart was now pounding solidly in his ears. ‘Look, don’t get angry.’

Shit, what had she done? Or rather, what more had she done. She had already done plenty to ignite
his anger.

‘I know you said it wasn’t any of my business,’ she continued, picking up steam, ‘but . . . Fuck, I
wish it had been sex tapes!’

He almost dropped the phone. ‘The box. You opened the box.’
'What did you expect me to do!'

'Angela!'

'I know! I’m sorry, okay? You remember Randall, from the down the street?’ Lestrade’s nostrils flared. He did remember, in fact. She’d had an affair with him, one of the first. Maybe the first. ‘Well, I remembered, he had a blow torch, and I asked him, and . . . But what does it mean! Tell me what it means! Tell me you aren’t going to hurt someone!'

‘Okay, okay, calm down.’ Was that for her benefit, or his own? He was turning in circles, marking the distance to his car, checking the actions of his team, calculating how long it would take to reach her. ‘Angela, are you calm?’

‘I’m calm!’

‘Okay, then listen. Listen,’ he repeated when she tried to interrupt. ‘Close the box. Whatever’s in it, just close the lid, okay? Don’t touch anything else. I’m on my way.’

‘Did you make this? Is this your work?’ Her voice was pitched, nearing hysteria. ‘Tell me what this is or I’m calling the police!’

‘Angela, I promise you, I’ve never even seen the contents of that box, and I don’t know what you’re talking about. But I am on. My. Way. Don’t touch it!’ With that, he hung up the phone and, without a word to his team, made a bee-line for the car.

***

The car was quiet, but for the hum of the motor, the hush of tyres, and the occasional squeak of windscreen wipers as they rolled along at sixty-five miles per hour on the A1, heading north. Though still midday, the skies were dark with late-spring storms. John kept the speed tightly controlled. It wouldn’t do to be pulled over, not with bloodstains in the car and a duffel with two pistols and a pair of handcuffs in the boot. That wouldn’t do at all.

They had been on the road about an hour, and had another three to go, at least. The address was for a motel in a remote village in North Yorkshire, secluded, secretive. John couldn’t help but wonder—and given their history, who could blame him?—whether they were walking into a trap. Maybe Anita Heselhurst was being used as a pawn. Maybe Moran had had a gun to her head when she made the call. John’s fingers twitched on the steering wheel, wishing for a trigger of his own.

‘When did you last have thoughts of suicide?’

His head snapped so quickly around that it was a wonder his hands didn’t follow and run them right off the road.

‘Excuse me?’ he squeaked.

Sherlock indicated the notecard in his hand as his defence. The manila envelope was opened on his lap, and the stack of cards were in his left hand, the offending question in his right.

‘Now?’ John asked, incredulously. ‘We’re going to do this now?’

‘It’s a long drive, John.’

‘And that’s the question you want to kick off with?’
‘I chose it at random from the deck. But I can find another, if you’re going to be stroppy about it.’

Stomach writhing, John flitted through some of the other questions Ella had been likely to include: Why did he believe he was haunted by the dead? and Why did he believe killing Darren Hirsch had turned him into a monster? and When was the last time he had an erection? ‘We are not doing this now.’

Sherlock shrugged but was surly as he said, ‘Suit yourself. We’ll do it tonight during bedtime tea. Maybe Bill can join us.’

Scowling, John retorted, ‘You sure are keen.’

‘We’ve been given homework. Might as well get on with it.’

With a half laugh, he said, ‘Is this what you were like as a student? Throwing yourself at the textbooks like they were trying to escape?’

‘Nonsense, John,’ said Sherlock with a sigh, sliding the cards back inside the envelope and conceding his question was ill-timed. ‘My homework back then wasn’t nearly so difficult to wrangle.’

John smiled without teeth, but he made no reply, and the car fell silent once again. But his conscience was pricked with guilt. He was the one who had insisted on Sherlock participating in therapy to begin with, on the recommendation that he himself had greatly benefited from it. He was also the one responsible for the fact Sherlock could no longer attend sessions. One, that’s all he’d had. What had he and Ella talked about?

The cards would likely provide some clue, but he hadn’t looked at them yet. As soon as Lestrade and Ella had gone, John and Sherlock had grabbed their gear and left London. They hadn’t neglected to bring the envelopes. Not that they had any intention of opening them, or so John had thought. It was to protect them from the wrong eyes, should the wrong people gain access to 221B. The flat had every private security feature known to man, but these days, one couldn’t be too careful. He did wonder what questions he would be asking Sherlock, if he decided to play this game. Yes, he had promised Ella, but she was asking a lot of him. Surely, she knew that. The things he talked about with her? The things she still needed him to talk about? Sherlock didn’t need to hear that.

Then again.

What if it was Sherlock who needed to talk? Maybe he didn’t know how, not unless it was reciprocal. Dammit. John knew what he had to do. It just couldn’t have come at a worse time. They needed to ready themselves for tonight, and whatever might happen. Bringing up past pains hardly seemed like the right precursor.

Fifteen minutes passed in utter quiet, maybe twenty. John licked his lips. Stole a glance. Tightened his hands around the wheel. Then, before he could lose his nerve, he answered the question.

‘The night you found me in the pub.’

Sherlock must have been deep inside his own mind, because he resurfaced slowly. ‘Sorry?’

John’s eyes didn’t leave the road. ‘Your question. That was the last time I . . . had those kinds of thoughts. The last time I took them seriously, in any case.’

‘Oh.’ A long, uncomfortable pause. Then: ‘Ella says I’m not to let you speak in vague terms or
euphemisms.’

John laughed shortly. ‘When did she say that?’

‘There’s a crib sheet about you in the envelope. A list of do’s and don’ts for me to follow when talking to you about the cards. You’ll see when you get to mine.’

‘Oh. Right.’ He sighed out long and deep. Of course, Ella wouldn’t half-arse this, so she wouldn’t let them, either.

‘Go on then,’ Sherlock nudged with the wariness of a bomb defuser who knew he was walking on volatile ground.

John took his foot off the gas; he needed to slow himself down, literally. ‘Kitty Riley showed me the coroner’s report. When I saw . . .’ He cleared his throat, but it didn’t dissolve the lump that was growing there. ‘When I saw that Mary had been pregnant . . . It was like I was watching her die all over again. Suddenly, I couldn’t see the point anymore. You know. Of living. I couldn’t see . . . How do I describe it? It was like blindness. It was like tomorrow just disappeared, like I had reached the end of time. There was no tomorrow. It was just . . . gone.’

Sherlock said nothing. Maybe he didn’t know what to say. Maybe he was giving John time to get it all out. Whatever his reasons, John felt the silence like an oppressive heat, no longer a respite but something to banish. He tried to explain himself.

‘I know it doesn’t make sense,’ he said, ‘feeling such devastation over . . . But that was my . . . my . . .’

‘Your child.’

‘Yeah.’ The road blurred, but John blinked hard, and it cleared again. ‘Or would have been.’ He swallowed hard, but the lump wasn’t going away. ‘It was me. It was us. Mary and me. A promise that a part of us would live on long after we were gone, and we wouldn’t be dead ends in the road. But no. I’m standing in a dead-end street after all, and it’s like . . . I’m trying to mourn for a child that never was. And I don’t know how to do it. It sounds stupid, don’t laugh at me, but I don’t think I’ve ever known how to mourn. I’ve spent months mourning Mary. Or trying to. Isn’t that funny? The way we have to learn how to mourn? Like it should be instinctual, yeah? As easy as grief. But it’s not. I just can’t seem to get it right. I’ve had plenty of practice, but never learnt to do it properly. All I want to do . . . all I can think to do . . . is die myself. It seems easiest. No, not easiest. It seems most fitting. The best way to mourn.’ He sniffed roughly. ‘Anyway.’ He didn’t know if he’d answered the question quite right, but it was the best he could do. ‘That’s how I felt that night. And you needn’t worry. I have my head on straight again.’

John tried to smile, to lighten the mood, but it was a forced twist of the lips at best.

He thought he’d perhaps satisfied the question, and given a little extra, so Sherlock would let him be. There must have been further instructions on his crib sheet, though, because Sherlock kept the wheel turning.

‘What do you mean, tomorrow had disappeared?’

John cricked his neck. What did he mean? ‘We don’t all have the brains of a genius.’

He thought he saw Sherlock frown in his periphery. ‘You think I don’t know what it is to grieve for someone?’
‘No no, what I mean is . . . my brain doesn’t adapt as quickly as yours. It just goes dark.’

‘I still don’t know what you’re implying.’

He thought. How did he explain this? It was more a feeling than a thought. ‘Tell me something.’

‘Okay.’

‘On the roof that day. You thought you would outsmart him, yeah?’

Sherlock shifted a little uncomfortably in his seat, clearly not knowing where this was coming from, or where it was going. ‘I had hoped to.’

‘How long was it, from the second he shot himself to the exact moment you realised you would have to jump to save Mrs Hudson, Lestrade, and me?’

‘I knew it instantly.’

‘And how long before you had formulated a plan to dismantle his network?’

‘Before I left England. It’s why I left England. To keep you all safe, there was no other way.’

‘I know. But you’d just had your whole world stripped away. Home, friends, reputation, all of it. You can’t tell me you didn’t feel the pain of that, Sherlock, because I know you did.’

‘Of course, I did,’ Sherlock said emphatically. ‘It was hell.’

‘Yes. But you kept yourself moving. Maybe it was distraction, or a sense of purpose, or a need to flee, or all those things together. But you had a plan, and you carried forward.’ He shook his head. ‘You saw a future, of a sort. I didn’t. I couldn’t. In an instant, it was just . . . gone.’

He let Sherlock think on that for a moment, and when it seemed he understood, John continued:

‘It wasn’t the first time I’d felt like that. When Mum passed, when I was shot, when you fell, when Harry got herself killed . . . I’ve stared into that void before. I saw it again, when Mary was taken from me. She was going to be my future, but I’ve had to learn how to relegate her to my past. Now, everything ahead looks different to how I thought it would be. Everything. It’s more painful than I can say, looking ahead and not seeing her there. So when Kitty showed me that report, I learnt that there was someone else missing, too. Someone else that should be ahead and no longer is.’

‘Is it particularly painful now?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Mary was eight w—’ Sherlock suddenly stopped talking, catching himself, but John knew exactly what he was about to say.

‘Eight weeks, yeah.’

‘I suppose you’ve done the math, then.’

For the first time since the conversation began, he looked over at Sherlock, who dared to meet his eyes in returned. He looked afraid to be having this conversation, and seeing it, John softened. ‘Our baby would have been born this month. Mid-May.’ He sniffed, then laughed without humour at how pathetic he was, returning his eyes to the road. ‘Can’t help it. I’ve thought about it a lot, since that day. I think, sometimes, son or daughter? What would we have named it? Would we have
moved into a bigger flat? Would I have been a good father? Mary—she would have been a good mother. But it doesn’t matter. Those thoughts mean nothing. Because they’re dead. Both of them. That son of a bitch.’ His voice caught and the road blurred again. He scrubbed fitfully at his face.

‘John—’

‘So that’s what happened.’ John said shortly. ‘I saw the report, and the future again just collapsed into nothing. I felt I had died. Again. But I was still standing, still walking, and tomorrow was gone but the pain just wouldn’t stop. I just wanted it over. I did. I wanted to kill myself.’

Sherlock spoke, softly, in a monotone, like he was choosing his words with great care. ‘Did you have a plan?’

‘Several,’ John admitted. ‘It wasn’t the first time I’d thought about it. You know that.’

‘Yes.’

But John didn’t talk about those plans. He didn’t want to. The thoughts were too dark, and anyway unrealised. It didn’t matter anymore. Maybe Ella would have pushed for the details, but Sherlock didn’t want to give him the chance.

‘My head wasn’t on right. I wasn’t thinking, just walking, when suddenly someone was asking me for money, and suddenly four men had jumped me, and suddenly I was fighting. But I wasn’t fighting, not really. I was already defeated. I don’t know what would have happened to me then, if someone hadn’t put a stop to it, and led me to a pub to clean up.’ He laughed shortly. ‘A pub. For lowlifes, like me. I sat. I ordered a drink. I thought, here’s to the end. I would get pissed, like I hadn’t been pissed in years. And then . . . I’d do it. Walk into traffic. Fall from a bridge. A bit of liquid courage was all I needed. But then, all my plans went to shit.’

‘Why?’ Sherlock asked, but there was a note in his voice that suggested he knew why.

‘Because suddenly—’ His throat felt choked again. He cleared it so he could finish. ‘There you were.’

‘You mean, I interfered.’

‘Like you always do.’ John nodded emphatically, not daring to look over this time. He was already on the verge of losing it entirely. ‘That’s what it took. That’s what it always takes: you, waltzing into my life, when that life is nearly over and—’ He slapped the steering wheel. ‘You saved me,’ said John, simply, truthfully. ‘Just like that. I could see tomorrow.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I didn’t either. How could you carry so much promise, just being there? Being you? When I saw the coroner’s report, my vision narrowed to a pinprick, to the day Mary died, and everything outside of it was black. I forgot everything else that was part of me, including you. But then, there you were. And you weren’t just you. You were everything. You were Baker Street, you were Mrs Hudson, and Lestrade and Molly and all those I cared about, and who cared about me. You were before the fall, and after the fall, and tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow. You were a life I’d lived and still had to live. I forgot you entirely, in those hours when all was dark. I forgot all you meant to me, and my reasons to keep going. I didn’t want to see you, I didn’t want to remember all my reasons.’ He shrugged, sniffed. ‘Didn’t matter in the end. Because you were there. I saw you, and I knew. I would see tomorrow. And hard as it was, I would have to deal with it. It wasn’t a pleasant thought, and I wasn’t okay. But I would live to see tomorrow. I knew it then, and I know it
now.’

They fell again into a sort of embarrassed silence. Ella would have been ready with the next question, or would ask him to think more deeply about an emotion or a thought, or explain something more of what he had said. Sherlock said nothing. He was there to listen, and he did exactly that, perhaps not expecting John to express anything of sentiment. Outside of a charged moment of heated emotions, when things were calm and John didn’t need rescuing, he didn’t know what to say. This would take practice, on both their parts. Knowing he needed guidance, John helped him along.

