The Illustrious Client

by ArabellaStrange

Summary

‘We’re a couple!’ John burst out, bluntly. His face was nearly twitching with rage. He hadn’t even meant to say anything, to anybody, because he wanted what they had for himself just a bit longer, for a million reasons half-romantic and half-defensive, and yet here he was, gripping Chez Francine’s thick cream tablecloth with enough force to tear it in half, suddenly wanting nothing more than to tell everyone within earshot that Sherlock was absolutely infuriating, surprisingly good at blowjobs, and probably in love with him.

[Now with some gorgeous cover-art here, by Hamstermoon!
Not S4 compliant but any potential spoilers will be noted. FIC SPOILERS IN THE TAGS.]

Notes
Acknowledgements
Having started writing this series *before* series 3, and now faced with the enormous
gift/burden of series 4 (to say nothing of 2017) very nearly here, it's time to put this final
part of my trilogy up. And may god have mercy on us all. *Beta'd by the amazing
@causidicus, whose works are inspirational and whose help in the (erg) years of this
composition has been invaluable. Remaining mistakes very much my own.*

Heads-Up
(1) SPOILERS MAY APPEAR IN THE TAGS, so if you don't want to know what's
coming, DON'T LOOK! (2) Also, this first chapter has, interpreted in the strictest sense, a
moment of mildly dubious consent. (It will not go undiscussed.) But if that squicks you in
any form, scroll away now. (3) You do not have to have read 'The Man with the Twisted
Lip' or 'The Blue Carbuncle' to read this story, but there may be references from/to those
works in this series that are confusing otherwise (but not many). (4) Lastly: this fic now has
a soundtrack playlist, available on Spotify here.

See the end of the work for more notes.
One (John)

Chapter Summary

‘Well,’ he added aloud to no one, ‘same time next week?’

‘Life goes on grinding
glass, wearing out clothes,
turning to smithereens,
crushing
forms,
and what lasts through time is like
an island or a ship at sea,
perishable…’

*

Science lost a great innovator, and the stage a great actor, the day Sherlock Holmes decided to devote himself to the study of crime.

Hm. Bit pompous.

The river floodgates were, if you trust the newspapers at least as far as reporting the weather, nearly maxed out by the end of the week, as were the clinic queues of wet-summer flu. Even inside Baker Street, the rush of wind and rain seemed to dampen the evening. Imagine our surprise, then, when a man arrived, mack soaked through like he’d been onboard a ship in a storm rather than crossing the city on foot, in our front room at ten past 8 with a beaming smile.

Bit… atmospheric? He liked it, sort of, but not enough to withstand the inevitable piss getting taken out of him when a certain drama queen decided to wax critical about increasing the stupidity of one’s readers by style alone…

At school, I was never that good at those word problems in maths. You know: ‘if Peter goes from London to Edinburgh at 70 mph, and stops ten times for eight minutes a stop, when will he meet Alice at the train station?’ Of course, the kind of question they don’t ever ask is the *useful* kind — in this case, ‘If a wannabe-millionaire/mania sends his fake twin to Manchester in the middle of a rainy July, how long will it be before you want to strangle your flatmate?’
There it was — well, at least as much of it as he was willing to tell his blog-reading (and, maybe, soon-to-be wider) audience. He grinned.

(The answer, for those of you playing at home, is four days.)

A while later a rustle of sheets and limbs from the bedroom signalled just in time: he turned to turn and catch the sight of a bleary-eyed, tousle-haired consulting detective awakening to the world after a full fifteen hours dead to man and beast.

‘Afternoon,’ offered John cheerily, shifting back to complete his paragraph.

Sherlock made a beeline for the coffeepot. ‘Congratulations, John, on having graduated to correct deductions about the time of day.’

Such snark would have been very annoying if not for three simple facts: first, Sherlock was usually like this; second, his voice was still sleep-crusted and thick, which John always enjoyed; and third, the tug of the bedsheet around Sherlock as he jostled about, scooping a nearly criminal amount of dark roast grounds per volume of water, meant that the faint sliver of a birthmark directly below the nape of his neck was exposed. More visible once John put his laptop aside and went to put the kettle on for himself.

(The nasty egg on Sherlock’s right parietal, on the other hand, was buried beneath his tangled mop of curls. John had checked it before getting up for his shower this morning, grateful at least that Sherlock slept soundly enough not to protest John’s probing fingers along his scalp. He doubted he’d be able to get away with it now, even under the guise of seduction.)

‘There’s plenty of lamb madras and naan left,’ John informed him, standing only inches away with his arms folded. Sherlock nodded thickly and shuffled over to the refrigerator. John’s fingers itched to drag him down for a syrup-slow good morning — well, a good afternoon — a hello snog.

Instead, settling down with fresh tea a minute later, John picked up the Guardian from beneath the pile of other papers and post they had in today. Truthfully, Sherlock had fallen asleep last night before the food had even arrived, after John had shoved him towards the bedroom to get changed out of his suit. (It had gone to the cleaners today — the good ones, who owed Sherlock a favour — but even so John apologised thoroughly for the musty, machine oil-drenched smell. Too bad there was no client left to foot the bill.)
Looking up abruptly, he added, ‘Curry’s hot, though,’ leaving off *be careful* as it would only — yep —

Sherlock dug his spoon straight into the stone-cold container then shoved it into his mouth with an eyeroll. After a second, he managed thickly, ‘Mrs. Paupel’s sister must be pregnant again,’ lips curling as he swallowed his heaping mouthful of food.

He was disgusting and adorable and brilliant and John refused to notice any of it with more than an absent, ‘Is she?’ turning to the back pages of national news. Some rapper with a ‘Z’ at the end of his name had assaulted a woman at a club; people were sitting for record long times in A&E waiting rooms (he knew that too well, as well as what the article failed to mention about understaffed surgeries and junior doctors’ salaries); politics was getting in the way of humanitarian aid workers reaching refugees; and more on bloody Brexit… All depressingly repetitive.

‘But at least they’ve had the oven timer replaced,’ Sherlock went on, upending the lamb over the rice he’d oh-so-elegantly glopped onto a plate. His mouth was on fire (John could tell from the way his nostrils were flared), but the stubborn git was also probably half-starved and definitely more-than-half mental. ‘I was wondering when they would realise it wasn’t just the kitchen staff all miraculously going deaf.’ With two fingers, he swiped around the inside corners to slide the remaining red sauce onto his plate, before licking them clean.

‘Charming,’ John noted dryly, staring as Sherlock’s now-orange dyed fingers emerged wetly from his mouth.

Sherlock smirked like a furry black cat that had jumped onto a white sofa. John wanted to stretch him bare across the table. He picked up the weekend insert instead.

After really disgustingly few minutes of not-quite-silent chomping or page-turning and sipping of tea respectively, Sherlock ripped a piece of garlic naan and wiped up the last morsels.

‘You intend to accept this publisher’s offer over the other one.’

It wasn’t a question, but John couldn’t help lowering the paper and staring at him openly. The feline grin was back.

‘Go on then,’ John sighed, but he knew his face gave him away entirely, and Sherlock licked his
lips like a Christmas locked-room murder had come early.

‘You were typing — well, as close an approximation as you do; hammering, really — when I came in. You were laughing to yourself as you wrote but you were worried momentarily when you looked at the top of my head: writing up the case, then. — The bump, incidentally, is fine, just as it was fine yesterday, and yes you can verify that for yourself later as you will insist upon doing.

‘You went out this morning for groceries, not including the propolis I told you would improve your lingering blisters because you are too stubbornly invested in so-called “modern medicine” to admit that apiological chemistry is better. In any event, you also got an impressive array of magazines and newspapers, including several that you usually deem not only morally suspect but also wildly overpriced. Your salary nor your hours have increased at the clinic, and we did not make any substantial commission from the nonexistent million-pound reward from Mr Evans. Feeling generous, then, which is to say feeling extravagant beyond just general good spirits. Though you are a gambler by nature, you evidently felt it justified based on the expectation of soon-to-be attained earnings. There are also the various old files, the recent case documents and your notes, and the thesaurus to suggest you’re not only writing for your usual blog punters but also for a less witless audience. — Your misled belief the average book buyer has higher standards of the English language, I will not bother to dignify with an argument. — Conclusion: you received another email this morning from a publisher, this time offering acceptable terms, and you intend to take it.’