‘You always save me in the end. Don’t you?’

‘You’re my friend, John,’ said Sherlock softly, as if it were the most obvious answer in the world.

John reached across the seat and gave Sherlock’s arm a quick squeeze to express the same.

‘One day, I’m going to return the favour. You can count on that.’

***

The Goose and Anvil Inn was not visible from the motorway and stood on the edge of the woods under a single street lamp because the other two had burnt out. The skies still misted, and the droplets caught in the street lamp’s glow like swirling dust. Two stories tall, the motel curved in the shape of an L, its outward-facing orange doors in full view of one another like Bentham’s panopticon.

They parked in the shadow of a tree, not quite within the wet car park, not quite without. John killed the engine and pocketed the key, but neither moved to get out of the car. Instead, Sherlock pulled his mobile from a pocket, and John watched him send a text to Anita Heslehurst, announcing their arrival.

:) 

Then, they waited.

Just three minutes later, the shadow of a woman rounded the corner of the motel. Though dark, there was no mistaking her from the woman they had met in Colchester. But instead of her professional slacks and modest blouse, she now wore cigarette trousers and heels, and a denim jacket over a skimpy shirt better suited for a hot summer night, not the chill of a drizzly May evening. She clutched her purse close under one arm and carried her lit phone in the opposite hand as she started warily toward their car, not sure if it was occupied by a stranger.

They pulled open the doors to greet her.

‘Said I were off to see management about fresh towels. Said I saw pubic ’air in one.’ Anita seemed pleased with herself for her quick-thinking lie.

‘He’s here, then?’ Sherlock asked to confirm.

‘Room 22.’ She dug quickly into her purse and produced a room key. Passing it into his outstretched hand, she said, ‘And you’ll get ’im to give me back my money?’

Sherlock ignored the question. ‘There’s a diner down the street, less than half a mile.’ He exchanged the key for five twenty-pound notes. ‘Call a taxi, find another motel.’
‘You gonna rough’em up?’

‘Bill Murray is no longer your concern,’ said Sherlock calmly, but there was a hard edge to his voice that caused her eyes to go wide and John’s jaw to set.

She left, passing through the lamplight and into the night.

Wordlessly, they opened the boot. John unzipped the duffel, and while Sherlock stuffed the cuffs into a pocket of his coat, he checked the ammunition in both pistols and flipped the safeties on and off, testing them. The weight of the weapon reassured him, and without compunction, he slipped the pistol into his pocket, handed Sherlock his own Glock, and slammed closed the boot.

He started toward the motel doors.

‘John.’

He turned back and saw Sherlock’s shadow had made no move to follow.

‘What?’ The pistol tugged down on his jacket, weighing on his shoulders.

‘I just wanted to say: Whatever happens tonight, whatever he has to say to you . . . ’ He stepped closer, but his words faltered.

‘You’ll be there with me,’ finished John. ‘I know.’

‘And tomorrow.’

Soberly, John nodded. ‘Tomorrow,’ he agreed.

They stood together a moment longer in the dark. Then, in unison, without needing to speak a word, they came to a decision. It was time to go.
They stood shoulder to shoulder at the door.

John put a thumb over the peephole. With his right hand, he slowly lifted the pistol from his jacket pocket and rested it on the top of his thigh, ready to engage. Just in case. He tried to breathe evenly, but his breath stuck in his chest, his palms sweated, and his heart raced as though he had run all the way from London. But his mind was clear, alert to every sound and movement, and most of all to Sherlock, who stood close at his side like a bulwark, hands in his pockets, seemingly cool and dispassionate, as if this were just an ordinary case. But they hadn’t had one of those in nearly four years.

He knew Sherlock was waiting for his signal. So he nodded once, sharp and resolute.

Sherlock knocked.

There followed the anticipated silence. If Bill really was on the other side of that door, he was unlikely to answer a knock at the door. The only person who knew he was here (or, rather, should know he was here) had left with a key and so could let herself back in. But if not Anita, then who? Management? Doubtful. And anyone else would be trouble: the police, Moran’s people, his wife, even. He would be a fool if he answered.

Sherlock knocked again, insistent.

They heard, or maybe felt through the paper-thin door, the soft approach on the other side, someone cautiously trying to look through the peephole.

‘Open up, mate,’ said John tersely.

There was a barely discernible click of metal as an invisible hand rested on the door handle on the other side. Then, the slow turn, and the door creaked open by miniscule degrees. John removed his thumb to position the key at the lock, but his grip tightened on the pistol as he angled himself toward the opening to see a single brown eye peering down at him through the crack. He recognised it at once: at last, he stood face to face with Bill Murray.

‘Hello, Bill.’

The eye went wide. There was a gasp. And in the instant before it happened, John knew Bill would slam the door shut. So he launched himself forward, throwing all of his weight into the door.

In the same moment, however, Murray shoved too, and the force of it sent John reeling backward. Sherlock caught his arm at the elbow to steady him.

‘He’ll escape out the back!’ Sherlock shouted. He took off running toward the end of the building to loop it.

But John would not abandon his first pursuit. He rushed the door again, jamming the key into the lock and turning it hard. When he thrust inward again, the slide security lock caught at the ball, giving him only three, maybe four inches of sight into the room, just enough to see Murray throwing open the back sliding door. He shouted in anger, driving his shoulder into the unyielding door. Murray disappeared out the back.
One more time, with all the strength he could muster and a mighty cry, John charged forward. The wooden frame of the door splintered and the door burst inward, bouncing off the back wall. He shot straight through the room and out the back exit, into the dark.

The mist had turned to rain, lashing at his face as he bolted across the clearing toward the treeline, chasing the dark figure of Bill Murray, who was only a short distance ahead. John was moving so fast—one leg labouring harder than the other—that his soles slipped a little on the wet grasses. Somewhere behind him, he heard Sherlock call his name, having just rounded the building, but he paid him no heed. For one wild second, he thought, I’ll just shoot him. He could do it. At Sandhurst, and then later in Afghanistan when it really counted, he had always been an excellent shot: still targets, moving targets, even when he himself was on the move, on foot or by truck, he had always been a deadeye.

Murray disappeared into the trees.

The darkness enveloped John the moment he crossed the treeline, where no light—neither streetlamp nor moon nor starlight—could reach him. But though blinded, his pace didn’t slacken. His shoulder rebounded off the side of a trunk and a branch lashed the side of his face before his expanding pupils made sense of the dark shadows around him, black against black. Here, the ground was firmer, little affected by rain, and he heard Bill lumbering noisily on ahead of him, also disoriented by the density of the forest.

‘Bill!’

His erstwhile friend jumped as if the sound of his name was a gunshot, then changed direction to lose John among the trees.

But John’s was a single-minded pursuit, like a dog after a rabbit he didn’t know what he would do with once caught, except to sink teeth into his prey and never let go. He no longer felt the cold, or the wind, or the rain, or the burning ache in his leg, not until he suddenly broke into a clearing, and the moon poured through the broken clouds, illuminating the way ahead. Murray was a black figure against the moon-white clearing, which sloped down toward a gully. The grass was slicker here, without the cover of trees, but he put on a burst of speed and closed the distance between them.

He was mere feet away when Murray, panting, wheezing, glanced over his shoulder, and, in taking his eyes off the way ahead, he slipped. John pounced, grabbing Murray around the middle, and together they spun around, and together they hit the ground, and slid down the muddy embankment into the gully.

Murray flailed. He kicked out, tried to dislodge John’s grip, tried to fight him. John fought back. He clutched at Bill’s clothes, twisted his limbs, took Murray’s hits and struck him across the head with the butt of the gun.

At last, he flipped Murray onto his back and threw himself on top of him. John squeezed his ribs with his knees, pressed a hand firmly to his throat, and planted the pistol against his forehead. At that, Murray froze.

‘Give me a reason!’ John cried.

Murray grasped John’s arm, trying to dislodge the grip on his throat. His eyes streamed, a mixture of falling rain and tears. ‘John, please!’ he gasped.

‘Give me a reason not to kill you right now!’
‘I didn’t know! I didn’t know!’

‘Didn’t know what?’

‘I’m sorry, John, please. Please!’

John cocked the pistol. ‘You did know, you son of a bitch!’

‘John.’

He refused to pull his eyes away from Murray’s, but he didn’t need to look to know that Sherlock was just over his shoulder, halfway down the slope, coming toward them.

John ignored him. ‘You killed Mary. You killed her!’ The gun shook in his fierce grip.

Murray sobbed. ‘Please!’

‘She didn’t get to beg for her life!’

‘Please!’

‘John, listen to me.’ Again, Sherlock’s voice, floating to him as though from across the sea.

In that moment, he didn’t know if Sherlock was real. He couldn’t see him. But he thought he could see her at the corner of his vision, standing at a distance on the other side of the gully, her slight figure dark with rain, unmoved by any sweep of wind. Watching him, and waiting to see what he would do. ‘Why shouldn’t I do it? Why!’ he screamed.

Murray sobbed. ‘Please! Please! I have wife! I have children!’

John struck him hard across the face with a fist, and Murray’s head rolled into the mud. ‘What about my wife! My children?’

‘John, give me the gun.’ Sherlock’s hand reached out, palm up, beseeching. Across the way, she did the same. John stared at her, bewildered. He dragged his eyes back to the target.

Murray kept his head angled away as John took aim once again at his head. Another sob tore from his throat.

‘You can’t kill him,’ Sherlock continued. ‘We need him.’

‘You know what he did, Sherlock. You know what he is!’

‘I know what he is,’ Sherlock affirmed tensely, his hand still outstretched. ‘But this is not who you are.’

John’s hand shook. He released Murray’s throat to grip the gun more steadily with both hands, but he did not lower the weapon, and he did not relinquish it. ‘Maybe it is.’

‘No, John. I know you. I know you. And if you do this . . .’ Sherlock could no longer maintain its reasoned, dispassionate tone. He was pleading. ‘If you do this, you will never forgive yourself. Never.’

Eyes streaming and throat aflame, John screamed through gritted teeth. Beneath him, Bill’s body quaked with fear and cold as they sank together, slowly, deeper into the mud.
‘Please, John. Give me the gun. We’ll deal with him, I promise. But first—give me the gun.’

His fury was like fire in his belly, spreading toward every limb, unstoppable, as though his body was made of dry tinder. He had done this before—he could do it again. For Mary. Daz had been guilty of her death, too, and John had killed him. And Pete, and Lex, and Stubbins, they were all culpable, they had all deserved to die. And Murray. He had known. Not only known about the abduction: he had helped orchestrate it. He had harboured Moran and his people. He was one of Moran’s people. Murray deserved death, and John wanted to be the one to deliver it. A bullet through the brain, a slashed throat, ten days of torture and starvation and humiliation, and John would watch, and let it happen, and make the cut himself and . . . oh God!

He looked up and saw her cover her face with her hands, afraid.

‘John. This isn’t who you are.’

His head dropped and he began to cry. But he took his finger off the trigger, flipped the gun around, and held it out. A moment later, Sherlock relieved him of it.

Next moment, Sherlock grabbed him under the armpit and pulled him off Murray, who remained supine in the mud, breathing hard and choking on his own sobs. John couldn’t look at him anymore. He turned away, but one step later, his leg gave out. Sherlock, who still gripped him under the arm, steadied him. ‘Stay with me,’ he said in a low voice, directly into his ear.

When his feet were steady under him again, Sherlock slowly released him. Then he revolved, slowly, and lifted his other arm bearing the pistol. He aimed it down at Murray.

‘On your knees,’ he ordered.

‘Oh no,’ said Murray. ‘Oh please no.’

‘You want to live? Don’t talk. Move.’

Whatever pity for the man Sherlock had implied in sparing his life had washed away in the downpour. John looked back over his shoulder, blinking against the rain, which was beginning to fall in droves. Slowly, Murray pushed himself out of the mud and onto his knees facing them, his hands up and fingers spread in supplication.

Two hands on the gun now, voice dark and dangerous, Sherlock said. ‘Hands behind your head. Do it.’

Sherlock shoved a hand inside his pocket and withdrew the silver cuffs. He passed them into John’s hands without a word. John breathed deeply, eyes scanning the clearing. But for the three of them, it was empty. Then, hardening his expression, and his heart, he walked behind Murray, grabbed a wrist, and twisted his arm down his back, clicking the silver bracelets into place.

‘On your feet,’ he said gruffly, though softly, and he hauled Murray upright. Then he looked to Sherlock, waiting for what would happen next.

Sherlock nodded sharply, but the gun remained fixed in space. ‘He’s coming with us.’

***

They returned to the treeline, and paused. Lights flashed in the car park on the other side of the Goose and Anvil. From here, it wasn’t clear how many patrol cars had turned up, but from the erratic flashing, it was certainly more than one. Sherlock wasn’t surprised. He and John hadn’t
exactly been discreet about forcing their way into Murray’s room, guns drawn, shouting to wake the devil. Someone was bound to get scared and call the police.

Murray half-gasped and half-sobbed when he saw them. An emotional wreck, he had little control over himself.

‘You have three choices, Mr Murray,’ Sherlock said in a dark voice. ‘One: scream and let the police know you’ve been taken hostage. Then they’ll take you into custody and we can do this in a little room with a two-way mirror. Two: put up a fight and try to run again and let Moran keep chasing you. Or three: shut up and come quietly with us. Don’t be fooled—we’re the closest thing to a friend you still have in this world. Your call.’

‘I’ll shut up. Don’t . . . don’t turn me in.’

‘Smart man.’

John said nothing. He hadn’t spoken a word since capturing Murray, only stared straight ahead with a deadened expression, though he grasped his prisoner’s arms tightly in both hands as he marched him forward.

‘Keep to the treeline, and follow me.’

They stayed within the shadows, marginally sheltered from the rain. Then, when Sherlock judged it safe, they picked up their feet and jogged toward the motel, pressing themselves flat against the building as they edged around to the side where the car sat idle. There, they waited, and Sherlock rolled his head around the corner to see two officers questioning a woman in her hotel doorway, the one right next to Murray’s gaping door, while she gesticulated wildly. The officers’ backs were to him, and so, with the gun, he signalled that John move Murray to the car. He pulled the keys from his pocket to unlock it.