John felt a swoop and soar of desire in his gut, mind rocketing through several satisfying ways he could shove the smug smirk on that gorgeous alien face into a gasp of pleasure.

John’s expressed the same thought in every possible variant available to the English language, a three years-younger Sherlock crowed, before Irene had gone on to say the one thing John hadn’t — very much the thing he was thinking at the moment, the thing Sherlock’s eyes were now thinking too, so John chanced it, almost certain Sherlock would follow his mental track.

‘Mrs. Hudson would probably be miffed if we got another scratch on her nice table.’

Sherlock didn’t bother to look down at the table, to move or to take his eyes away from John’s, adding to the electric charge in the room that made John want to throw Sherlock against a wall. As it was, the heat of Sherlock’s body, not in contact anywhere in particular but somehow palpable everywhere, where his hands and mouth and skin should be (fingertips along John’s belly, the sensitive flesh under his arms, tongue behind John’s ear) was slowly driving his pulse through the roof. He barely heard for staring at Sherlock’s lips when he said, ‘I doubt she wants it back after what it’s already been through, John.’

‘And that’s just the things she knows about,’ John agreed. Apparently reading his mind (he so often could) Sherlock’s smirk quirked dangerously even higher at that, and John broke.
In a flash and whip of papers they were both on their feet, a collision of mouth and hands, teeth biting into lips and tongues and fresh-revealed skin like faint pinpricks of barbed wire, sharp enough to hurt. The burn of hot chilies across his taste buds almost made him laugh.

John yanked aside the sheet and sighed with overjoyed relief to find Sherlock completely naked underneath — flushed across his abdomen, a little bit hard and breathing unevenly — gorgeous — it had been ages —

‘It’s been a week, John,’ Sherlock muttered, amused, but his hands were swiftly removing John’s shirt and belt and trousers, Christ —

‘Christ,’ he swallowed, very glad that they had the sheet because he wasn’t going to last long enough to use the table properly and he didn’t want to think about the state of the floor.

He managed just at the last moment to get himself under Sherlock, pulling him down over him in a rush and only hitting his own unconcussed head on the tile, mouthing at whatever part of Sherlock he could reach, and then suddenly everything was essentially a blur because Sherlock’s hands and mouth were ruthless but his eyes were searching and adoring and John couldn’t help but feel like this was the icing on the cake of a dream-like day: blowjobs at 3 pm on the kitchen floor.

Side by side sleepily afterwards, Sherlock closed his eyes. ‘Oud and bergamot. Exactly right, as I knew it would be.’

John allowed himself to roll his eyes at the ceiling. He’d waited more than three weeks since he’d found the dark bottle on his dressed one morning, stopping him in his brisk routine. It wasn’t that the cologne didn’t smell good. It smelt fantastic, of course — firewood, like the smoke from a crisp, cold forest camping fire, combined with the familiar whiff of Earl Grey — posh as hell and, damn the man, in keeping with what John (if forced) would have picked for himself. And forced was very much the extent of it, considering, as he had verified later, how much it cost: well more than he’d ever bothered on hygiene products, for any girlfriend or family member, never mind for himself. Which was, he reckoned, the none-too-subtle point: I can’t be seen dating a man who still considers army-regulation unscented soap and bargain-bin shampoo sufficient for his scent regime. From now on, please wear the following selection from my three-ways indexed fragrance profile. Except, naturally, John knew Sherlock would never really have said ‘please’.

‘Thought I’d try it out,’ he admitted. It wasn’t as though he had imagined Sherlock wouldn’t notice: that ship was not only sailed, but probably had crashed into an iceberg, broken in two, and sunk to the depths of the metaphorical ocean.
'And?'

'S’nice.'

‘Nonsense. And it’s ideal for daily use.’

He tried not to tense. ‘We’ll see.’

Sherlock sniffed sceptically at John’s sternum. ‘Oranges.’

John peered to where Sherlock’s head was resting, nose along his shoulder. ‘What, oranges? I didn’t get any — they weren’t on the list.’

‘Scents take on different aspects when in contact with natural human odours, chemical signatures with different notes as they combine and decay. In this case, your skin plus this cologne gives off —’ he grazed his index finger along John’s stomach — John shivered radiating out across his bare skin ‘— oranges.’

‘Mm,’ he allowed, staring down at the outbreak of gooseflesh. His mind was whirring back online with possibilities. He couldn’t smell oranges, or tea leaves, or firewood, but his nose and mouth were still full of Sherlock and the world of flavours that meant, so maybe he could be persuaded to indulge — from time to time — in the posh stuff to use to his advantage.

Sherlock, hand holding lightly but firmly above John’s side as though he meant to grip there and propel himself up towards John’s mouth (not a bad idea), had his thumb grazing slightly to curve over John’s hipbone where the hollow of his skin was humid and hyper-sensitive, and looked up: his eyes were fountain water around jet black discs of pupils. John tugged lightly at Sherlock’s mussed hair, trailing in loops up and in and out and down and up. With each stroke he confirmed inwardly that his ability to hold everything he felt for Sherlock inside himself was rapidly deteriorating. Sometimes it threatened to explode his skin from within, sending bits of himself across 221b like a bomb blast. (As his dreams proved, such a thing was easy to picture.) Yet somehow even now his own body felt enormous, his toes miles and miles away, across the confused, bumbling mountain range of both their skin, and beyond them Sherlock’s paler knobblier feet, and between here and there Sherlock was looking at him hungrily under long eyelashes and John imagined the tectonic shift that would erupt if he gave in and rolled himself up to cover Sherlock’s body with his and kiss him until they could go again.
‘We have to get up.’

John stopped moving his fingers. ‘So much for enjoying the moment.’

‘We’ve been enjoying the moment for several moments. Now it’s time to get up.’

‘I’m not working today. You just solved a case. I’ve got a book deal. And, it’s Friday. We both deserve a day off.’ *And a bit of a reward.*

Lazily shifting away from John, Sherlock insisted, ‘Your idea of a “day off” is to clean and then force us to go interact with the parade of idiots at the pub. Which isn’t what you really want. So we’re going to a concert.’

John allowed the silence to drag on a bit in the hopes that Sherlock would hear himself. When this was unsuccessful, he bit back a tart reply (it wasn’t the people, including quite a few decent people, at the pub so much as gesture of drinking in *company* rather than at home, alone) and went for: ‘I’m sorry?’

Sherlock’s hand waved about vaguely. ‘The thing — Mr. What’s-his-name, the banker — gave us tickets.’

Putting aside the absurdity of Sherlock always deleting the names of clients he found too boring to retain after the case was concluded, John cast his mind back. ‘Hang on, *Lord Carstairs*? Were those even good tickets? What if he shunted off his seats for some artsy nonsense in a bunker near Heathrow.’

Sherlock opened his eyes, panther-like orbs as he regained his usual self-control. ‘Doubtful. It’s *Paganini*, John. In any event, all the relevant details will be printed on the tickets, including the date and time: in this case, today, half past four. Must get dressed — the curtain will not wait! You are going to love this one,’ he grinned gleefully, then shot up and dashed away, a ridiculous blur of naked energy.

Pitching himself to his feet with a grunt and the creak of his bones, John began sorting his clothes. ‘Well,’ he added aloud to no one, ‘same time next week?’
Ignoring the smack of nighttime chill, Sherlock damn near threw himself out of the cab towards their front door, which under any other circumstances would have been completely infuriating but instead was a bit infuriating and very, very promising so John paid the driver, distractedly assuming that he probably looked like exactly what he was: a bloke off to get lucky after a posh night out (more specifically, a man to shag the living daylights out of the man he jumped after).

It had been a lovely but long several hours — more than four hours, if you counted the interval and travel, which he absolutely did. He also resented slightly that he had liked the concert (haughty audience aside) and, though he refused to admit it to Sherlock, it probably was better to spend £40 on taxis and a whisky at the orchestra rather than on successively sloshed pints and darts wagers with the football crowd of a Friday evening. At least once in a while.

Now, though, based on the simmering tension in Sherlock’s shoulders after what John’d whispered to him just before the second half (fuelled by whisky and the lingering obscene scent of Sherlock on his fingers), they were both impossibly keyed up. He could not be arsed if the entire street — if the entire planet — knew what they were getting up to. The front door swung open before John could crowd Sherlock against it, but he more than kept up with Sherlock’s great leopardine springs up the stairs (another usually-annoying act that was currently fuelling John’s tunnel vision).