John softly opened the back door, pushed Murray’s head down, and shoved him into the backseat before crawling in after him. The time to act was now. Sherlock moved swiftly but silently to the driver’s seat. He passed the gun back to John, whom he trusted was no longer a danger to a now compliant and terrified Bill Murray.

He put the key in the ignition and started the engine. But as the headlights announced their location, the woman suddenly started screaming and pointing in their direction. Sherlock checked his rearview mirror, marked the police officers at a distance, and threw the car into reverse.

Murray let out a small scream as Sherlock whipped the car around and threw him into the door. John muttered a tight shut it, and cast Sherlock a reproachful look in the rearview mirror. Sherlock smirked back.

‘There’s only one road for miles, Sherlock,’ John said, having driven it himself. The implication was clear: they wouldn’t get far before the police caught them.

Sherlock pressed his foot down on the accelerator and shifted into a higher gear. ‘Oh John,’ he said mildly, in defiance of the dangerous speed over wet asphalt, ‘what is it I always tell you? You see . . .’

Seeing a shadow in the treeline up ahead, Sherlock killed the headlights, slammed the brakes, and pulled the car into a narrow gap in the trees, which he had spotted on their way in. Not twenty down the dirt-and-gravel road, he killed the engine so the not even the brake lights could be seen. Seconds later, as the flashing lights passed them by on the main road, Sherlock said, with a self-
satisfied sort of smugness, ‘But you don’t observe.’

He twisted around in his seat.

‘From here, we walk.’

***

‘How did you find me?’

Murray sat despondent, no longer weeping. But his head hung low where he sat on a plastic chair they’d found outside, overturned in the rain. They uprighted it and dragged it inside the lonely barn. There, by the light of a portable halogen work light they’d found on a workbench, they sat their hostage, muddy from head to toe and shivering from the wet. But they did not restrain him. They used no ties or chains or wires. The cuffs had been removed, and the pistols put away.

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ said John. He, too, was muddy and cold, but he stood stalwart on two firmly planted feet, arms crossed and chin raised high. ‘You read my blog, you know who my partner is, what he can do.’ He sniffed derisively. ‘You thought you could hide from the world’s greatest detective? Moron.’

Murray didn’t lift his head. ‘What are you going to do with me?’

He had always been a man of some heft, not particularly tall, but average height and stocky build that the army had sculpted into angles and planes, staving off the roundness that was his natural state. The last time John had seen him, away from the battlefield, he had sported a bit of a gut and fuller face. Now, however, there was something sunken about him, a deflated balloon. They were both changed men.

‘It’s not your turn to ask questions,’ said Sherlock softly, leaving the barn door, now secured, to stand by John’s side. His coat was dripping onto his shoes, but he alone was spared the mud. ‘You’re going to tell us everything, everything you know about Sebastian Moran.’

‘I can’t,’ said Murray, squeezing his eyes shut as though he was in pain. ‘He’ll kill me.’

‘Maybe that’s exactly what you deserve,’ John spat.

‘He’ll kill my family.’

‘We’ll protect them,’ said Sherlock. ‘We are your only hope for keeping Fran and the kids safe. And we will. So you will talk to us. Right now.’

The rain fell steadily overhead, striking the wooden shingles in rhythmic patters, and the wind whistled through the gaps in the doorframe.

‘We don’t leave this barn until you do,’ Sherlock promised. ‘First, you will tell us how long you’ve been Moran’s man—’

‘Why?’ John interjected. He felt Sherlock’s gaze shift to him, but he ignored it and stepped menacingly toward Murray, who shrank back. ‘That is what you will answer me first. Why? You were my friend. You saved my life. So tell me. Tell me. Tell me why you’ve come to hate me so much.’

‘John . . .’ Murray said, his voice cracking.
‘That’s Captain Watson to you, you—’ John screwed up his face, trying to keep a tight rein on his anger. It was all he could do to stop himself from drawing his fist back. Instead, he kept it in a tight ball at his side.

‘It’s not what you think,’ said Murray, before adding a fearful, deferential, ‘sir. I didn’t want this, any of this!’

‘You’re well past the point where I give a fuck what you want.’ John stabbed a finger down at the ground. ‘This is where you are now. This is where your actions have led you. And it has cost me everything!’ He stabbed himself in the chest. ‘Why do you hate me? What did I ever do to—?’

‘You killed James Sholto!’ Murray burst, gripping the edges of the chair as though forcing himself to stay seated.

John blanched. He had forcibly dismissed from his mind any insinuation from the mouth of Kitty Riley that Bill Murray’s connection to Sebastian Moran was in any way connected to what had happened to the commanding officer both men had so greatly admired. An email from an anonymous source: Ask Murray about a man named James Sholto. That’s where John’s story starts. But what about Bill’s story?

‘That was your fault, captain. Your fault! That’s where it went wrong, where everything went wrong. You killed Sholto!’

‘I didn’t,’ said John breathlessly, falling back a step.

‘You took one look at him and left him to die! I know, I was there!’

Raising his hand as though in defence, John shook his head emphatically.

‘Is this what it’s all been about, then?’ Sherlock asked. ‘Revenge?’

Murray ignored Sherlock and continued to rail against John. ‘You could have saved him! You didn’t even try!’

‘I did what had to be done!’ John shouted.

‘He was your friend!’

‘You took up with Moran out of revenge?’ Sherlock pressed.

‘No!’ Murray cried. ‘I didn’t take up with him, I never took up with him. He trapped me! You have to understand, he trapped me! And it would never have happened if . . . if Sholto had only lived. If you’d even tried to saved him.’

John was shaking, and it had nothing to do with the cold. ‘There was nothing I could do,’ he said in a tense whisper.

‘You better start making sense real fast,’ said Sherlock, crowding closer, towering over Murray, who shrank back again. But his outburst seemed to have given him spirit.

‘We served under Major Sholto.’ His eyes lifted to John. ‘Both of us. He was a good man.’

‘The best of men,’ John murmured.

‘We all admired him. We all trusted him. Even the crows.’
‘Crows?’ Sherlock echoed.

‘New recruits,’ explained John. Then to Murray: ‘Do you blame him for what happened to those boys?’

‘No,’ Murray said fiercely. Then, to Sherlock, ‘It was standard procedure. Take the crows into battle, let them get their feet wet, let them know what it’s really like out there. Thing is, it’s still a training exercise, you see. They only go out when the risk assessment is low. But that day, something went wrong. Wrong intelligence, I guess. They were ambushed by Afghan infantry. The crows freaked. They stopped following orders and scattered like pigeons.’ He shook his head.

‘Nothing Sholto could do. Even if they’d made it back to base, they would have been reprimanded for ignoring direct commands. But they didn’t make it back. Not one of them. They all died out there, and only Major Sholto survived.’ He sniffed loudly and sighed. ‘There was an investigation. Sholto was found to have acted in accordance with all procedures. No fault. It was a tragedy, but he wasn’t at fault. The thing is . . .’

‘Not everyone believed it,’ John finished. ‘That he was innocent, I mean.’

‘That’s right.’ Murray’s eyes locked onto John’s. ‘There were lots of doubts.’

John slowly uncrossed his arms. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘You know how it was. Captain. You remember. Everybody was looking at each other sideways back then. The rumours about defectors. And saboteurs. Moles. There were whispers. Was Sholto a turn-coat? Did he lead those boys into enemy hands deliberately?’

‘That’s insane.’

‘I knew that. But someone in the regimen was a traitor. Someone was working for the enemy. We all thought it was a foot soldier, one of the troops, didn’t we? But the truth is, no one really knew who they couldn’t trust. Call it hypervigilance, or paranoia, whatever you want. But I think we were all waiting for something to go wrong, for someone to turn against his own and how his true colours. And I . . .’ He lifted his wet eyes to John. ‘I thought it was you, captain. I thought it was you.’

***

They didn’t recognise him, not right away. The field hospital was overcrowded, in chaos. There were more wounded than the space could hold, every bed occupied, and just outside, on blankets on the ground, more casualties of an apparent IED explosion, or was it RPGs, or Molotov cocktails? Details were hazy. Reports contradicted one another. But the aftermath of whatever had happened out there was right in front of them in the form of blood and gore and human suffering.

The man’s face was seared as though by fire; blood caked nearly the whole of his head. As for the rest of him? One hand had been blown clean off, that much was certain. The arm had already been fixed with a tourniquet by a field CMT. The rest of him, no tourniquet could save. He needed a surgeon.

While another nurse began cutting the tattered fatigues from the soldier’s burned, bloody body, Murray reached for the neck, looking for his ID discs. He had to pull the chain through the torn skin of his throat where it had sunk to read the name:

B Neg
40058399
He jolted, his eyes snapping back up to the distorted face. ‘Captain!’ he cried. ‘Captain Watson, you’re needed!’

He had worked under Captain Watson’s command for several months now, and there was no doctor, neither back home in the civilised world nor out here in the pandemonium of war that he trusted more to save a life. It wasn’t just Watson’s outstanding record. He had seen the man work miracles. Men who should have died had received a second chance at life under Captain Watson’s capable hands. Now, another life needed saving.

‘Not now, corporal,’ Watson replied. He was on the other side of the tent, bent over the body of a civilian caught in the crossfire, his arms covered in blood from fingertip to elbow as he pulled a thread through an open cavity, closing a wound to stop internal bleeding.

‘Now, sir! It’s Major Sholto!’

For heart-stopping moment, it appeared the Captain Watson was choosing to ignore him. Then Murray heard him say, ‘Magurn, take over. Keep an eye on his blood pressure.’ Then he turned to another nurse and extended his arms. The nurse pulled off his bloody gloves and changed them out for fresh ones.

Next moment, Watson was there at the head of the table. On the outside, he was calm, like a sea of glass. He leant over Sholto’s head and peeled open his eyes, first one, then the other. ‘James,’ he said softly.

Murray rapidly recited his vital readings and initial assessment for the doctor. It was bad. Sholto’s blood pressure was dropping and he was unconscious, perhaps from shock and lack of oxygen to the brain. They were fitting him with oxygen even now. His clothes had been cut away fully, revealing a concave, bloody chest and exposed ribs.

‘Exsanguination level is critical,’ someone said. Was it one of the nurses? Was it Watson? Had he spoken those words himself? He couldn’t be sure. He felt like he was paralysed, something he hadn’t experienced since those first days in the field, when it had all become real. The first time he saw a kid’s leg blown apart, he had vomited. No one had judged: they’d all done the same, their first time.

‘Prep for laparotomy, doctor?’ Was that him again? Or another medical technician?

It wasn’t just the carnage this time. Blood and gore was something he’d grown numb to. No, it was that his friend was dying, a man who was never supposed to die. More than a friend. He’d been like a mentor, a role model, a father figure. Wait, did he really think that? The comparison had never really crossed his mind before, but he knew he wasn’t the only one to feel that way. Some of the younger soldiers did, especially those who had never known their fathers or had lost them somewhere along the way. Murray supposed he could fit into that category, too, and seeing Sholto now, he was forcibly reminded of the day his own father had died, and the same dread, the same denial of mortality, began to well in him.

He wasn’t the only one who thought so. Other men, especially the young ones, had long admired and respected him, which was why the mere suggestion of his being anything less, let alone a turncoat, were so very unpalatable. Even Watson had once described Sholto as the paradigm of a good man, and what they should all strive to be. Murray envied them, actually. As officers, Sholto had more in common with Watson than he did with men like Murray. They seemed particularly
close. At least he was here to save the major now.

‘He’s B-negative,’ said a nurse. ‘Shall I ready for transfusion?’

‘Priority 4,’ Watson said in a monotone command. ‘Conserve the blood. See that he’s comfortable.’ He stepped back toward the patient he had already turned over to another’s care. Not just a civilian, Murray would later learn. An Afghan teenage boy and son of an enemy soldier.

Murray snapped to attention. ‘Priority 1,’ he said, a spark of defiance pushing back the dark clouds that had narrowed his vision to a pinprick.

Watson revolved slowly, his face stoic but his jawline hard.

‘We should prep for surgery,’ Murray said tightly, then added, ‘Captain.’

‘Supportive care only,’ Watson retorted.

‘He’s going to make it!’

But Watson was unflinching in the face of his impassioned plea. ‘Severe head trauma, severe burns to over fifty percent of his body, crushed chest. He’s dying, and we don’t have the resources or the manpower to sustain him. Priority 4.’

‘That’s bullshit! You can’t do that!’ cried Murray.

‘I am the senior medical authority in this room. I am the only one who can do it. Priority 4, corporal, and that’s an order.’

Having made his command, Watson turned his back, and left James Sholto to die. He didn’t even pay him the respect of one last glance.

***

‘I know he was important to you,’ said John, and Sherlock recognised in his voice a kind of empathetic pain that meant James Sholto had been important to him, too. ‘But there was no saving him. He was dead, Bill. The moment that IED went off, he was dead. It just takes some men longer to leave this world than others.’

‘You knew that for sure, did you?’ Bill challenged him. ‘You spent less than a minute examining him. That’s all. And—’

‘Yes. And I didn’t even need a minute. I knew the second I saw him. Because I had seen it before. A hundred times before! Even if we had had blood to spare, even if we had had the staff, even if we had had every medical tool at our disposal, he was not going to survive. It was obvious. You did your job in trying to save him, and I did mine in letting him go.’

‘And you found that easy, did you?’

‘Never.’

Sherlock started. He felt like his brain had just jarred unpleasantly in his head.

‘It was never easy,’ John continued, voice breaking. ‘Only necessary.’ He winced, as though in pain. ‘You’re looking at me as though I didn’t care that he died. As though every death I witnessed, every man I could not save, didn’t carve another scar into my soul. I may not have saved them in the end. But I cared about every man who died on my table, or in my arms. Men
have died while I held their hearts in my hands. Did my caring about them help save them? No. But damn you, I cared, just the same.’

Sherlock closed his eyes and turned his head away, recalling the first time he had ever been aware that he had disappointed John. He heard that ancient conversation repeated in his mind now, when Sherlock had asked what must have to John seemed such a heartless question. He hadn’t known, then, what John had passed through, the depth of feeling when he talked about *actual human lives*. Quickly, he cast his eyes downward, ashamed of the man he had once been, and for too long.

Murray scrubbed his wet face with a hand. ‘I just wished,’ he said quietly, ‘that you had tried.’