Leaping onto the landing and striding through pompously, Sherlock declared in his well-practised tone of triumph, ‘As I anticipated, you liked this concert—’

Before Sherlock had time to congratulate himself further, John shoved him none too carefully back against the open sitting room doorframe. ‘Shut up.’

He saw an insulted flicker bounce across Sherlock’s face before John had him pulled down, body pressed firmly between his own and the moulding, by planting one hand against the wall but keeping his mouth just slightly out of reach. He could string this out for ages, feeling the hum of winding frustration mounting in Sherlock, almost sweeter than the admittedly excellent symphony still reeling in his ears. Teasing, tipping his head to one side and inhaling only to pull back as the hint of his lips ghosted across Sherlock’s, then changing his feet and tilting his nose the other way, maddening and intoxicating and highly effective — Sherlock, he knew fervently, was an impatient sod, particularly when the air between them was charged and John was essentially holding him on the brink without having to do more than caress his wrist back and forth with a single finger.
The sound of their accelerating blood became the only important thing left in the room. Sherlock’s pupils swelled slowly to push his irises (tonight the colour of seaweed) outward. Warm and nocturnal, bright-sharp with possibility: perfect.

Eventually Sherlock, almost crossly, growled, ‘Come on, kiss me, you want to and you’ve been wanting to for hours.’

‘Bossy,’ John chided, but he gave in anyway.

And oh Sherlock’s mouth was lush, closed in a pout as though they hadn’t seen each other in weeks, like they had to start from scratch, which thank God they never had to do again. John kissed the bottom lip fervently, then the top, long and wet and deep enough to drown. For a brief second he felt Sherlock’s quiet sigh, but as Sherlock continued to meet his kisses ardently, John decided to interpret the sigh as contentment rather than irritation.

His kisses slowly became frantic, edged with teeth that brought a full rosy flush to Sherlock’s lips, if only to remind Sherlock which one of them had the upper hand here. Come to think of which…

‘John,’ Sherlock muttered sternly, finding the shell of John’s ear as John manhandled him fiercely out of his ridiculous posh dinner jacket and bloody silk tie, ‘mind the cufflinks.’

John sought and sucked on his tongue, nudging his cheek with his nose, until Sherlock was slumped slightly further down the door and panting. Christ, but his mouth — his jaw, it was divine —

‘You mind the cufflinks in the next ten seconds, or I’m sorting them whatever way I bloody well like,’ he retorted hoarsely, shoving his knee higher between Sherlock’s legs, to make his point. Sherlock’s almost imperceptible whine was perfect.

John began mouthing harsh kisses down Sherlock’s neck as he peeled Sherlock’s crisp ice-blue shirt open. (Sherlock’s hands were working behind John’s head, forearms resting on his shoulders, until a moment later his arms sprang apart, cuffs undone, pulling apart his now-unbuttoned shirt to reveal his stupidly gloriously bare chest.)

‘God, you’re a bad man,’ he groaned, sucking a lovebite over Sherlock’s clavicle, unfastening and untucking and petting until his fingertips crept along the warm skin of Sherlock’s hips beneath the
loose invitation of his undone belt. ‘Sitting there, all night, in your damned chair, like it wasn’t screaming for anyone to jump you and snog you senseless…’

‘Don’t exaggerate: not “anyone”,’ Sherlock breathed, nails scraping restlessly along John’s nape.

‘They’d have to drag me out by my ears if I’d’ve had to watch you, gone all hazy-eyed, for one more sodding encore,’ he went on, one hand working Sherlock’s shirt off now that the cufflinks were gone (not that either of them cared to find out where), the other thumbing up along the dip where Sherlock’s neck met his shoulder, the spot that now as ever made Sherlock jerk forward shudderingly as his nose dipped behind John’s left ear. John smirked and tipped him back with long draughts of kisses, losing himself in it.

He wasn’t entirely sure if it had been the sheer thrill of suggesting they do something radically different in bed, or the shock on Sherlock’s face, just as the theatre flashed the lights to call them back to their seats, that John had been the one to suggest this particular act, or that he’d dared say such a thing to Sherlock Holmes in broad daylight (or, as it were, bright, public lobby light) but all of it fed into John’s hungry curiosity… The idea that Sherlock wanted it to happen, that he wanted John not just for spontaneous quickies but for deeply premeditated, er, manoeuvres, the kind that didn’t deflate at negotiations of ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ and hygiene and history. John pressed more fully across Sherlock’s whole body, hard and tight, and didn’t care whether it was now (though fucking hell he was ready now) or never, but that look on Sherlock’s face had made John groan to suppress the simple declaration that he wanted to paint in permanent shiny letters over the doorway to 221 —

Sherlock slurred across the surface of his consciousness, voice dripping derisively, ‘If you can manage to emerge from the depths for a moment… I believe this would be an excellent opportunity to yield to your proposition. Lest you get impatient waiting any longer.’

Surprised and oddly stung by this, John, a little breathless, drew back with a slight frown. ‘As if you’re not down there with me.’

Bold as brass, smirking as though he had not been minutes away from coming in his fussy special concert suit, Sherlock raised an imperious eyebrow. ‘I simply mean, it was a longer week for some of us than for others.’

The gall — he took a full step back, enough to remove himself from the places they were touching — he felt genuinely as though he’d been doused with freezing water. The intense, bitter taste of unfairness of that remark stole any words — touched a nerve he thought he’d stopped protecting. Because it had been Sherlock who had clearly flirted with him earlier, just as hungry for it as John was himself, like the razor-sharp energy during the final movement of the concert when the orchestra was moving towards a climax and Sherlock had brushed his thumb along the inside of
John’s knee, making him stifle a groan. *They* (they, both of them) had been kissing only moments ago with relief; had flown at each other earlier in the kitchen with the desperate need to be close in a way that had long ago transcended pleasure and become necessary, vital. Hadn’t they? —

‘You’ve been thinking about it,’ Sherlock plowed on, timbre deep. ‘You’ve been imagining it for weeks. You *crave* a gambit, you’re always a man to take a risk. You want to take it. And — John? Where are you going?’

Every part of him was tensed, staggered, emanating from a soreness in his chest that ached like burn of a pneumatic cough. He turned his back to Sherlock for a moment in the hopes of mastering himself.

Behind him he heard the glide of fabric, which meant Sherlock had probably buttoned his shirt back up a bit. Good. At least he’d read that correctly. Half-in, half-out of his clothes, and — yes, John found, turning to look at him darkly — Sherlock was glaring irritatedly at John: waiting as though he deserved an apology!

‘Don’t pretend this is just me, Sherlock,’ he growled shortly, but guilt was now corroding his feelings about the past few days (few weeks). Yet he knew, he knew with dead certainty, that he wasn’t wrong here: it wasn’t a request that Sherlock was *deigning* to debase himself to. ‘I’m not some sex-crazed bastard. I haven’t ever forced anything on anyone, least of all you. Now, I’m going to bed. Goodnight. And if and when I want something, for the record? *I will actually ask you.*’

‘I don’t need to be told —’

‘Yes, *you do.*’

Sherlock was scowling, studying him, but John didn’t want to be read for clues. He couldn’t even begin to have this row that forced him to doubt himself, to doubt what he knew to be fact in Sherlock. This was a frightening emotional reality, probably, for the maestro of high, mighty, calculating reason. But John didn’t feel up to convincing Sherlock how much they… they cared about each other, wanted each other; how different this was to all the other times with every other person he’d ever been with — especially not when his insides were already churning at how fucking quickly things had gone from heated to — cool, in the worst possible way.

‘All right,’ Sherlock murmured, and John’s gaze snapped up from boring holes into the carpet.
“‘All right’ what?’ he said, gracelessly. His shirt felt starch-stiff across his back, sticking to his skin, ill-fitting.

‘Tell me what you want.’

Sherlock was clearly holding his tongue, looking into John’s eyes keenly; he was keeping himself, what he actually thought, behind a wall. It was there, John knew it: they loved each other. It wasn’t bloody rocket science. They were in this for good, forever. But here again was Sherlock, essentially denying it to his face, forcing him (yet again) to blink first, to come out and say it, without any sign that he knew how it tore John up to feel this way. No indication that Sherlock really heard him even when he did say it. That Sherlock did believe him. That it was enough, that it would ever be enough, to keep him from leaving again.

Neither of them said anything for… for too long. Finally Sherlock took a step forward. John manfully stood his ground.

(Probably one of his therapists had spun it out at some point: that trust was a leap of faith, that love was essentially giving someone else the most vulnerable part of yourself, and trusting that they wouldn’t shatter it into a thousand pieces. Just now, it felt as though Sherlock didn’t even recognise the simple, ugly truth — that he was holding all the cards.)

Though he refused to take another step back, his eventual sigh felt like a retreat. ‘I have work in the morning.’

After a long moment, Sherlock shifted his own weight fractionally, away from John. It seemed like a dismissal, so he took it.

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With a sharp jolt, he awoke, disorientated and overwarm and grunting as Sherlock slipped between his thighs, his cock thrusting as John’s pressed up against his own belly, already hard and leaking.

‘Jesus,’ he moaned, shifting back instinctively, his sleep-lax left hand clumsily shoving Sherlock’s hip against him and grinding him closer, harder, tighter — ‘Jesus, fuck…’
Sherlock’s hot breath gulped and gasped, his nose dug into John’s shoulder. John could imagine the riots of sweat-drenched curls, matted to Sherlock’s forehead where it was sticking to the nape of John’s sweat-clammy neck, tickling his skin with each cant of Sherlock’s hips —

‘John, I — *John*—’

Without thinking, brain swamped with *not good* very *bad* and *so so sososo good don’t stop* he locked his ankles, and Sherlock hissed and slid down on his side, and the angle was rougher and suddenly Sherlock’s slick fist was in front of him, dragging downwards. John’s hand flew up to grab, white-knuckled, at the strained cords of Sherlock’s neck; his body couldn’t decide to rock back or forwards, and for a single electric instant he felt like he and Sherlock both were *everywhere* at once, and he *gripped*, riding out their near-simultaneous orgasms with a moan, fingers biting so hard he was sure they drew blood.

Through the white noise of his breathing, the distant noise of someone drunkenly laughing in the midnight hour down on Baker Street: it would not have woken him, had he been asleep.

Sherlock had rolled away (onto what would be his side of the bed, except they never *slept* here anymore; John’s room was more often than not a changing room, an overlarge closet versus where they actually slept together — and slept at all —, in Sherlock’s room). His deep, steadying huff was nearly as loud as John’s, though he seemed to have tried to mute it by exhaling through his nose. John didn’t look round.

With as much energy and dignity as he could gather, he wiped his stomach and sticky thighs with the top margin of the sheet, then curled himself onto his side, facing the door. He wanted Sherlock to admit it, here and now, while they were both exposed and debauched and prideless. (Not apologise — that was surely asking too much.) Wished he would listen when John said, in every way possible, that he wasn’t going to leave: that he didn’t think he would survive it, not a second time.

Instead John lay awake, frowning into his pillow for what felt like hours, listening to Sherlock’s equally sleepless breaths.
Chapter Summary

*I’m sorry*, he admitted, internally. But he was sure that John would be more than happy to demand what exactly he was sorry for, right here, in front of Mycroft and — in approximately one minute — their next client. The list would take longer than that.

Chapter Notes

As ever, despite departing from the show at TRF, corresponding moments tether my version to canon-Series 3, because WOW even still it's hard to believe some of that actually happened.

*WOW. I’m slightly shocked and so humbled to share THIS COVER ART gifted to me by @Hamstermoon for the series. So unbelievably chuffed. [wanders away to blubber in a corner]*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 2: Sherlock

*‘Here occurs a terrific gulf. Millions of things I want to say can’t be said. You know why.’ — Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, letter 9 Oct 1927*

Leave it to Mycroft to stick his grotesquely overlarge nose in at the worst possible moment.

*‘We’re busy,’* Sherlock fumed, making sure to whisk the belt of the (burgundy) dressing gown behind him as he strode over to the window and picked up his violin.

*‘So I gather,’* oozed the great and pointless oaf behind him, a knowing pitch to his voice that grated in Sherlock’s veins exactly unlike a needle. No reason to turn around, not to see his bespoke periphrastic self-important *glorified ACCOUNTANT of a brother* reading the hateful silence he had so unhelpfully strode in upon. He smashed his eyes shut and sawed his bow.

*‘No point torturing your violin, Sherlock,’* chided Mycroft blandly.
His shoulders and back gave a phantom twinge. ‘You’re one to talk.’ *(This isn’t torture, Mycroft. Or have you forgotten Serbia already? But John didn’t know, not fully, and today was not the day to enlighten him.)* ‘I don’t think I’d ever heard Mr. Gresham beg someone to *stop* coming to lessons before you.’

Assuredly, Mycroft rolled his eyes. Excellent. Maybe for once a popular misconception would turn out to be true and his face would get stuck that way.

Through the Babel, he heard Mycroft’s muted tones cajoling: ‘I apologise for the intrusion, John.’

‘We’re not busy,’ John informed him.

The violin shrieked perfectly. Which probably earned him a glare, or two. He tore a *spiccato* gash in a high B flat, enough to pierce his own ears.

‘What can I do for you?’ (Not *we*.)

‘I have been approached by a would-be patron of yours, one who had hoped to discuss a pressing matter with you both in the… relative privacy of Baker Street. If it’s not too much trouble.’

His tone suggested that he found this client’s preference highly dubious to the point of eccentricity, but — for hierarchical reasons, most likely — incontestable.

‘No, but.’ (A rasp on the carpet as John shifted his stance.) ‘Surely you have places more private than our sitting room.’

‘My colleague felt that he should keep his… professional ties apart from this matter.’

*Oh, for god’s sake!* Sherlock rounded on them both with an imitation of moronic joy. ‘As ever, Mycroft doesn’t trust his staff not to post official secrets on Twitter. Isn’t the fate of the nation in wonderful hands!’
They hadn’t spoken all day, but still John’s frown — not even slightly fractured by a laugh — set loose a wriggling eel in his abdomen. Mycroft’s grimace, on the other hand, was satisfyingly thin.

‘I had hoped to arrive ahead of him, in order to give you some due warning…’ He cast a glance over the stack of semi-clean dishes, the rumpled afghan in a pool on the sofa, their bowed shelves stuffed with potentially useful paperwork, the very faint stench (where was that — ah, his laundry hamper: his week-old sodden socks) of proliferating mould, Sherlock’s cufflinks glinting where they had bounced on either side of the doorway last night. ‘Should you wish to prepare.’

John did smile this time. (Primates and many mammals interpret the upturn of the mouth and particularly the baring of teeth as a sign of aggression, a warning signal, for precisely this sort of smile.)

‘Ta very much for the head’s up, Mycroft.’ He nodded (old habits: a gesture of (un)due deference, more casual than a salute and far more versatile), then headed his favourite direction: towards the kettle. ‘Make yourself at home.’

The unbidden urge to kiss John perilously breathless erupted in his mind, so vivid with sense-memory he could feel the phantom impressions of such a meeting on his skin and clothing.

*I’m sorry,* he admitted, internally. But he was sure that John would be more than happy to demand what exactly he was sorry for, right here, in front of Mycroft and — in approximately one minute — their next client. The list would take longer than that.

So he quickly rotated his chair, then moved behind John’s turned back towards his (their) bedroom and exchanged his dressing gown for a jacket.

(Long after attending to that other of Mycroft’s royal ‘colleagues’ in less-than-complete dress (his sheets were better material than 90% of the tourists who visited the Palace), which John had later described as ‘sans shirt, shirt pants, sans socks, sans everything’ — a reference he had loved being able to explain smugly —, Sherlock had made a promise to himself that he would not longer treat clients with (much) irreverence. He had realised during his time ‘away’ that he was grateful that they came, however vapid/thick/deluded/entitled/mundane they were, and not just for the thrill of the case. He had come to see, when he was gone from Baker Street, that, though he didn’t care for them himself, he could care about their problems — and thereby could, in no small measure, reduce the number of misunderstandings and mistakes in the world simply by doing something he already liked to do, something he was very good at doing. He could make sense of these portions of the world, when so little else seemed to make sense.)
A car out front. The front door shut firmly, followed a moment later by the ascent of sure-footed but nevertheless aging feet on the stairs. In the kitchen, their one good tea service — well, the pot and two matching cups (with the third, slightly heavier but nearly matched, though John would of course take the odd fourth mug for himself; GOD, but he wanted a cigarette!) — tinkled on a tray.