John’s voice was shaking. ‘I don’t need to justify myself. Not to you. I explained my decision in the report. I presented the evidence to the proper authorities and testified at the official inquiry. They accepted my statements as true and my decision as justified.’

‘No, sir,’ Murray said. ‘They didn’t.’

***

*The death of Major Sholto rocked him in a way he didn’t understand. Sholto hadn’t been the first soldier or officer to die under his care, nor even the first friend to perish in the war.*

*It was something else. It was that James Sholto had always seemed untouchable, the way heroes in the movies always fought the good fight and made it to the end. He was a leader, a warrior, a survivor, and so to be killed, not in combat or on a mission, but by something as clumsy and indiscriminate as a roadside bomb, seemed simply insulting to the great man he had been. It was beneath him to die in such a pedestrian manner. It wasn’t right. It wasn’t fair. He had been awarded a Victoria Cross medal, and this was to be his end?*

As far as Bill Murray was concerned, his inglorious end was not just the fault of the IED, but of the doctor who had refused to treat him.

*His doubts began to fester. Camp Bastion was already rife with whispers and dodgy glances, soldiers who half suspected their fellows to be leaking information across enemy lines, or else acting on orders from officers not their own. There had been too many surprise attacks, too much faulty intelligence, too many deaths. Those who had before draped Major Sholto in the pall of suspicion now searched for a new target. Murray’s eyes landed on John Watson.*

*It was an unhappy thought, to be sure. But he couldn’t shake the memory of that day in the medical tent. Now, he recalled every time a man had died under Watson’s care. He made mental lists of the times Watson had gone out into the field and come back alone. He remembered when Colonel Stephens had died, and Lieutenant Patterson, and Lance Corporal Weech, all when Watson was alone with them, out there on the battlefield. And he remembered the story Watson told earlier that summer, when the siege and an explosion just north of Musa Qala had landed him underground beneath a cement building with a lone Taliban soldier, who had been injured in the fall. Watson had treated him—treated him!—and spoke with gratitude about how the enemy soldier had saved him in return. Gratitude! He had regarded the many with sympathy. Maybe more than that.*

*And then, the treacherous thought: Watson was aiding the enemy. How? By taking out some of the very best officers of the British Army, in private and discreetly, and with such justifications as a Priority 4. He was, himself, an enemy of the Crown.*

***
Greatly burdened by the thought, Murray confessed it all at the inquiry. The commanding officers said nothing, just let him talk, but as the inquisition drew to a close and he expected dismissal, Brigadier William Keen instead dismissed the stenographer.

‘Is it your opinion, lance corporal,’ Keen asked, ‘that Watson is sympathetic with the enemy or its cause?’

‘He does seem to be helping their cause,’ Murray murmured unhappily.

‘Do you consider his actions to be of his own volition, or do you believe he is following orders from across enemy lines?’

‘I couldn’t say, sir.’

Brigadier Keen rested his interlaced fingers on the top of the table, leaning into it. ‘Answer truthfully: is Watson dangerous?’

‘I . . .’ Murray swallowed hard, fighting to get the words out, despising himself as he spoke them, ‘I believe so, sir.’

***

It was the middle of the night. Murray rose from his bunk, wiggled his bare feet into his boots, and tromped lightly to the lavs for a piss.

While he stood at the makeshift ‘desert rose’ urinal, someone came up on his left at the adjacent urinal, but made no move to use it.

‘Nice night,’ the man said, and Murray recognised the voice as belonging to Brigadier Keen, whom he’d not had any dealings with since the inquiry, some weeks before.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Murray, trying to piss faster.

‘Your official statement at the inquiry into Sholto’s death,’ said Keen, nose pointing straight ahead, as if he were at an outlook and not facing a wall of plywood. ‘Do you stand by it?’

Murray’s heart began to race. Why was he being asked this? And right now? ‘I do, sir,’ he said, not wanting to seem capricious.

‘Good.’ Keen waited for Murray to finish. Then he turned to face him directly. ‘Tomorrow, 800 hours sharp. I’m sending Watson to Ghorak on a civilian medical assessment. You’re going with him. You’re going to keep an eye on him.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Don’t leave him for a second.’

‘Understood, sir.’

‘Keep him on the road.’

‘I will, sir.’

‘That’s all.’

***
From Camp Bastion, the road to Ghorak was long and dusty. Murray and Watson travelled in the second of three Land Rovers. Only an hour out of camp, the sun was already beating down. This time of year, isn’t have been so warm, but a heat wave was moving through, promising high temps for another week at least. They weren’t moving quickly to begin with, what with the shoddy condition of the road itself, and the atmosphere was leisurely. Watson was chatting with the driver, and the men behind were laughing at something or other. Then the Rover slowed, and stopped.

‘Ah shit, here we go again,’ said the driver.

Murray ducked his head to look out the windscreen and saw a human blockade: about a dozen local men stood in the road, only two of them armed, with their lorries behind them. They would want a bribe for passage. For a while, some soldiers had just paid up to appease them. It was never much. But the army disapproved and had put a stop to it, negotiating with local leaders to keep their people off the roads so the Brits and Americans could come and go without a hassle. But sometimes this kind of thing still happened.

The threat level had been assessed as low before departing camp, so they opened their doors and alighted from the Rovers, readying for the argument. Murray and Watson left, too, but hung back to let the other soldiers do their jobs.

Murray would never be able to say which happened first: the scream or the gunfire. But in an instant, the situation had turned. Suddenly, one of their own was laid out on the ground, and the locals were running back to their lorries, and someone was shouting, Take cover! Take cover! There was an explosion on the side of the road, puffs of dust rose from the hills where hidden assailants fired at them, and bullets pinged off the side of the Rover near where Murray stood. He jumped, and turned to run to the other side for cover, only to see that they were firing from the opposite hills, too. It was an ambush.

Wildly, he looked around for Watson and saw him sprinting toward the fallen soldier.

‘Watson!’ he cried.

Watson was on his knees, turning the soldier onto his back.

‘Watson!’

It was then Murray realised: it was a setup. The intelligence they had been given was wrong, and Keen knew it. He knew there would be an ambush. Was it his own design? Or was he merely taking advantage of enemy presence? Either way, the outcome was exactly what was desired. They were trying to neutralise an internal threat. They meant to take Watson out. And, it seemed, Murray was to be unavoidable collateral damage.

Eyes riveted on a kneeling Watson, Murray cried out to him again. Watson looked up, their eyes met, and then it happened. A spout of blood burst from the front of his shirt, and Watson went down.

Next moment, Murray was running. He became deaf to everything, and his vision had narrowed to a pinprick. Through gunfire and dust-smoke, he reached Watson and seized him under the arms. He hauled the dead weight backward, Watson’s heels dragging through the sand-swept roads. Murray was screaming, shouting, crying, he didn’t know. The door to the back of a Rover opened, and hands reached out to grab Watson, then him. He fell on top of Watson just as the doors slammed closed. The Rover jolted forward and peeled away.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ he murmured into Watson’s ear, but the man wasn’t moving and his eyes
were sealed. Dead, he thought. Just like they wanted him. ‘I’m sorry.’

***

He had taken a single bullet to the left shoulder. Pain and blood loss had sent him into shock. But he survived.

While Watson languished in the infirmary and papers were drawn up for his discharge back to England, Bill Murray received commendation. There was talk that he might even be awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallantry in the presence of the enemy. The mere suggestion of it made him feel ill. Major Sholto had been awarded the Victoria Cross, and rightfully so. They didn’t make heroes of men who had first colluded to murder a fellow soldier, only later to save them.

He stayed away for about a week, until he heard that Watson would be shipping out soon and had been asking after him. Murray didn’t think he could face him. Did he know? Had he figured it out? But when he came to Watson’s bedside, where the man lay with his chest wrapped in bandages and IVs still hooked to his arms, he received only gratitude.

‘You saved my life, Bill.’

Murray made no reply, just smiled his stupid smile, forcing himself to look Watson in the eye.

‘I promise, I won’t forget it.’

Not long after, he was gone. Murray felt left alone in a war zone.

***

He saw Brigadier Keen only once more, from across the refectory. They locked eyes for only a second, but it was all Murray needed to know he was in danger. Keen had sent him to kill and be killed, and he had failed in both respects.

Faking DVT was easy. He complained of pain in his right calf, tenderness when walking, sitting, or even lying down. He faked a cough, a headache, shortness of breath. He even set his leg under a heat lamp just before it was examined so his skin was warm. What’s more, he knew just which of the doctors to complain to.

‘I think it might be DVT,’ he said, with fabricated concern. When he received no reply, he slowly lifted his gaze and saw the doctor studying him carefully.

‘Could be serious,’ the doctor said at last.

‘Yeah.’ He held his breath, not daring to hope.

Next day, his discharge came through. The reason cited: medical complications, owing to deep-vein thrombosis. Recommended treatment: blood thinners, specialist care.

The war hero was going home.
John stared at Murray, disbelieving. All these years, he had believed what he had been told about the attack on the road: bad intelligence, an unpredictable ambush, the nature of war. He’d never doubted it, had never had any reason to. But if what Murray was saying was true, then his own people had wanted him dead. Why? Because of Sholto? Because of Karim? He was reeling. Somehow, his failures had tainted him as a potential traitor. And traitors needed to be dealt with. But despite their suspicions, they had no proof. Just the word of a nurse. That was all.

‘They wanted me dead,’ he said in numb horror.

He rocked back on a heel and covered his mouth. For a second, a wave of heat passed through him, settling in his stomach, and he thought he might be sick. They had hated him, hated him, enough to orchestrate his demise. Men he had trusted, respected, honoured as good men, just men. They had sent him off on a fool’s errand, knowing he would never reach Ghorak. They had lied to him. Had everything about his service been a lie? The men he had served under and commanded, had they all, each and every one of them, smiled to his face while plotting behind his back?

‘You’re an idiot,’ said Sherlock, stepping closer to Bill Murray, who shrank down in his chair, ‘if you think, even now, after all this time, that John was a conspirator.’

Murray rushed to deny it. ‘I was wrong! I know it now. I knew it then. Just not until . . .’

‘Until it was too late.’ Sherlock flung a disgusted hand in his face. ‘A sheep has more advanced critical thinking processes than you.’

‘I didn’t think they would do what they did, I swear to God,’ he protested. ‘I only meant to do right, and be honest. It’s all I’ve ever—’

Sherlock gave a great ha! ‘And that’s how you ended up Moran’s lackey, is it?’

‘No! That’s not—!’ He gave a stuttering sigh. ‘Not how it happened.’

‘Out with it, then. Tell us just how you accidentally became embroiled with a murderous sadist.’

Murray covered his face with his hands, trying to compose himself. ‘When I came back from Afghanistan, end of 2009, I thought I could leave behind everything that had happened, and the person I had been. It was a chance to start my life fresh, with Fran. But it was true what they said. You can take the man out of the war, but he’ll carry it with him even so. For some men, it’s the horror of what they’ve seen. For others, the torment of what they’ve done.’

***

He hadn’t been to St Anthony’s since his dad’s funeral service. Even then, however, he couldn’t bring himself to pray. Not unless it counted when he screamed at the heavens, demanding to know why his father had to die. But it wasn’t like anyone answered. Just as well. If an all-powerful God saw fit to take a thoroughly decent human being at such a time of life because of something as stupid as choking on grape while alone in his own home, then he wasn’t the kind of God that Bill Murray wanted anything to do with.

He swore he’d never return. But he’d not been on British soil even twelve hours before his feet took him back to the old wooden door, as if they had a will of their own, or were commanded by some vengeful spirit that would see him answer for his sins.
Perched on the badly worn kneeler, he touched his forehead and breast, one shoulder then the other. It was action as natural as breathing, almost a relief to a body that had so long been holding its breath.

‘Bless me, father,’ he said quietly, unable to control the tremor in his voice, ‘for I have sinned. It’s been four years since my last Confession.’

‘You are most welcome back, my child.’

He could make out the silhouette of the priest on the other side of the screen with some clarity, if he had had the courage to look for long. He did not.

‘May God the Father of All Mercies help you make good Confession,’ said the priest, when Murray’s silence endured and it became evident he was in need of prompting. ‘Your Confession is sacred to the Lord, and safe with me.’

Murray wiped the sweat from his palms to his knees. ‘I, uh . . . I only recently came home. From Afghanistan. I was a combat medical technician.’

‘Thank you for your service.’

‘Don’t thank me, please don’t thank me. I wasn’t supposed to come home. Not now. Not like this.’

The priest tried to pre-empt his guilt with consolation. ‘Many soldiers, when they return home, are . . . haunted by the things they have seen, and done. You need not suffer it alone. There are many support groups, right here in Edgware, you’ll be happy to know—’

‘You don’t understand,’ he interrupted. ‘I . . . did something. Something bad.’ Murray whispered now, unwilling to hear his own voice speak the dreadful words. ‘And because of what I did, a friend got hurt. He nearly died.’

The priest waited patiently for the story. After a few false starts, Murray recalled that day on the road, a day that now felt like it belonged to another man’s life. He didn’t mention the secret plot. That confession was too much. Instead, he spoke weakly of how he knew something was wrong and didn’t act fast enough. But he could not speak words of conspiracy and name himself a traitor, not in the eyes of God.

‘God will absolve you of your sins,’ said the priest once he was finished. ‘But if you feel you have done wrong by this man, make peace with yourself by making peace with him. Go and serve and love him, and your soul will rest.’

Then they prayed together:

‘Oh God, I am sorry for having offended Thee. I detest all of my sins because of Thy just punishments. I resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more. Amen.’

***

All he had was an email address. It took him three days to work up the courage to write, and three drafts to say what he wanted to say, which in the end boiled down to little more than a dozen short words:

You’ll never believe it, but I’m back in England! How are you?

He held his breath and hit send. Ten seconds later, he got a reply:
It was piercing relief. He had tried, and no one could fault him for trying.

But the thought wouldn’t leave him: Watson needed to know he was back, and Murray needed to know his former captain was all right. Not knowing kept him up at night. It haunted him during the day. Fran noticed something was off, and when she asked, he just smiled to reassure her. One night, they tried to make love, but he was too preoccupied to perform. In the morning, thinking him in need of support she couldn’t give, she suggested he ‘see someone’.

‘Let’s get married,’ he said in response, and he hated himself in that moment, because he said it not out of love or desire, but to shut her up about sending him to some sigmund freud. Her eyes went wide, and she started to cry. For a moment, he thought her upset, but then she laughed, threw her arms around his neck, and said yes through her tears.

They planned to marry straight away, before the end of the year. They had waited long enough, and what was the point in a fancy do, when for less than fifty pounds they could go down to the local registrar’s office and make it official in under an hour? She could invite a couple of her closest friends, and he’d grab a mate. An old army mate, as it turned out, bloke named Sam Jefferies from Wokingham. He hadn’t seen Jefferies in over a year, and they weren’t especially close, but he needed somebody, anybody, and Jefferies fit the bill.

The ceremony was short, and the celebrations entailed little more than pub hopping and a nice-ish hotel in North London. But the weekend passed, and they returned to Edgware, husband and wife, but little else had changed. There was work to do and bills to pay, and despite it all, in the end, it hadn’t been enough—he needed to find John Watson.

***

For days, internet searches brought up absolutely nothing. Then one night in mid-December, he found it:

johnwatsonblog.co.uk

He clicked. It was just what it claimed to be, a blog, and it had been created just the day before. There wasn’t a whole lot going on with it. Two posts, the first, evidently, a test post titled ‘Nothing’. The second, posted just that morning, was called ‘Pointless’, and contained four pathetic words: Nothing happens to me.

The ever-present guilt roiled in Murray’s stomach. He knew Watson had loved his work, and he was damn good at it. Being sent home, a wounded soldier, had obviously been devastating. Before he could lose his nerve, Murray clicked the comment button and typed: Hi John. I tried emailing you but it bounced back. how are things? I’m in London t the end of the month. Do you fancy meeting up?

He didn’t even proofread it for its errors, just hit Post. Then he let out a great breath. It was done. It had sent. It was in Watson’s hands now.

It wasn’t until after the New Year that he heard anything at all: an email from a different account to the one he’d sent his own letter to. It read:

Hey Bill, sorry for not responding. Now’s not a great time, but maybe sometime soon we can meet up. I owe you a drink. Glad to hear you’re home safe. John.

It turned out to be more than a courtesy email. A couple of weeks later, Watson rang him up. He’d
finally got a phone, he said, a gift from his sister. They talked only briefly. Watson sounded tired, like he had just woken up, or maybe never went to sleep.

They met up at a pub in North London. Watson was already there, waiting for him, and apparently had been for a while. One glass stood on the table, drained, and the one in his hand was halfway gone. Leaning against the table was an aluminium cane.

He tried to keep his eyes off the shoulder, wondering how bad the damage was. And he didn’t understand the cane at all, but was too afraid to ask. ‘Looking good there, mate,’ Murray lied.

He lied all night. He told Watson about the DVT, about being on blood thinners, about being sorry to have left the Army prematurely, about his excitement to marry. He thought he was commiserating, but Watson wasn’t keen to talk about his own misfortunes, and neither even mentioned that day on the road.

If he had been hoping to provide a morale boost to his former captain, he knew by the end of the night he had failed. Watson was clearly in a bad way. He seemed lonesome and depressed, every smile forced to his face and cut short like it cost him something to wear. To Murray’s alarm, he mentioned something about serial suicides in the news. Murray hadn’t been following the news, but that was beside the point. Was Watson thinking of . . . doing something? Something drastic? Had Murray’s agreement to conspire against him doomed him in the end after all, despite the foiled plot?

He tried to distract Watson from dangerous thinking and asked after his sister, but apparently it wasn’t the best move. Watson had seen Harry only once since coming home, only to learn she had split with her long-term partner and was more interested in mourning the relationship and drinking herself stupid than showing any concern over her brother’s near-death experience and crippled state. He had also started seeing someone, a therapist, but he didn’t think it worth his time and was looking for a reason not to go back. If his sister couldn’t help him, if his therapist couldn’t help him, what chance did Murray have? What business did he have even trying, given that he was responsible for Watson’s having ended up in that state to begin with?

It was coming on late; the night was over. Murray rose to standing, and when he saw Watson struggling to get his feet under him, he moved to help, but was met with a stolid rebuff. ‘I got this,’ Watson said, and planted the cane, pushing himself upright.

‘Maybe we can do this again sometime, eh, Watson?’ he asked.

‘John,’ came the reply. ‘I’m not a captain anymore. I’m not anything.’

He never did answer the question.

***

To Murray’s surprise, John updated his blog that very night. It wasn’t long. He mentioned the suicides again. He mentioned their evening together. He still sounded depressed. Keen to keep the mood light, Murray commented, telling him to come meet the new wife, teasing him about past birds, as if nothing had changed and John was the same as he ever was. He received no reply.

But next day, a new post. Something about it was . . . different. Murray couldn’t quantify it. He’d never been one for textual analysis. But it was different in a good way. John had bumped into another friend, one who had apparently been more helpful than Murray had been by introducing him to a potential flatmate. Murray hadn’t even thought to help him find better housing, even though he knew John was in a bedsit little better than a dosshouse. Some friend he was.
It was the first time he read the name Sherlock Holmes on John’s blog, but it was far from the last. As the days and weeks passed, John’s blog became, in effect, a blog all about the flatmate. Holmes was strange, and rude, and brilliant, and eccentric, and John was clearly, obviously, enthralled. As much as he moaned about this Sherlock Holmes’ shenanigans, even an idiot could see how much John was taken by him. More than once did it cross Murray’s mind that John had a crush. But hell, if living with such a madman (John’s words, not his) made him happy, then more power to him.

He began following John’s blog like it was a new religion. Because damn, those stories! The things he got up to, the mysteries and adventures! A few times, he doubted they even happened (maybe John was spinning fictions), but then the news story came out, and shit, it really was true. Sherlock Holmes was a genius, and John was his right-hand man. Sometimes he saw John and Sherlock in photographs; sometimes they were on the telly. It was like knowing a celebrity. But the most important thing, Murray knew, was that he hadn’t, in fact, ruined John’s life. He was happy again, loving his work again, and he was good at it. The heavy guilt weighing over Murray’s heart was lifting.

Murray had to stop thinking like that. It was these very thoughts of conspiracy that had led him to getting John into trouble the first time. He didn’t want to walk that road again. But he couldn’t put John out of his mind.

Once again, he found himself sliding toward obsession with John’s welfare. He kept checking the blog, hoping for an update. But none ever came. He thought, I should call. See how he is. But it seemed too near the date of Holmes’ suicide to intrude on his life again, and then, almost without his being aware of it, it was too late. He’d let too much time go by. How could he suddenly pop up now? How could he explain his absence in the wake of a friend’s tragedy? Try as he might to gather the courage to call, whenever he opened his phone and scrolled to John’s number, that courage faltered.

He couldn’t shake the guilt, the feeling that he was somehow responsible for yet another devastation befalling John. After all, if he had not done what he did in Afghanistan, John would never have been invalided home. He would never have met Sherlock Holmes. He would never have suffered this loss.

He returned to St Anthony’s.

‘The parable of the two debtors comes to mind,’ said the priest, after listening to Murray’s heavily
edited recounting of the ways he had failed John Watson. ‘You’ll remember it, I trust. A lender had two debtors. One owed him 50 denarii, the other 500. Neither could pay, and the lender forgave both. Our Lord asks, which of the two debtors loves the lender more?’

‘The one with the bigger debt,’ Murray answered. He remembered the story from Sunday school.

‘The story is told in the presence of a woman who had greatly sinned, but who, from the moment she entered the house, had not ceased to serve the Lord. She washed his feet, kissed them, and anointed them with oil. And in so serving earned the Lord’s love and forgiveness.’

‘So, you’re saying . . .’

‘Earn your friend’s love, and God will forgive you your trespasses against him, no matter how great your debt. Serve him, as the woman served Jesus. Then your soul will be at peace.’

On the train home, he resolved to phone John that very night. He rehearsed what he would say: Hey buddy, been thinking of you. Let’s get drinks. Let’s catch up. Let’s get wasted together. Fran’s got single friends, loads of them. Bet she can hook you up with something real special.

Miraculously, the baby went down easy that night. Fran, pregnant with their second, turned in early, leaving him alone, the whole night quietly stretched before him with no other obligations and no interruptions.

He never called.

***

Their second child came on a Sunday morning. That night, Murray got drunk. To celebrate, he told himself. Lately, he’d been looking for just about any excuse.

Drinking helped. God, how it helped. When he drank, he didn’t have to remember that he was guilty of perjury, lying on official documents to get out of the RAMC, for which he was still collecting a pension. He could forget, for a few hours at least, what he had done to Watson, was still doing to Watson. Growing up, he had never seen himself as a bad person. Now, he didn’t know what he could do to see himself any other way. He couldn’t confess to John, that was for certain. He had tried confessing to God. But how could he face God when he couldn’t even stand to look at himself in the mirror? So he drank.

And when he drank, he fell into strange beds. At first, it was entirely accidental. Wasn’t it? He had woken up in a room he didn’t recognise, a bed entirely too soft for his liking, and a woman he’d never seen before in his life. That time, he had fled, without a backward glance, and drank some more to purge his brain of the memory of it. When he thought of Fran, he wanted to cry. She did not need to know—it would only break her heart. He was many things, but he would not be so cruel to his wife. It was a mistake, and it would never happen again.

Only, it did. It might not have seemed right, to the moralist, but if they could only understand, it was to save his marriage, not destroy it. These women, they were . . . a release. He loved his wife, he loved his kids, but at home, he felt like he was burning up. He got into tempers where he didn’t even recognise himself, shouting about the most trivial of things, like being called to the dinner table in the middle of a football match, or being expected to fix the clog in the shower. What was he, a plumber? The kids were too loud. Why couldn’t they just shut up and eat their carrots? Fran wasn’t even trying anymore. When’s the last time he had seen her in anything but sweatpants? Their sex life was nothing. She was always too worn out, and he respected that. He did. He would just find another outlet for his frustrations, and spare her and the children. It wouldn’t be forever.
Just until he got his head on straight.

It was summer, and the air was stifling. Inside the pub, the fans were turning, but he felt little relief. Already he was on his third lager. That girl with the ponytail—apparently, she wasn’t coming tonight. That was fine. He would just get blind drunk and maybe sleep in his car. He sure as hell wasn’t about to go home.

‘Damn, it’s hot tonight.’

Bleary-eyed, he rolled his head to his left to take the measure of the man who had just sat two stools over. He was a tall man with close-cropped hair and sharp angles everywhere but his face, which was doughy like a muffin. After ordering a drink, he shucked his leather jacket and draped it over the stool between them.

‘Reminds me of Afghanistan.’

A fuzzy sort of lightbulb went off in Murray’s brain, and he licked his soured lips to speak. ‘You been to Afghanistan?’

‘Her Majesty’s Royal Army,’ said the man, toasting the air.

‘Me too,’ said Murray. ‘RAMC. Been a few years.’

‘Came back in 2010.’

‘End of ’09.’

The man regarded him with a smile, moved his jacket, and slid the next stool over so they were sitting side by side. ‘To coming home,’ he said, and they two clinked glasses.

Like old war buddies, they began to reminisce—about sand and desert roses, camel spiders and deathstalkers, bastard COs and those god-awful drills—and in short time, Murray’s new friend (Everett, he thought his name was) bought him another round. He didn’t mention how many he’d already downed.

‘I had a friend at Camp Bastion,’ said Everett. ‘Name of Watson. John Watson. Ever come across him? Woulda been there about the same time as you, I reckon. A doctor.’

‘Shit, yeah, I knew John,’ said Murray glumly into his glass. ‘I tried to kill him.’

His words were sliding, slipping, greased by alcohol, and he had no sense left in him to shut his mouth and stopper the flow. God, it felt good, getting it out, explaining himself, naming his sin. The glory of confession, at last. His new friend listened without judgement, without prescriptions for restitution, just a sympathetic ear. Bill wasn’t a bad person, of course not. He’d been confused and coerced. He wasn’t evil.

He woke next morning in his car with a sour mouth and a pressing need to urinate. Despite the hangover, though, he felt like a boulder had been lifted from his chest, one he hadn’t even known had been pressing down on it for so many months, even years, and he could breathe again.

He returned home, showered, and kissed his wife. He played with his children. He went to work sober and professional. He thought about John, as usual, but this time forgave himself. John was his own man. He had control over his own life; he didn’t need Bill Murray, casual acquaintance of bygone years, worrying after him. A new leaf had been turned, and Murray was ready to live his own life again.
Normally, he didn’t answer calls from unknown callers. But this one had a name that he had evidently programmed into his phone: Everett. When had he done that? Who was Everett?

‘Hello?’

‘Hiya Bill,’ came a cheerful but mostly unfamiliar voice. A fuzzy memory of a pub floated to the surface of his mind, which meant it could have been from anywhere, anytime.

‘Who’s this?’

‘Everett. You remember me. We met a couple nights ago. At the pub.’ When Bill remained silent, racking his brains for a connection, the man filled in the blank, saying, ‘You told me all about what you did to John Watson.’

The blood in his veins suddenly ran ice cold. What had he said? How much had he said? Who was this man, and how did he know John?

‘You sober this time? You and I need to talk.’

He made up an excuse, a good one, too: Fran needed cigarettes. She’d taken up smoking again, though they had made a bargain—never around the kids, and never in the house. He bought two packs, but instead of heading straight home, he went to a local pub where the man Everett was waiting for him. As he approached the corner, prepared to deny everything, to blame it on the delusions of a drunkard, he realised that now, yes, he did recognise him, and the memory of the midnight confession sharpened just a little.

‘Listen—’ he began.

‘No, that’s your job.’ But the man laughed, like they were old mates, and this was the kind of prank they often pulled on one another. ‘Hey, don’t look so serious! Sit down, sit down. Let me order you a drink.’

‘No, thank you,’ said Murray.

‘Sit. I’m not here to make trouble for you.’ Everett fixed him with a steely eye. ‘But after what you told me? It’d be pretty easy to do. I mean, come on. Faking DVT?’ He chuckled. ‘Clever son of a bitch. Wouldn’t the RAMC like to hear about that? Wouldn’t John?’