After seventeen thuds, the creak of the sofa and a whisper of Saville Row wool as his brother rose.

‘Sir James,’ greeted Mycroft majestically.

‘Holmes,’ murmured a mellow, mid-vocal range, public sch— well, military academy (underneath, Belfast), but certainly upper-class public servant — voice.

He waited a full 4/4 bar, then emerged from his room to meet their illustrious client.

(He was trying to be more patient, he wasn’t trying to be boring.)

***

Colonel Sir James Damery was the kind of man whom John would have met often in military training institutions and seldom on the field of battle. He was, obviously, a wealthy, high-ranking (semi-retired) bureaucrat — the eminently transposable kind that sat behind desks in government, armies, corporations, news conglomerates, and the better organised of the criminal world. (Not that the latter was at all mutually exclusive the any of the formers.) After a lifetime of service to queen and country, Damery was the intimate acquaintance of a number of peers, foreign diplomats, and evidently, private individuals of he sort that didn’t have to rent their diamonds: of great means and little actual importance to the world.

(They would, at least, being getting paid — probably well — for this case.)

For himself, Damery was balding (hair formerly dark mahogany) and clean-shaven; 5’9” though he seemed slightly shorter due to approximately five years of significant bone density loss, and for having spent the majority of his life inclining his head for one reason or another. (His wife, almost certainly minor nobility (inherited cufflinks, not Irish), was an inch taller (before heels).) Clothes: meticulous, current without being ‘edgy’ or absurd (a lavender pocket handkerchief; a charcoal silk necktie) yet assiduously well-kept (his regularly de-scuffed shoes); a man, then, who slept well at night and rose early to perform his life’s duty, to play the role he had been assigned and do so with dignity. The pin on his inner lapel spoke of his seniority within the Carlton Club, his private political leanings, his feelings about Irish Home Rule, his literary taste, and (considering the usual fat-heavy fare at such institutional meals) his cholesterol. He had worn glasses (a nondescript style
that would be acceptable for another few years) for the whole of his adult life, which added to his overall impression of being reliable, likable, personally disinterested and, most important of all, discreet.

John would almost certainly be describing him as looking like an old turtle in a waistcoat. (He wouldn’t be wrong.)

When Sherlock had entered the room, Mycroft had met their guest with a handshake, but now Sir James’s hands were tucked, with (his pockets and rear coat flaps attested) a lifetime’s habit of placing them promptly out of the way. He stood to attention, but his posture was relaxed, even elegant. More to the point, the fact that Mycroft, who usually radiated coolness, had stood board-straight when Damery entered and then had immediately excused himself and actually driven away suggested that, for perhaps the first time, ‘colleague’ meant ‘boss’.

‘Sir James,’ Sherlock offered, with a formal dip of his head.

Reproducing a hand, the man’s grip was strong — apposite for a figure whose long-standing reputation in ‘society’ (if such a thing existed outside of gentleman’s clubs) had been one of unflappable, delicate finesse in handling situations best kept quiet: the personable counterpart to Mycroft’s strategic mind for arranging numbers and skulking behind people’s bins. Not dying on us today, he thought to himself. The nation may be in steady hands after all.

‘Mr. Holmes,’ Damery acknowledged gravely, in the unmistakable marble-mouthed rumble of most British peers over the age of 60. ‘And Dr. Watson. How do you do.’

John didn’t bother to ask how Damery knew his title, merely returned a polite, assured, ‘Afternoon,’ as he also shook his hand. (Sherlock wondered if Damery had chosen ‘Doctor’ over ‘Captain’ for any specific reason, or if he had been tipped off by Mycroft.)

‘I’m very grateful to you both for agreeing to meet me,’ Damery confessed with perfunctory civility and — surprisingly — a genuine hint of relief.

Sherlock sat, which at least apparently released everyone from the binding predicament of not being the first to stop standing.

‘Dreadful business,’ continued Sir James. ‘Ah, yes, thank you. Milk, no sugar, if you can,’ he directed to John, who was at the partners desk handling tea. (Their roles, all three of them, were
easy to fill. And of course John had gone for the chipped mug before realising Mycroft wasn’t staying.) Damery had settled into their high-armed sofa with grace, so his discomfort was rather with the matter at hand.

‘Please, Sir James, begin at the beginning and omit nothing.’

The (gentle-, he probably added)man took a moment to sip his tea (his ‘thank you’ so resonant in his mouth it was virtually unintelligible), then sat back.

‘I must first begin by asking how much you know of Baron Heinrich Gruener.’

‘The Austrian murderer?’ Fascinating: this was more promising than his brother had intimated. (Or perhaps he simply didn’t know: delightful.)

The huff of recognition at his side meant John had also recognized the name but not immediately placed it — they did regularly update the list of the world’s most concerning criminals (ranked by a formula of Sherlock’s invention, not based solely on already-committed crimes like the idiots at INTERPOL), and Gruener had been on the list for as long as John had been helping with record-keeping. As it was, their independent register was sufficient to locate the germane details in the archive room (the study, naturally) of his Mind Palace.

Meanwhile Sir James was blinking in apparent amazement that Sherlock was not a complete neophyte. ‘My word, Mr. Holmes. Your brother did say you were the sharp sort but… this is extraordinary. Quite extraordinary. But, Gruener has never entered a criminal courtroom?’

‘It’s the nature of my work to keep abreast of the relevant news,’ he shrugged. ‘A not entirely uninteresting pastime.’

‘And we play Top Trumps with fugitives with the worst moustache,’ added John.

Damery did chortle at that. (Apparently he was unaware that John wasn’t joking.)

‘Nevertheless, I highly doubt that you are here because Gruener murdered his Dutch first wife in Genoa six years ago.’
'You believe that he did kill her, then?' asked Sir James intently.

‘The convenient death of the primary witness and the fact that the woman was cremated before her body could be properly examined — my opinion is strangulation, but poisoning is nearly as likely — suggests as much. Well, that and the fact that Gruener was funding both the minor local narcotics drug cartel and the police unit. And the final point, that the woman in question did, in fact, know how to swim.’

‘Good heavens!’

(He had gathered these facts in two sleepless nights four years ago, pouring over Italian and German newspapers which all conspicuously refused to report more than a column on the drowning. (The boy, a violinist who had been a keen amateur sailor and the sole, merely partial, witness, had been found dead in his rooms at the music conservatory of an alleged overdose four days after the woman.) His ears prickled. He wondered if John was impressed.)

‘Mr. Holmes, we have been tracing Baron Gruener’s movements for nearly a decade.’ (Interesting: ‘we’, the government? the security services? Evidently Damery’s role was more active than garden party host.) ‘He is, as I’m sure you know, at this moment residing in this country. But we must not treat this issue as a fait accompli. Nevertheless I confess to you, I,’ (Damery’s brow knitted, and he looked as though (had he been a man less in control of himself) he would have wrung his hands) ‘I fear our impending crisis is not to be prevented. In three weeks, a young woman’s future —’

‘Three weeks!’ Sherlock burst in, because good lord, was this Mycroft’s idea of an insulting practical joke? ‘My cases frequently take a matter of hours, Sir James, not the better part of a month. It’s not as though he’s difficult to find: his home address was listed in the Sunday Telegraph, for god’s sake! Whatever incompetent —’

John cleared his throat. Not good.

Sherlock blinked it away; FINE. ‘Whatever "people" you’ve had working on this ought to be sacked.’

‘Several steps have been taken in our present situation, none of which has met with even an ounce of success. Thus it transpired that I reached out to your brother, who agreed that you might be able to lend us your expertise.’
'You say “us”, Sir James,’ John wondered aloud, drawing full attention to himself for the first time in several minutes. ‘“Our crisis”? Who do you mean?’

John was an absolute marvel. He seldom appreciated how astute he was, how perfectly sensationally brilliant he could be (at times).

Having hit upon a sensitive question, John waited (not looking at Sherlock) while Damery frowned guiltily. ‘I… I must ask you not to press that point, Dr. Watson. As I have described it, my client — my friend — is in a terrible situation, and I must rely on your sympathy to keep his or her identity private, though I have no doubt at all that you could discover it without much trouble.’

Typical — bloody politicians and underground peers of the state. Secrets from one end to the other. He could probably work it out in under an hour, but to do that he would have to give a damn. Gruener was a major criminal, no doubt in his mind, but Sherlock was done hunting shadows and only ever finding more.

Sherlock rose. (Like cats watching a laser pointer, both of them: heads following him up but neither of them readying to move from their seats.) ‘I’m sorry, Sir James, but I cannot take your case.’ (He wasn’t especially sorry.)

The old diplomat scowled up at him with distressed displeasure in his eyes. He was either an excellent actor or a very frank, very confident adversary.

‘Mr. Holmes, I act on behalf of one who wishes to save a young woman, a foolish young woman, whose only real crime has been that of granting her trust to a blackguard. You cannot imagine the grave consequences of your refusal.’

I don’t have to ‘imagine’, he reminded himself. And who says ‘blackguard’ anymore?

But he had rushed in too deep to this game before, a catastrophic mistake he was in no hurry to repeat. One Moriarty was enough for a lifetime.

‘I cannot untangle a problem if there remains a jumble of deception at the other end of it.’

‘Deeply though I respect your insistence on candour,’ Damery hedged, ‘surely you must also understand that my work depends on my ability to put myself forward in the place of others. I
believe if you heard the whole story you would change your mind. Might I at least describe it to you in more detail?"

Not a military or public safety investigation, that was more than obvious. Not a murder, or he would not have been able to laugh earlier (he was not so cold-blooded as either Mycroft or himself); nor, for the same reason, was this ‘friend’ merely a fiction to cover up one of his own indiscretions. Almost certainly Gruener had jilted, blackmailed, swindled, or (most likely) beguiled a twenty-something duchess (upper-class, naturally) whose self-destructive tendencies were not new but likely to result in a chain reaction of public scandal and private shame. More importantly, Gruener had already killed twice — four times, if you counted the dead newspaper reporter in Denmark, plus the ostensibly unrelated Parisian private investigator Gerrard Le Brun who no longer enjoyed the use of his legs (Sherlock counted both incidents). So far, Gruener had not seen his name officially linked to any crime whatsoever.

Which all suggested that, even if he did not formally accept the assignment of Lord Damery, perhaps it was time to turn his full attention to the Austrian baron.

With some reluctance, he settled back into his chair and closed his eyes. ‘The facts. In every detail.’

* * *

All told, there were at least few appealing elements.

Another hour’s research yielded Gruener’s self-published reflection (all self-important lies) on the Eye For Beauty: How I Became The World’s Greatest Collector (2005) and two genuine scholarly monographs on the influence of various kinds of varnish in Chinese versus Eastern and Western European pottery and printing in the late medieval/early Renaissance periods (2008), and Death and the Maiden: Images of Beauty and Decay Across the World, 1500-present (2013). The sort of thing Sherlock might have enjoyed reading — precise, technical — had he been more interested in archival rather than forensic puzzles. It was all based in chemistry, fundamentally…

Having deduced a great deal about the man from his writing style and chosen subject, the question remained: how could such a sleek cat as Baron Heinrich Gruener be exposed for the brutal criminal he was?

A rustling of synthetic fibres against natural brought his attention to the sitting room again. John
was standing, hanging a zipped garment bag (tuxedo: Mycroft had had it delivered in under an hour, meaning the swine had been holding a tailored suit for John in the wings until just such an occasion arose; go play dress-up with one of your lemmings, you megalomaniac) over the kitchen door. (There would be a minute scrape near the top panel where the hook was now digging into the paint.)

‘I really don’t want to know how he knows my suit measurements.’

‘Mmm,’ Sherlock agreed, since he suspected it was ‘not good’ (to say nothing of illogical) to unleash his fury that Mycroft had taken even fifteen seconds to gather numerical information about any aspect of John’s body.

For a moment, as he observed John glaring at the long black bag, he considered the possibility that John would refuse to go. Perhaps he truly had crossed some critical line, either last night or with this (rented, but certainly good quality) presumption, and now John was already subconsciously disentangling himself from their current arrangement. He’d scarcely let himself imagine things getting even this far.

‘Are you going to eat, before? Mrs. Hudson’s made some kind of stew… thing.’

The dish was steaming on the table (the table they had almost — no; inconvenient, return to later), meaning Mrs. Hudson was probably enjoying one of her herbal soothers by now, cooking finished and ‘her boys’ taken care of.

But ‘before’ deictically revolved around an implied event: La Forza del Destino, Royal Opera, 1 hour 22 minutes from now. Gratitude and relief flushed Sherlock’s system.

‘Not tonight,’ he said, regretting having to refuse. (The aroma of carrots, tomato-based gravy, potatoes, beef, saffron, and… oranges? Well: Florida. Too bad the congealed sauce would be merely half as appetising after being reheated tomorrow.) ‘Digestion diverts energy away from brain work.’

‘Right.’ John looked at him with a lilt of an eyebrow. ‘I mean, that’s complete bollocks, of course, but don’t let that stop you.’ He went about setting out a second plate — even when angry, an optimist— before dishing up his own and beginning to eat with a soldier’s terse efficiency (and posture… on-edge, overly formal… disappointed).
Sherlock rose from his chair and went to stand near him (though he stood very still, lest his presence induce John to move away). The roast did smell divine.

‘Eating foods rich in sugars and carbohydrates creates a spike in metabolism which ultimately leads to lethargy at inconvenient times, such as, to pick two random possibilities, running after suspects or surveilling criminals during three-hour operas.’

‘Except, in order to do any activity at all, like, oh I dunno, chase suspects or spy on murderers through opera binoculars, you actually have to have some energy to start off with.’ His mouth creased into a line of unsympathetic annoyance, difficult to see at this angle. He chewed on the perfectly boiled-and-then-baked vegetables, mulishly ignoring the weight of Sherlock’s gaze falling down upon him.

So much for talking, it seemed. (But at least, so far, he was still planning on going.)

Taking out his phone, Sherlock scrolled through a variety of society tabloids, getting a sense of Violet De Merville (Gruener’s fiancée and their purported charge) and how they might accomplish Damery’s task of separating the lovebirds. Considering the personal experience he had acquired in just the last twenty-four hours, it seemed the most effective way would be to let them be themselves and drive each other apart: so often the catalyst for a breakup (and from there, if previous patterns were any indicator, a murder).

After what felt like hours, after John had taken a sip of water, washed his plate, cutlery, cup, hands, only then (stubborn, stubborn man) did he finally look at him again. ‘Three hours?’

‘Almost to the minute, unless they take an uncommonly long interval.’

John waved his eyebrows. ‘Oh good, two nights in a row, then.’

Sherlock flinched involuntarily.

With a begrudging sigh, John levelled his direct gaze at him. ‘What happened last night: more than a bit not good.’

Sherlock instantly broke into his well-rehearsed explanation: ‘I only intended to lie down for a few minutes. You do still occasionally have nightmares when you sleep alone. It seemed prudent —’
‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, Sherlock. You don’t get to play the caring nursemaid who came in for pity sex —’

‘Don’t be self-deprecating, you are not that obtuse. Your need for a certain amount of physical contact to reduce anxiety does not mutually exclude a mirroring sentiment in others.’

Momentarily John’s face creased with scepticism, before, after evidently making sense of Sherlock’s point, he swallowed. Then — infinitesimally — his shoulders unclenched. Sherlock felt his face burning, but refused to fidget or otherwise betray the enormity of this admission.

‘And so — what? You got into my bed, starkers, because you figured we both would sleep better if we shagged a bit?’

Eventually, for accuracy, Sherlock stated, ‘I didn’t sleep.’

‘I know.’

(His body felt just one degree out of his control — it was already doing it — his hormones were firing at danger-response levels, awakening him to the familiar, exhilarating sensory blitz that was John — John, up-close, heart-rate slightly elevated, golden-brown coarse facial hair faintly (enticingly) visible along his jaw and flattened upper lip (making him look a full five years younger). Always his unconscious tic, John’s tongue had darted out three times in the course of this conversation (the first words they’d exchanged since the argument, unless one counted the hushed frantic broken obscenities of the episode in question: Sherlock didn’t).)