‘What’s this about?’ Murray said tensely, sitting despite his self-preserving instinct to flee.

‘John Watson, of course. We have business with him, and we believe you can help us.’

‘We?’

Stubbins pulled out what Murray initially mistook as a black wallet. But when it hit the table and fell open, he saw the gleaming silver badge and insignia for the Metropolitan Police and a photo ID naming him Everett Stubbins, Sergeant Detective.

‘Christ.’ Murray scrubbed two hands down his face. ‘You’re with the Met?’

‘Like I said, you’re not in trouble.’ Everett Stubbins picked up the badge and slid it back inside his jacket. ‘Not if you help us. This is about John Watson, not you.’

‘John and I haven’t talked in years.’
‘Just as well. We don’t need you to talk to him. Just, provide some information. Keep tabs. Take notes. That sort of thing. You’ll be well compensated.’

‘Why can’t you do that?’ he asked. ‘You’re the police.’

‘The situation is more delicate than that. I’m not at liberty to discuss it. But trust me, Bill. This is in John’s best interest.’

‘What did he do?’

Everett shook his head and smiled with closed lips, and Murray knew he would get nothing more from him on the matter. Top secret police business, he supposed.

‘And this is all . . . okay? Like, I’m legally allowed to do this? And John, he’ll be okay?’

‘Of course, of course. I wouldn’t ask you to do anything unethical, Bill.’

Murray chewed his cheek in thought. ‘Right. And if I do this? You won’t rat me out to the Army?’

‘You have my word.’

‘I’d like that in writing.’

Everett laughed and clapped on a hand on his shoulder. ‘That, I can do.’

***

Because of the drinking, because he kept coming in late or missing days entirely, Murray was fired from his job at the hospital. No matter. He had another source of income. The undercover police officer was good on his word. After just two weeks of following John around London and reporting his movements, money was deposited into his bank account, exceeding his usual salary by more than two hundred pounds. Not a bad gig, really.

It was strange, seeing John again after so long, even if it was from a distance. He had a new job at St Elizabeth’s Hospital in South London; he was living on Porters Avenue in North London; and he had someone new in his life, a good-looking ginger who worked at a flower shop. He seemed reasonably happy, if not a little reserved. Who would have thought this was the same man who had run toward explosions to save fallen soldiers, or who had once commanded a hectic operating theatre with a single barked order, or who had chased down criminals in London with the madman genius? Only, the latter hadn’t really happened, had it? He had been living a lie. Now, he lived a placid life. Predictable. A little boring, even.

For weeks, he tracked John’s movements. They weren’t especially interesting, but he took diligent notes all the same: the exact minute he stepped out his front door, the number of the bus he took to do the shopping, the way he checked his watch as he approached the doors to St E’s, the change of jacket depending on the weather, everything. He noted when John had a cold, or yawned more than usual, or talked to someone on the Underground, or dropped a handful of coins in the open palm of a homeless man. Good guy, John. Unremarkable, and good.

Murray was never seen, and he felt proud of himself on that front. He spent a fortune on taxis and filling his Oyster card, but he was well compensated for every expenditure, even his coffee and lunches. He felt useful in a way he’d not in a long time. He didn’t know what the police were doing with his reports, but he was thanked and complimented for them, and so carried on without question or complaint.
Stubbins was always his point of contact. He didn’t like to talk on the phone, so they always met up somewhere in the city for debriefings and assignments. Murray liked assignments. He was good at following orders. It spared him from having to think. Strangely, he had missed that. Maybe, when this was all over, he might consider a career in law enforcement. Maybe Stubbins would write him a reference.

It was a rainy night when they met up again in June. Murray had another spiral-bound notebook of observations to deliver. The pub near John’s flat was crowded and noisy, the best sort of atmosphere for going unnoticed, Stubbins said. They sat together at the bar, but hadn’t been there even five minutes when, to his surprise, John and his girlfriend, Mary, came through the door.

‘Shit, he’ll see me,’ he said into Stubbins’ ear. He was careful not to make any sudden movements, lest he draw attention to himself.

‘Doubtful. Too crowded. But if he does?’ Stubbins shrugged, completely unperturbed. ‘You’re his friend. Shoot the breeze. I guarantee he won’t give me a second glance.’

Stubbins was a cocksure son of a bitch, which he demonstrated by spending the next thirty minutes staring at John with unabashed interest, while Murray tried to look anywhere but. Sure enough, John never once glanced their way. He was relieved: the last thing he wanted, really, was to actually speak to him again. Not after all this time.

***

By the end of summer, Everett Stubbins informed him over the phone that his role as tracker was over.

‘We need something else from you.’

‘What?’

‘You have property in Wingrave.’

‘Yes?’

How did they know about his dad’s cottage? It was a French-style farmhouse he had never cared for. Too open, too many windows. Two years ago, when he and Fran had moved house, he had put it on the market. He even got an offer. But one day, he slipped up again, and brought a woman there, and they made love on the living room floor, and, he thought, he needed to keep it. As a refuge, an escape. A sanctuary for the occasional tryst. He lied to Fran, told her it sold, and she never once questioned it. When she said they should go on holiday, and pay for it out of the proceeds of the sale, he dipped into the inheritance money instead. It was a lie he was still living to this day.

‘Meet me there. Tomorrow, six o’clock.’

He arrived early, and with beers, which he put in the fridge. Then he sat on the sofa and waited in silence. He had disconnected the cable, and he couldn’t concentrate well enough to read a book. All he could do was watch the clock.

They arrived in a transit van, five men, all in plain clothes. Everett Stubbins, it was instantly clear, was not the leader. He followed at the back, looking somehow smaller than he ever had. Then again, he was eclipsed by men of greater stature, one with the bulk of an ox.

Fighting his nerves, he let them in, and guided them to the living room, where he invited them to
sit. They did not.

‘Bill,’ said Stubbins, gesturing to one of the men, ‘the Colonel.’

The Colonel was a good-looking man, dark of hair and broad of shoulder, but his face was narrow, and he would seem tall—certainly taller than Bill—but for the giant standing just behind him, whom Stubbins called Daz. The other two, Pete and Lex, stood by stoically, feet apart and hands behind their backs, as if at ease, a military state of alert.

‘I didn’t know colonel was a rank in the London police,’ said Bill.

‘It’s not,’ said the Colonel. ‘Lex, Pete, go survey the house. Mr Murray and I have business.’

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He would never be able to explain it. It was like he was under a spell. The Colonel said he needed to use the cottage as a rendezvous point for him and his men, and Murray agreed. He said he needed unfettered access, and Murray turned over the spare key. He praised the detailed surveillance notes, and Murray was flattered. And last of all, he told Murray to be ready to act when called upon, and Murray said, without hesitation, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Sergeant Stubbins was right to trust you, wasn’t he?’ said the Colonel. ‘You’re a good man. An honourable, reliable man.’

‘Yes, sir, I am.’

The Colonel clapped a hand on his shoulder and smiled. He felt special, important. It was only after they had all left, when he stood alone in the cottage, alone with his thoughts, that he wondered why he hadn’t asked more questions, and what he had actually agreed to.

***

He would always remember it, sitting in a pub in mid-October, drowned in the ceaseless susurrations of a dozen conversations all around him, when he glanced up at the football match on the screen, perched on the far wall, and read the scrawl at the bottom of the screen:

London police seek public’s help locating 41-year-old London-based doctor, John H Watson, last seen Wednesday . . .

He practically fell over himself getting off the stool to get closer to the screen, waiting for the scrawl to repeat. When it did, his eyes jumped with magnetic attraction to the name: John H Watson. Doctor. Missing.

He stumbled out into the street, fumbling for his phone.

The news is reporting John as missing. Do you know about this?

While he waited for the reply, he paced anxiously and googled news sites on his phone, trying to get more information. But other than the report that John was missing, there was little to be had.

His mobile rang.

‘I want to be clear about one thing,’ said Stubbins without greeting. ‘You don’t call me. You don’t
text me. I call you. Got it?’

‘I know, I know, but . . . Something’s happened to John. What do you know?’

‘Calm down. Go back to whatever you do. Everything is under control.’

‘Is he in trouble? Do the police know more than they’re saying? You’re on the inside, you must
know—’

‘It’s under control. We’ve got this. John Watson is not your problem.’

‘Not my . . . Why would you be asking for the public’s help if—?’

‘Bill, listen to me. Here is what you’re going to do. You’re going to delete that outgoing text. Then
you’re going to erase your call history. Last of all, you’re going to go home, kiss the wife, pat the
little ones on the head, and go to sleep. Nothing else is your concern.’

‘Oh my God,’ he whispered. ‘What have you done to John? Who are you people?’

There was a long pause. It seemed to Murray that the streetlights were dimming, the city lights
fading. There was no light at all in the night sky.

‘We’re your people, Bill. Don’t forget that. You’re one of us.’

***

He couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t eat. Fran asked if he was feeling well, and he snapped at her, took
her cigarettes, and went into the back garden for a smoke. He didn’t even like smoking.

What the hell had he got himself involved with? Everett Stubbins, was he really with the police?
His credentials had seemed legitimate, but then, Murray wasn’t exactly practised at spotting fakes.
How could he have been so stupid? He should have asked more questions. Or better yet, cut all
ties. He should never have answered his phone, or agreed to tail John, or handed a stranger the
keys to . . .

When he remembered the cottage and Moran’s interest in it, he went straight there, heart racing
with trepidation, but found it dark and empty. He felt like he might have a panic attack. What
should he do? Go to the police? Then what would he say? He didn’t know much of anything,
really, let alone where John Watson was, or even if he was in danger. Or even . . . alive.

No, no, don’t think like that. You’re being paranoid. It’s fine. It’s all going to be fine.

But what if it wasn’t? What if he went to the police and they arrested him as a co-conspirator? Oh
sweet Jesus, what if Stubbins twisted things, and accused him? He was the one with a history with
John after all, the one who had betrayed him once already and had been living with the shame of it
ever since. It would be easy to foist the blame onto him, a guilt-ridden would-be killer. Their own
motives were . . . unknown. Why did they have him surveil John in the first place? What was their
interest in him? Who was ‘they’? A dirty policeman, a colonel, a giant, and two wildcards. He
knew nothing of nothing.

He tried not to think about it. Tried to be normal. Smiling, talking about the weather, making the
kids sandwiches and slicing up apples for lunch. But even Fran was asking about John Watson
now. He pretended to be ignorant, then confused, then worried. Well. He didn’t have to pretend at
that.
‘How long can a man go without water?’

The phone call came in the middle of the night. He left the bed, told Fran to go back to sleep, and stepped outside in his bare feet. ‘Who is this?’

‘Answer the question. You’re a medical man. CMT. How much water does a man need to survive?’

‘Lots, he needs lots!’

‘Don’t be cheeky. Just give me the answer. The minimum amount.’

‘Uh.’ He was sweating, and feeling rather thirsty himself as he tried to think through his hydration survival training. ‘Body needs a good litre a day, at least. What we expel in urine, sweat, and even breath, it has to be replaced. A good litre, minimum. But not all at once or the body won’t conserve it right. Every . . . four to six hours, it should be rationed out.’

A long pause on the other end.

‘Minimum food requirement.’

Murray ran a hand through his hair anxiously. ‘2000 calories a day.’

‘No. The minimum. Mere survival.’

Shit, oh shit. ‘It’s not just about calories, it’s nutrients, too. Vitamins, proteins, you really can’t skimp—’

‘Such as? Non-perishables. Name them.’

‘Uh, uh . . .’ He cast his mind around quickly. ‘Tinned foods? Tomatoes, peas, beans. Black beans. They’re higher in carbs and proteins and magnesium. Um. Spinach, salmon, mackerel, prunes—’

‘That’s enough.’

The line went dead.

Two nights later, he received another call.

‘How much blood can a man lose and survive?’

Murray covered his mouth to keep himself from crying out in dismay. Oh God, oh God, this was bad, this was very bad.

‘Answer me.’

‘What’s happened? Tell me what’s happened, and I can—’

‘Answer the damn question.’

‘15 to 30 percent blood loss is classified as a class 2 haemorrhage. But it’s really hard to assess just by looking, yeah? So . . . Is his heart racing? Is he pale? Skin cool to the touch?’

There was a long pause. ‘Yes.’

‘He . . . look, you want him to survive, right? You wouldn’t be asking me any of this if you wanted
him dead. So he can’t lose any more! Got it? Class 3 haemorrhage will necessitate a transfusion or he may go into cardiac arrest.’

‘How quickly does the body naturally replace its loss?’

‘Four to six weeks! You can’t let him . . . Please. Tell me what is happening!’

‘We’ll call again if we need you.’

***

He was in denial. It wasn’t real, none of this was real.

Then they found the body of Mary Morstan. He heard about it on the news.

‘Not my fault. Not my fault.’ He paced the men’s loo at the pub, feeling heavy with drink. ‘I didn’t know. I didn’t know.’

He thought, You’ve put it off long enough. Go to the police. Now.

He couldn’t.

He stood outside the doors of St Anthony’s. He didn’t go in.

***

It would be best, he thought, if John didn’t make it.

Not for himself. For John.

But the truth was, he didn’t want his sins to come to light.

***

‘You’re needed.’

It had been ten days.

‘Is he . . . ?’

‘You want to keep your friend alive? Be at the rendezvous in one hour. Bring medical supplies.’

He started a fight with Fran, over what he didn’t even know. But he needed her to kick him out of the house. She did. He slammed the door on his way out.

At the cottage, he waited in near darkness, a solitary lamp shining dimly in the corner.

The giant arrived first, the one called Daz. He said little, only that they were bringing him within the hour, and to be ready.

It was past midnight when he heard the crunch of gravel, and the beam from headlights shone through the windows. Car doors opened, closed with a bang that set his heart racing. This was insane. Heaven’s joke. His only hope was that John was unconscious, or blind, or dead. He hoped he was dead. He couldn’t bear the thought of John seeing him, and knowing he’d been betrayed.

But John wasn’t there at all.
‘He’s bleeding badly,’ said a woman he’d never seen before. She was bearing up the Colonel, whose right arm hung limp at his side, blood dripping from shoulder to fingertip. He held the other hand over his nose; his face was a smear of blood.