Sunset below the skyline illuminated the flat, long shadows stretched into the room, now paradoxically dark in contrast to the warm, early autumnal light outdoors. It was easy, in the comforting shade of privacy, to believe that John might in fact understand his perplexity.

‘I find that my physical reactions towards you are seldom, in retrospect, what I would call “wise choices”…’

(An understatement of necessarily gargantuan proportions. But to imagine that upon finding John Watson naked in bed, that Sherlock would have had the saint-like strength to resist touching him, just a little; to prevent himself from curling into John and filling his lungs with his scent until he realised that John was erect beside him, as erect as he was himself; to listen to his rational mind
which had warned, ‘He won’t forgive you — he would be disgusted — this will be the last time if you can’t pull yourself away—’, when the temptation of wondering what the soft, firm insides of John’s thighs would feel like, warmed by their pre-ejaculate and saliva and friction; to stop when John made those noises and held Sherlock so tight it seemed again like it was worth whatever humility he would need to muster later (now) to have this, them, in the night… To believe, in short, that he was not addicted to John Watson beyond reason was to fail to observe himself.)

John was nodding — though whether sarcastic or genuine, Sherlock couldn’t say. He blamed the dusk.

Before he could swallow back the words, he had asked, ‘Do you regret it?’

John sighed, otherwise keeping incredibly still. ‘It isn’t that simple.’

On that, certainly, they were in complete agreement.

Flexing his hand, John seemed to be struggling to put into words something deeply uncomfortable. ‘I just… I spent a long time wanting this — wanting a whole life with someone — but not knowing I could have it, with you. And now that I do…’

The auburn-tinted room seemed to stagger with this half-confession. (Too much data, clouded in sentiment and Sherlock’s suddenly pounding heart.) He didn’t trust himself to say anything right.

‘I can respect whatever you want, Sherlock. It’s never really been a problem, to give you space or time to yourself, even if I’m not always overjoyed with your timing. That’s not going to change. And if you want to have sex every two years or every two hours—’ John caught him in a knowing smirk — it was fairly ambitious… ‘—Shut it.—But what I’m saying is, I can handle that, whatever you want. God knows I spent the better part of two years thinking I’d never be able to have sex with anyone else ever again…’

(Intriguing, but false. How did he account for his relationship — certainly sexual — with Mary Morstan, the woman Sherlock was not supposed to know existed, and the ring John had very nearly given her during that interval? Had he made the same declarations, the same promise, to her?)

‘But I need some time to adjust. We both do…’ John nearly stifled his last point, but after momentarily deliberating, he seemed to decide he could bear voicing it aloud. He shrugged and met Sherlock’s eyes head-on, a wry sad smile not quite holding on his lips, as though resigned to
his fate. ‘It’s not easy for me… to want to kiss you more than you want to be kissed.’

Sherlock boggled. Did he truly understand so little? It wasn’t for lack of wanting — it was two decades’ learning that he was incapable of having the things (the people) he wanted in moderation…

‘I don’t think that’s possible,’ Sherlock croaked, voice thicker than he had expected.

Frowning, John plainly didn’t follow. ‘I can, I just need a bit more time. I—’

‘Not that,’ Sherlock interrupted. ‘The — the other thing.’

Once the penny dropped (a bewildering expression), John looked at him fondly, mouth twisting up from its grimace. ‘Yeah?’

He nodded. And John looked at him… Sherlock felt slightly raw, as if John had only just glimpsed, in the space of this one conversation, the simple fact of Sherlock’s painfully obvious devotion.

(How, after several confrontational and highly emotional conversations, could he believe Sherlock at all ambivalent? Could he be so blind? Sherlock thought his feelings about John were almost certainly visible — dangerously so — to strangers on the pavement, to Mycroft and Sir James, to the bloody delicious-smelling long-dead cow cooling in a soup on the tabletop.)

‘All right then. That’s… that’s good.’ John checked his watch, attempting to hide a smile. Sherlock wished he wouldn’t feel he had to. ‘I reckon we better get moving, then, if we don’t want to miss the Red Baron’s arrival.’ (The reference, if it was one, went over Sherlock’s head: irrelevant. More relevant: John was smirking, good humour gradually reclaiming its hold.) ‘And you’ve got that damn tuxedo. Another night of poncy women fainting all over you while you’re dressed as James bloody Bond.’

Modesty was a false self-conception: certainly there would be a few audience members (of both genders, probably) who spared him an assessing glance. But of course, John’s modesty was entirely sincere: his confidence was founded more upon his experienced seduction techniques than his perception of his good looks. As ever, he underestimated himself.

‘Hardly pertinent tonight: we want to be seen and forgotten. And in any event, Captain, isn’t that
more your area? “All the nice girls love a soldier”?’

For some reason John inexplicably brightened at this.

(What? That was a phrase, surely — such sentences were hardly the organic stuff of his own imagination. His Mind Palace occasionally housed proverbs: the associations common in regular social conversation. Where had this one originated? Connie Price? The ‘Bloody Guardsman’ case? (And what had nearly killed that damned guardsman? John had been checking on the man’s recovery, and his former Major’s: perhaps, when this Gruener business was wrapped up, they could take another pass at solving it. He did so hate the unsolved ones.))

‘It’s “sailor,”’ said John, voice rich with amusement.

What was ‘sailor’ — oh.

John’s gaze had regained its natural self-possessed, unshakeable demeanour, meaning he looked at Sherlock now like it was his birthday and Sherlock was the candle he was intent on blowing out.

‘And at the moment, I’m more interested in what the nice blokes in snobby opera capes like.’

Emphatically in spite of the inanity, Sherlock repressed a shiver.

For a tense moment, Sherlock stood, awaiting John’s reaching fingers on his jacket, his lower back, his jaw: but when none of the usual touches came, he rapidly reassessed: ah. He took a step forward, then (when John smirked even more, settling into his stance leaning against the countertop) another. Hovering over John, he wondered if they had enough time for any of the three or four scenarios gliding like film strips across John’s glinting eyes.

‘I’m not anyone’s definition of “nice”, John.’

‘That’s true,’ John went on, lowering his voice to an undertone, managing to keep the invitation on his face as Sherlock bent close over him. ‘Although. You were impressively patient with Colonel Toffeemouth earlier, even though his case ranks at about a two. That’s pushing “nice”, if you ask me. Best be careful.’
‘Be fair, a four, at least.’ He examined in near-microscopic detail the bridge of John’s nose, the creases around his (wet) upturned mouth. ‘And I won’t be wearing a cape, for god’s sake.’

‘Pity,’ lamented John, lips not-quite-brushing Sherlock’s.

He almost never initiated kisses (dangerous), but, just for a moment, he allowed himself to revel in the rare instance of being able to give them both what they craved.

*"

Chapter End Notes

Comments and feedback, as always, deeply appreciated. x
Three (John)

Chapter Summary

John frowned. ‘It still seems like a bad idea.’

‘And yet, needs must.’ Sherlock hopped up and swept himself off to his bedroom before John could say anything more, followed after a minute by the clanging of the pipes.

_Drama queen._

Chapter Notes

Heed tags: MENTIONS of (but *not* scenes of) past, canon-typical bad things.

As ever, any changes (ie, errors) made since my incredibly helpful beta [@causidicus](https://twitter.com/causidicus) saw this chapter are entirely my own fault -- and do let me know so I can fix them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: John

_‘I can cope with you. The problem is more how do I cope without you because such as you happens almost never.’_ —Anne Sexton, in _A Self-Portrait in Letters_

It was a good opera, as these things went. Sherlock had spied, John had prevented him from toppling unsubtly over a balcony, and the fat lady had sung (he thought, very well). No one had been shot or had a drink thrown in their face (onto what was probably a hideously expensive rented tux). He’d even liked the music enough to buy the CD (though the specky kid at the merchandise stall had looked pityingly at him and asked if he didn’t want to ‘download it for his tablet, with a digital booklet, for half the price?’). They had snogged the whole ride home. All in all, a successful evening.

Even so, he wasn’t in a mood to push his luck.
‘It’s late,’ he muttered into Sherlock’s mouth.