With Daz’s help, they laid the Colonel on the long kitchen table, where Murray began to cut his clothes off, mind racing. He was trained to perform emergency medical treatment in the field, but that didn’t qualify him as a surgeon. The Colonel had been shot in the arm, and the bullet was still lodged there. He had been gashed across the face, slicing clean through the bridge of his nose. Another wound flayed his leg from knee to ankle. And he’d been stabbed in the hip. He needed to go to A&E. He needed a team of doctors for this kind of thing. But he’d barely started saying so when the Colonel barked his order: ‘Stitch me up, or I’ll put shoot your goddamn head off.’

That night, he saved Sebastian Moran’s life. Too scared to know, he didn’t ask about John’s.

***

Shortly thereafter, the story broke: John Watson, victim of a kidnapping plot, was alive and in hospital. And Sherlock Holmes was back from the dead. Only at this point did Murray learn that John had been used as bait, nothing more, a tool to draw out of hiding a murderer who had taken the life of a man named James Moriarty. Beyond that, they had no interest in John at all.

The cottage became something of a refuge and hideaway for Moran and his people, where they concocted their plots. Murray wasn’t often there, but when he was, when he was made to come, to bring supplies and groceries and run errands, he learnt things about John’s time in captivity that was not released to the media. Not only did Moran tell stories, but they passed around the footage on smartphones. Murray caught only a glimpse before spinning away, unable to bear it. They laughed at him, sat him in a chair, and with guffaws and ribbings, crowded around, and made him watch.

Later, when he at last escaped, he got sick in the loo. For days, he was unable to scrub the horrific images from before his eyes.

They didn’t talk much about their own men who had been killed, like Pete, or those who had been arrested, like Everett Stubbins.

Was Stubbins talking? How long before Bill Murray’s name came up, and they came breaking down his door to arrest him?

As it turned out, he wasn’t the only one worried about the police.

‘Greg Lestrade is a problem,’ the Colonel said. ‘Moriarty named him as one of the three, and he colluded with Holmes to track down his little puppy. O’Higgins should have done a better job distracting him. Fool. He deserves what he gets. And as for the DI . . . It’s time we took him out of the game.’

The Colonel turned a steely eye onto Bill.

***

Bill Murray lay flat on his belly, which roiled and squelched. The scotch, which was meant to calm his nerves, wasn’t helping. The air was cold, the skies threatened rain, but he licked the salt off his upper lip and his sweat-slicked finger slipped on the stock. Quickly, he wiped his palm on his trousers.
It’s okay, it’s okay, he coached himself, trying to forestall the tears, but there was nothing he could do about the tightness in his throat. He won’t suffer. He started a little when a pigeon landed on the ledge, just feet away. Greg Lestrade has no children. No wife. No one who will really care.

He thought of his own children, his own wife. He was doing this for them. To protect them from an evil he hoped they never came to know. But the tears began tracking down his cheeks. Forgive me, Fran, he thought.

His earpiece crackled. ‘Buck is exiting the building. Steady on, Ranger One. Prepare to engage.’

Murray pushed to his knees, lifting the sniper rifle above the ledge of the high rise, and put his eye to the scope, swiftly correcting his aim.

A group of officers had just appeared outside the doors of New Scotland Yard, ten of them, maybe twelve, he didn’t have time to count. He didn’t know which was Greg Lestrade. Though he had been shown a photograph, the distance and small crowd made him indiscernible from his fellows. But the Colonel had taught him a trick. With a nervous finger, he tapped the phone he’d been given, the one with an inscription of love on the back, a love that had been broken and regifted and stolen and abused, to send a pre-written text to the pre-programmed number. One word.

Bang.

Through the scope, he watched as one officer paused, reached into his pocket, and pulled out his phone to read a text.

God forgive me, for I shall sin.

He pulled the trigger.

***

It was the turn of the peg that snapped the taut string. Sherlock started forward, drew back his fist, and punched Bill Murray hard in the face.

Murray’s head flew back and blood spurted from his nose and mouth. The chair tipped but did not fall.

‘Bastard!’ he shouted.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ Murray sobbed.

‘Not good enough!’

Sherlock turned away, shaking the sting from his knuckles. For an hour, he had listened with measured disinterest, a computer receiving and sorting data, in part because that was who he was, in greater part to balance the unpredictable fires burning silently under John’s skin. He would be cool where John was hot, and keep things under control. But even he was more than machine. This man had just admitted to firing a bullet at his friend’s skull, and it was the last chink of the chisel to crack wide the stone.

‘If you had killed Greg Lestrade, I would murder you myself. Know that. Right here, right now, I’d strangle the life out of you, you son of a bitch.’

He was shaking now, from the thought of what might have transpired on that day, from the effort of not choking Murray with both hands. It was almost too much to bear. If things had gone
differently, he might have suffered two devastating losses that day, perhaps that very hour. He would not have survived it.

‘I’m sorry,’ Murray repeated woefully. ‘But the Colonel, he said . . . he swore . . .’

‘What? What did he swear?’

‘You have to understand! He threatened me. If I didn’t do it, he’d kill my family. He’d kill my children!’

‘He’s lying,’ John said in a monotone.

Sherlock stood straight and looked over his shoulder. John’s arms were crossed and his feet spread shoulder-width apart, planted solidly on the ground. He appeared unmoved by Murray’s tearful plight. ‘How do you know?’

‘Because that’s what Bill Murray does,’ John slowly stepped forward, his face stoic but eyes hard as ice. At some point, they must have exchanged temperatures. ‘He lies.’

Murray shook his head hard. ‘I’m not lying, I swear, I’m not.’

‘Moran doesn’t threaten,’ said John. ‘He executes. He doesn’t scare you with the thought of breaking your fingers to get you to talk. He just breaks them, and it’s the blinding pain that drives you to do what he wants, whatever he wants. He doesn’t threaten to chop off the finger of the woman you love—he just does it. And he makes you listen to her scream. So don’t give me this bullshit that he threatened you. He didn’t have to. You were already scared shitless.’

Tears continued to flow as Murray looked up at John. ‘I’m sorry about Mary,’ he whispered.

‘Like hell you are.’

‘I didn’t know he’d go after her. I didn’t. That’s the truth.’

John put a finger in his face. ‘Shut up about her. You don’t get to talk about her. Not one goddamn word. Don’t you even say her name.’ Then he spun away and began to pace.

Sherlock sneered at Murray, chest still heaving. ‘So Moran sent you to kill Greg Lestrade. The sniper sent a nurse.’

‘His wounds were . . . severe.’ Murray sniffed, wiped the blood from under his nose. ‘He couldn’t even hold a rifle, let alone aim one. The pain from the gashed nose was causing double vision, and he was so doped up, he couldn’t have done it. There were others at his beck and call, though, better shooters than me. I mean, I barely even qualified to hold a rifle at Pirbright. It didn’t make sense, his choosing me. But—’

‘It was strategy,’ said John. He was leaning now against the back wall of the barn, in the shadows, as though physically distancing himself was the only way to keep from going after Murray himself. ‘Don’t you get it? He wins either way: If you are successful, Lestrade dies, and he wins. If you fail, he punishes you. Sadists like that sort of thing.’ There was a beat of silence. Sherlock tried to make out John’s expression in the dark, but could see nothing. ‘So what was it? How did he punish you for missing your mark? For killing off one of Moran’s own?’

Murray blinked like he had an eyelash caught under a lid. ‘One of Moran’s?’

‘That’s what I said.’
'Anthony Pitts?' He shook his head. ‘Pitts wasn’t one of ours.’

‘Ours,’ John spat derisively.

‘His! You know what I mean! The Colonel’s!’

‘Stop calling him that!’

Murray cowered, and made to apologise, but Sherlock stepped on his first word.

‘What do you mean, he wasn’t one of yours? Pitts was Moran’s man, like Stubbins had been. One of the ten.’

‘Ten what?’

‘Spies! At the Yard! Stubbins said there were ten players. Nine were arrested. That left Tony Pitts as number ten.’

‘I don’t know anything about that. All I know is, when the Col— When Moran found out how I’d screwed up, he laughed. Actually laughed. A bug he didn’t have to swat, he said. I’d been aiming for a fly and taken out a wasp, he said. But I had still failed to take out my mark. Like you said, there were consequences.’

Tony Pitts hadn’t been a spy? Then what about that phone call? And who had they overlooked? He put them aside for now. It would not do to get distracted.

‘Go on, then. What consequences?’ Sherlock asked. ‘What else did he make you do?’

Murray sniffed again, but allowed the blood to drip down his chin. ‘The cottage became headquarters. People coming and going all the time, even when I wasn’t there. And I wasn’t there much. I had appearances to keep up at home, you know? I didn’t know half of the A.G.R.A. crowd, but I was learning, and—’


‘It’s the network.’

‘I know that! How does it work? Who is part of it? How do they communicate?’

‘And what does it stand for?’ John added.

‘What does it stand for? I don’t remember.’

‘You don’t remember?’

‘I only heard the full name once, and it’s not even English, I don’t think. Don’t know what it was. But that’s not the point. A.G.R.A is a code. When you become part of the network, you can signal to others, let them know you’re a part of it. Then you sort of, I don’t know, help each other out.’

‘How?’ Sherlock asked, and at the same moment John asked, ‘Why?’

Murray looked rapidly between them. ‘There are trackings all over the dark web. That’s where most of the communication happens. But some of us—them, I mean—have surface clues, like pins or tattoos or stationery, things people don’t think twice about. There are businesses, too, whole storefronts. They have a public face, legitimate services, but—’
'We know about those,' said John. He was growing impatient.

Murray blinked. ‘You do?’


Murray wiped his forehead. ‘It’s his masterpiece.’

‘Moran’s?’

‘James Moriarty’s. That’s what Moran told me. It was all his idea. A collusion of criminals scratching each other’s backs. If you rob a bank, a pub down the street will help you launder the money. If you kill someone in your warehouse, a service will come clean up the evidence. Like Andre’s. I used them twice, the first time after Moran showed up that night, bloody from head to foot. Then again in March. And every time you do it, you report it, and you get a reward. It’s like, an incentive for crime. Small potatoes, most times. But not always.’

‘Where does the money come from?’ Sherlock asked.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Who moves it around?’

‘I don’t know.’

John snorted. ‘But you got your own slice of the pie, didn’t you?’

‘Three hundred grand,’ said Murray. ‘Untouchable. Sitting in an offshore account. I touch it, they find me. Moran, or the police, whoever. But I don’t want it. I don’t want so much as a penny.’

‘You can’t run forever, Bill.’

Murray’s shoulders slumped and he shook his head pitiably. ‘I know.’

Sherlock shivered. The damp was seeping into their bones. ‘What else did you hear in the cottage? How did Moran punish you for failing to kill Greg Lestrade?’

‘They made me part of their plans,’ Murray answered, ‘going forward. It was punishment enough.’

***

The plot to draw Sherlock Holmes out of hiding had been a success. That’s what Moran kept saying. He was a glass-half-full kind of guy, after all.

But they hadn’t killed him. So the man who had murdered James Moriarty still lived and breathed on Baker Street, probably not even knowing how well protected he was by forces greater than himself. They weren’t done with him, Moran said, not by a long shot. But Murray didn’t quite understand. If they wanted him dead, surely there were ways to do it, and quickly. Snipers and bombs might not be elegant, but it would do the trick, surely. But there were different machinations at work, apparently, spearheaded by two masterminds, Adler and Moran. ‘Dead men don’t suffer,’ said the woman on more than one occasion, and Moran recited, ‘I’ll burn the heart out of him,’ as though it were a long-held mantra.

It was a game to them, one Murray didn’t comprehend. He was not inner-circle.
They planned behind closed doors, but that didn't prevent him from overhearing a fair bit in passing, though to him it was all fairly nonsensical, like disparate puzzle pieces in a grand picture he couldn’t fathom. Conversations about flowers, one day, and Jack and Jill another, and London Bridge. Murray thought of his children, and how he wished he were at home with them.

Then one day, in early December, while setting Old Speckled Hens in the back of the fridge, he spotted a stack of stapled papers on the counter. Curious, he dragged the papers closer, eyes skimming. It was a long list of names ordered, apparently, by initials, with some markings beside names he didn’t understand.

Stephen Jacobs
Sam Jefferies
Simone Jeffords
Sean Johnson
Scott Jurewicz

Henry Owen Hatch
Hector O’Halloran
Holden O’Harris . . .

‘Know what they all have in common?’

Murray jumped and spun. There stood in the Colonel, in the doorway of the butler’s pantry, watching him.

‘They’re all homeless,’ said the Colonel.

‘Oh,’ said Murray, not understanding. ‘Okay.’

‘So get this. James Moriarty uses his brilliance to orchestrate a network of well-disguised criminals, filling the entire globe. He ruled the world. But Sherlock Holmes? The man who claims to be more clever, more brilliant, than the most intelligent man who ever lived? He uses his intellect to fashion a network of London-based homeless sods. Ha!’

Above the unsightly scarring across his nose, the Colonel’s eyes danced with a kind of excitement, and clear invitation to appreciate the joke. Murray laughed weakly.

‘We’re going to steal it,’ he continued. ‘Weaponise it. We’ll turn it against him. Along with all of London. It’ll be a sight to behold, wait and see. These’—he drew nearer to Murray and drummed his fingers on the page—‘are the first pieces of my puzzle.’

Murray looked down at the list again, still confused but afraid to know what it all meant.

‘What do you think, Bill?’

‘Me?’ He laughed again. Play stupid. Play incompetent. ‘I don’t think anything. I just thought I knew one of these guys, heh.’ He cleared his throat. ‘But if they’re all homeless chaps, then I’m clearly mistaken. Sam Jefferies is probably a really common name.’

‘You know Jefferies?’

‘Well. Not that Jefferies.’ He nodded at the page.

The Colonel regarded him for a long and silent moment. Then: ‘Follow me. The cellar needs refurbishing, and I have some ideas.’
The A.G.R.A. crowd weren’t coming around the cottage much anymore. Moran had left, too. To where, God only knew. He hadn’t seen the woman in more than a week, either. It was just as well. The holidays were approaching, and he needed to be with his family.

Christmas was a special misery. He tried to be cheerful, appreciative of the ways Fran tried to make it magical for the kids. But he was on edge, waiting for an anvil to fall on his head, or London Bridge to explode, or the ghost of John Watson to show up on his doorstep with a pistol levelled between his eyes. Sometimes he forgot John wasn’t dead. God, those photographs, those videos. If plucking his eyes from his skull could erase the memory of them, he would do it.

‘You’re not even trying,’ Fran snapped at him as they cleared away Christmas wrapping paper.

‘Not tonight, Fran.’

The kids were in bed. In years past, he and Fran had always celebrated a job well done with a bottle of red wine and love making. Tonight, it was clear neither of those things would happen.

‘How long has it been?’ she asked. She couldn’t look at him. Just kept shoving paper into bin bags.

‘Since what?’ he asked.

‘Since you stopped loving me?’

He froze. Sighed. Straightened. ‘Don’t start this.’

‘Should I just end it, then?’

‘Fran—’

‘I mean it, Bill. If you don’t want this’—she swept her arm wide, taking in the whole living room, the house, the children, their life together—‘walk away. Because your children don’t deserve a daddy that doesn’t want to be here. I don’t deserve it, either. You don’t want to talk to me? You don’t want to admit you’ve got troubles? Fine. Figure it out on your own. But not at our expense.’

He wanted to scream and rail. He hadn’t wanted this! Any of it! He hadn’t asked to be a pawn on the board of evil men. He hated that he was afraid of the man he saw in the mirror and the shadow on the wall. If he could only turn back time. If he could only find a way out of the burning rubble with all his limbs intact. If only the hand of God would part the stormy clouds and pluck him up and save him from this mortal coil. If only he deserved any of it.

She went to bed alone. He lay on the sofa, but didn’t sleep.

***

It was New Year’s Day. He was drinking when they contacted him again.

They wanted him to reconnect with Sam Jefferies. Sam Jefferies, with whom he had lost contact since his wedding, and who, having fallen on hard times related to his time in Afghanistan, was now homeless.

They wanted him to pick up Jefferies in front of St John at Hackney Church in Lower Clapton. ‘Tell him you want to take him for a drink. Catch up. Like old times.’

They handed him keys to a black transit van. He hailed Jefferies on a corner. Jefferies climbed in
smiling, thanked him for calling. Murray smiled back, and they started chatting, like old times.

He didn’t know that the giant, Daz, was in the back. Not until they parked, and the divider parted, and Jefferies was grabbed and hauled into the back end of the van.

Hands pressed over his ears and eyes squeezed shut tight, Murray trembled and cried, but he couldn’t shut out the ungodly sounds of savagery that followed, nor fail to notice how the van pitched from side to side like a rowboat caught in a storm. It seemed to go on forever. Murray wanted to scream: Just kill him already! Just die! But he could do nothing but sit and listen to the giant do to Jefferies what he had done to John.

At long last, the screaming, the groaning, the gurgling all stopped. The van stilled.

‘Drive,’ came the order.

Murray obeyed.

***

‘You’re gonna help me get him in the tree.’

The back doors to the transit van hung open, but Murray, frozen in shock, couldn’t look inside. The giant’s words jolted him, and he fell back a step. He had thought Daz would dump the body, and they’d drive away.

‘Grab the bleach. And rope.’

Then Daz grabbed Jefferies’ half-naked corpse by the ankles and hauled him out.

‘I . . . can’t . . .’

Next he knew, Daz had him pinned against the van, and a massive hand was around his throat. ‘You’ll do what I tell you to do, or you’ll end up just like him.’

He did what Daz told him to do. While Daz fixed a rope in a tree, Murray treated the body with bleach, pulled the laces from one shoe, and used it to bind the dead man’s hands in front of him. His every action was mechanical, detached. This isn’t me, this isn’t me, he thought, when he thought anything at all. This isn’t happening. This isn’t Sam. There is no Sam.

Over and over, he repeated it like a mantra, with every tug on the rope, as the body rose toward the sky. This isn’t happening. This isn’t me. There is no me.

***

After that night, he didn’t return home. He never went home again.

***

There were other jobs, other missions. Nothing like the one in the park in Lower Clapton. Maybe they didn’t trust him anymore. Maybe it was clear to Moran that Daz hated him. Whatever the reason, he wasn’t there when it happened to O’Harris, or Nichols, or the two homeless lovebirds. In fact, he was barely aware that anything more was happening at all, not until it was reported in the news or through the grapevine.

Instead, he was tasked with little things, like receiving a parcel to the cottage: a small box
containing what looked to be a red dog bowl. He was to do nothing with it, only store it in the wine cellar. He was asked to collect hemlock and a rose petal and leave it in a plastic baggie in the fridge at the cottage for someone to collect. He helped set up a television set in a tunnel near Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. Little things.

He had long stopped thinking about going to the police with what he knew. Instead, he fantasised about the moment when they caught him. Maybe they would surround him on the street somewhere in London, or come crashing through the door in Wingrave, dressed in riot gear and toting assault rifles, like they did in the movies. They would drag him away in handcuffs and interrogate him about everything, from John Watson to Tony Pitts to Sam Jefferies. Would that be when he did it at last, offer his confession? Into an audio recorder and before a host of police detectives who had no power to offer either justice or mercy?

Maybe he would just kill himself. But the thought was bitter-sweet. He wasn’t ready for his Final Judgement.

***

They brought a man to the cottage wearing a bag over his head. In the few seconds he had to observe him before they dragged him to the wine cellar, Murray noticed the brown of his hands and heard the soft murmuring beneath the bag. The words were foreign and reminded him forcefully of Afghanistan. But they were soft, ceaseless, desperate. He didn’t understand a word, but he recognised them just the same, one God-fearing man’s soul speaking to another’s. Words of prayer.

He didn’t want to know what would happen next. So he left the cottage. He stood at the edge of his property, facing away from the house and across a field, and lit a cigarette. He pulled a pre-paid phone out of his coat pocket. After a few drags, he called home.

‘Hey love,’ he said.

Then he closed his eyes and listened to the voice of his wife berate him, question him, beg him to come home. He made no attempt at another hollow apology, but asked how the kids were doing, how she was doing, were they managing the cold all right, was the neighbour boy still tossing cigarette butts into their garden? It was a short call. When he hung up, he rang Anita. He needed money, and a place to stay.

Two nights later, they called him again.

‘Meet Daz at Newport Cemetery. Bring a length of rope.’

***

Colonel Moran was back in London.

Murray was summoned to the cottage and found the Colonel there alone at the kitchen table, two beers set in the centre. He had the comportment of a businessman and a gentleman, dressed in a dark suit and tie with his hands folded together on the surface of the table. His hair was longer than when Murray had seen him last, slicked back and held in place with gel, and his beard was full and close to the cheek. All these details faded into the background, however, beneath the mass of scar tissue running across his otherwise pristine face, like a split in the earth. He indicated that Murray take a seat.

‘The game is nearly over,’ he said, sliding a bottle toward Murray. ‘Three more days.’
Murray had always recoiled mentally every time they called all of this a ‘game’. It sounded perverse. Nursery rhymes and puzzles and games—it was a hell of a way to toy with the lives of men.

He took a swig of beer.

‘I have an assignment for you.’

He was given the details. In three days, a small team, including Daz, was to make a pickup in London. The final seizure, he called it, the last piece in the puzzle. They would bring the mark to the cottage, and they needed Murray there to act as medical man. ‘Be ready to clip a bird’s wings,’ said the Colonel. ‘Keep it alive, but unable to fly.’

The mission was code-named ‘Cock Robin’. Murray knew who that referred to, exactly who. All along, there had been code names, for both of them. Wren and Robin.

When the plan was laid out and Murray’s role made clear, the Colonel, clunking his empty beer bottle back to the table, said, ‘You’re my man, Bill. Isn’t that right?’

‘Yes, sir,’ he said without any force of conviction. It was true, but not because he willed it to be so. It was the way a prisoner belonged to the governor.

‘Before this is all over, Irene Adler will come to you. She will tell you this was all her design and that she shot the wren from the sky. She’ll want you to believe her. She’ll ask you to join her in what comes next.’ He cocked his head, eyes fixed on Murray as surely as a needle fixing a dead moth to a pinning block. ‘But you’re my man. Not hers. Do you understand?’

Slowly, Murray nodded.

‘This is my kingdom. All this? This is my great work. The glory is mine. Irene Adler is a thief and a liar. A usurper. So you’ll stand by me, won’t you, Bill? You’re my man, aren’t you?’

‘I’ve always obeyed my superior officers,’ said Murray. ‘Always.’

***

One last time, he called home.

‘I love you,’ he said. Tears tracked down his cheeks. He clapped a hand across his mouth so she couldn’t hear the ragged breath that followed.

‘You love me?’ she asked, incredulous. ‘You love me, you’ll get your arse home! I’m going mad here on my own. You hear me, Bill? You come home this instant! We’ll figure it out, okay? Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out!’

Fran was a woman who never cried. But she was crying. He heard it in her voice.

‘Kiss my babies for me, Fran,’ he said.

‘Bill!’

He couldn’t manage another word, and he couldn’t bear any from her. The moment the call was ended, he fell to his knees and sobbed.

***
‘I ran. I left Dad’s cottage, and I didn’t look back.’ Murray ran a hand across his weary face. ‘I’ve been running ever since. Hell. I’ve been running since Afghanistan.’

Outside, the rain had stopped. Now, only a whistling wind cut past the windows.

‘He’ll come after me, I know it. He’ll kill me. It’s only a matter of time.’

Sherlock didn’t doubt him. Moran was not the sort to live and let live. And if the network was as vast as Murray suggested it was, and as Sherlock himself had been witness to while trying to dismantle it abroad, he had a thousand spies. Murray wouldn’t be able to hide forever. And if he managed it much longer, Moran would apply pressure elsewhere to draw him out. They’d seen him do it before. They needed to get Fran and her children to safety.

He heard a scraping behind him and turned to see John emerging slowly from the darkness, where he had sequestered himself for the last of Murray’s testimony. His face was stoic as he dragged in his wake a folding wooden chair, which he set before Murray. Then he sat.

John said nothing. For a long moment, Murray looked down at his own hands. But as the quiet dragged on, both Sherlock and Murray seemed to realise that John was waiting. He wouldn’t speak until Murray looked him in the eye. Slowly, Murray lifted his head. Their eyes met. Sherlock held his breath.

‘When he brought Mary to the convent, she was wearing pyjamas and her feet were bare. Her hair was cut.’ John leant forward, elbows to knees, but his head didn’t bow, and his eye contact with Murray didn’t break. ‘She didn’t understand what was happening. I could see the confusion in her eyes, the fear. But you know what else? I saw the trust. She trusted me. She trusted that I was without fault, that I would figure a way out of that place for the both of us. She believed it wouldn’t be long before we were safe back home, together, with the memory of that awful place behind us. I saw that in her eyes. I can’t stop seeing it. And I let her down.’

Murray winced, and it was as if Sherlock could read his thoughts, as they resonated in harmony with his own: It’s not your fault Mary died. It’s mine.

‘We both know what Sebastian Moran is capable of. You didn’t need him to break your fingers or kill your loved ones to know it. You saw what he did to mine. That was enough. So I know why you did what you did.’ John shook his head sadly, his voice low and soft. ‘You should have come to me.’

‘I know,’ said Murray woefully. ‘I think about it all the time. I should have come to you at the very start. I should have talked to you after Major Sholto died. None of this would have happened.’

But again, John shook his head. ‘Not to you. But to me, it was always going to happen. I don’t lay that at your feet.’ He sighed. ‘You could have saved yourself, though, couldn’t you? You could have come to me at any time. Don’t you know that? After Sholto died on my table, after Sherlock fell from the rooftop, after Mary, after Sam. Last week, for Christ’s sake. You could have. And I would have helped you. Isn’t that the damnedest thing? I would have helped you.’ He pushed back from his knees and sat straighter. ‘Why did you make me have to come to you instead?’

Murray repeated his question from before. ‘What are you going to do to me?’

‘I don’t know.’ John arose and faced away. ‘We’re going to protect your family, first and foremost. But as for you? God, the things you’ve done, Bill. You’ve done some terrible things. You don’t just get to walk away from them.’
‘Are you going to kill me?’ He sounded calm, almost hopeful.

Sherlock stepped closer. ‘No,’ he said.

‘Then . . . have me arrested?’

Sherlock waited for John to look at him before he answered. ‘No. We’re going to let you go.’

Both John and Murray looked stunned. ‘We’re what now?’ John asked, an edge to his voice.

‘You’ve just told us one hell of a story, Bill. And John is right. The things you’ve done are criminal. We could turn you over to the police, certainly, and get you the punishment the law says you deserve. Maybe it is what you deserve. But there’s something larger at stake, and if we take you into custody, we lose our advantage. Don’t we?’

‘What advantage?’ Murray asked.

‘You. An inside man.’

John’s eyes widened as he realised what Sherlock was planning. Sherlock waited for him to step in and interject, and when he didn’t, he continued:

‘You want to expiate your wrongs against John? You want to rid the world of the evil that is Sebastian Moran?’

Tremulously, Murray nodded.

‘Then you’ll become the very thing we need to defeat him: a spy.’

‘He . . . he’ll know. He doesn’t trust me anymore, not after I ran.’

‘He’ll trust that you’re still a coward. That you fear him more than anything and anyone and will always do as he says.’

‘And that’s how you’ll deceive him,’ said John, coming to stand at Sherlock’s side. ‘Because deep down inside of you, somewhere, is a man who can defy the devil. If you can only let him out.’

‘So,’ said Bill, ‘you’ll let me go. Tonight. And . . . do what? Go back to the cottage?’

‘The cottage is gone. He burned it down over a week ago.’

He paled. ‘Oh my God.’

‘You’re going to let Moran find you. However you do it, do it quickly, and do whatever it takes to win back his trust. But you’ll be reporting to us. You want redemption? This is what it takes. You’re going to help us take this bastard down.’

With rounded eyes, he looked between Sherlock and John, like he couldn’t believe his own ears. But as Sherlock observed, a subtle but unmistakable transformation was taking place. The rounded shoulders began to square, and the lines of fear hardened into something resolute.

‘I’ll do it.’

‘At long last, a righteous choice,’ said Sherlock. ‘Welcome to the side of the angels.’
End of Part 2

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