‘Mmm,’ Sherlock responded. John supposed he shouldn’t be too surprised not to get a snarky reply, as he was currently kissing Sherlock slowly, deeply, holding nearly all his weight up against the top of the stairs outside the kitchen. At the back of his mind, he was curious. Did Sherlock deliberately plant himself in positions that almost invariably led to him being plastered against the wall? — Was it was because of their difference in heights, or Sherlock’s almost-overcome anxiety about the scars on his back, or (most hopefully) did he just liked the feeling of John holding him, crowding him, close and hot and sharp, against whatever vertical surface presented itself?

But they’d had enough uncomfortable relationship talks this (long, long) last couple of days to keep them a while. Instead, John gradually tipped them back out of the kiss, fingers still curled between two of Sherlock’s white fine dress-shirt buttons.

‘It’s late,’ he repeated, watching Sherlock huff impatiently, mouth indecently reddened. ‘Got work tomorrow. I’m for bed. A proper night’s sleep.’ His hard-on thrummed in protest against the fiddly buttons of his tuxedo flies, but he forcibly ignored it. ‘Are you sleeping tonight?’

Sherlock searched his face for a moment, then seemed to collect himself. ‘Probably not. I should look into Gruener’s finances, and Mycroft will probably have sent me CCTV of where Gruener went after the performance.’

That was fine — possibly better. Made things easier, if they were going to try to triangulate some sort of happy sexual/professional/domestic medium. Much as he enjoyed crowding Sherlock a bit, he felt tonight called for ‘quit while you’re ahead’.

Difficult, though, when Sherlock seemed so un-overwhelmed in comparison to his usual frantic tornado.

‘Would you…’ He paused. This was asking for trouble, but… maybe it didn’t count, if he could postpone it until tomorrow? ‘Would it help, if we arranged a time to… to have sex? Gave us some space to wrap our heads around it?’

He could almost see the sparks of arousal shooting across Sherlock’s face, through his arms and legs, down to his fingers which twitched, and pupils that blew hungrily. God, this was a bad —

‘How much notice?’ Sherlock demanded in a rumble.
Fifteen minutes sound good? thought John. ‘A day? A few days, if you’d prefer.’

‘We’re in the middle of a case, John.’

‘I know,’ he nodded quickly, because that was certainly true. But equally, it was clearly going to drive them both mental to swing between extremes of celibacy (or close to) and desperate quickies in the kitchen. ‘I just reckon it might be a good idea to work out a compromise. Only if you want. It just seems like it might resolve some… tension.’

Worse than the damn Cheshire cat, this man, the tilt of his obscene mouth. ‘Can you not “resolve” your own tension?’

‘Witty,’ he said dryly. ‘Yes, I can. Or.’

‘Or?’

Sherlock was watching him, still a bit crushed at the top of the landing. Quitting while one was ahead was only a successful strategy if one was planning to call things to a halt. Otherwise it didn’t quite count as ‘quitting’, only waiting before the action. Like the music at the beginning of the opera — an escalating race involving all the instruments bellowing at full volume, with occasional quieter solos. The whole orchestra, just going for it.

‘Or, I could fuck you across the bed.’

Outside of a cartoon, he hadn’t known a person could blink as much or as quickly as Sherlock, dazed and possibly short-circuited, blinked at this suggestion.

‘If you want,’ John added low, just to be cheeky.

He only stepped back away from Sherlock’s mouth just in time — Sherlock whined, but John made sure not go too far away.
‘John,’ Sherlock purred, almost ravenous, and Christ if that wasn’t something that would always go straight to his cock.

‘So, shall we get out our diaries or —‘

‘For god’s sake, John, if we’re going to do it, let’s just bloody do it!’

God, if anyone had told him a year ago that he’d be standing in black tie after the opera at just before midnight having Sherlock Holmes beg him to bugger him, he would have broken their nose before they’d finished their sentence. Somehow it was a sobering thought.

‘Tomorrow,’ he insisted, stepping forward to soothe Sherlock’s indignation with another slow kiss.

Soon they were both half-tangled together again, hips pressed together and mouths and hands and scattered fiery neurons just this side of buzzing-stinging-numb. He nudged his nose into Sherlock’s and licked his own lips.

‘I want to get it right,’ he murmured. He was deeply aware that it sounded like a bad cliche, a chat-up line for a girl at a uni party fifteen years ago. Didn’t stop it being true.

‘Romantic,’ Sherlock taunted snidely. (Bit difficult, it turned out, to be properly snide with the whole of his mouth bitten rosy and his hair a disaster.)

John laughed, though, scrubbing his face sharply and extricated himself for good, trying and failing to surreptitiously adjust himself in his trousers.

‘Right. Well then.’ He needed to change, to get this suit back in the rental pouch before he found a way to ruin it, and then — he found himself yawning.

Sherlock’s eyebrow rose to mock him.

‘Not a word.’
At last Sherlock shoved himself off the wall, elongating to his full height and, with a dark look that was probably meant to be intimidating, he strode past into the sitting room.

Several minutes later, as John returned downstairs in his pyjamas (full pyjamas tonight: trouser bottoms and his proper grubby t-shirt from an army three-legged-race and everything), he found Sherlock staring up at him from his laptop on the coffee table.

‘John?’ he wondered, owl-eyed and assessing rapidly. Already well into the case, then.

‘If you’d rather I can go back up —’

‘No!’ he half-shouted. John smiled.

‘Goodnight, then, madman.’ On impulse, he took the extra plunge and leaned down to kiss Sherlock briefly. Sherlock’s mouth was still slightly pink.

‘Goodnight, John.’

The pitch black of Sherlock’s room as the door closed softly behind him was split only by the small window, catching the tangerine streetlight from the alley. John climbed into bed, his side, leaving space on the one-in-a-million chance Sherlock did miraculously decide to sleep, or… well, John was confident he wouldn’t get a repeat of last night any time soon after the row they had, but, then again, you never knew.

He thumped his crisp pillow.

Even Before, Sherlock had been able to switch trains of thought at the speed of lightning. One minute discussing a poisoner’s MO, the next the idiotically high-res CCTV as shown on telly, then back to arsenic, before John had even spoken. Sherlock’s mercurial libido was not a surprise development of After — at least, John assumed so. The fact that Sherlock was more likely to moan when a slide culture failed to mature than when he was denied sex seemed all too believable.

Even so, John couldn’t completely ignore the strangeness of it all, lying here in the dark in Sherlock’s room without him. Having once upon a time laid in his own room, listening through walls and doors and muted movements to Sherlock’s nocturnal existence in the flat — and then having lived for nearly 800 days lying awake, feeling like (especially after he’d been drinking, or
hadn’t slept for he stopped knowing how long) he could hear the familiar *thud* and *pnik* in the next room when in his heart he knew it was impossible… Lying in Sherlock’s empty bed instead felt like a perverse intrusion.

With Mary, of course, he’d never been anything but her boyfriend. The only times they’d slept in their own beds had been before they’d gotten serious. Within a few weeks, he’d effectively moved into hers, spending no time at his oppressive tin box of a flat. She’d gamely cleared out a nightstand (the right one, for no reason he could quite remember agreeing to), and the room had been — more so than with any previous parter — a couple’s bedroom. A snug, mostly uncluttered, shared space that smelled like both of them and told anyone who come round for dinner that they were a ‘them’: one bedroom, theirs.

Sherlock’s room was filled with… *things*. In the dark, at this angle, he couldn’t quite make any one of them out. John knew, as he had know for a long time, that Sherlock had an armoire with a long mirror near his bed, but he’d only recently discovered that, from any given point on the bed, you couldn’t see yourself in it. It was also a surprising distance between where John was situated and the door, a gap which made him distinctly uncomfortable. (In his (old?) room upstairs, he’d made sure on the first day he’d moved in to have clear sight-lines and only a split-second’s divide between himself and a potential intruder. That evening, Sherlock had glanced at him all over, rolled his eyes smugly, and gone back to roasting plastic.) He wondered at what point it would be acceptable to bring up rearranging the furniture, and what that conversation would look like.

*Tomorrow*, he thought as he settled at last.

Sleep rolled over him with the theme of the strings replaying in his head.

* * *

Over beans and toast the next morning, Sherlock summarised his findings.

‘Baron Gruener is “fond” of racing horses (not cars or dogs), enough to be co-owner of at least two winning thoroughbreds in recent English and French contests. But his interest is far more on the training side than that of an inveterate gambler.’

John munched on his toast and tried not to fidget uncomfortably.

‘Oh, you’re not an *inveterate* gambler, you just happen to enjoy a certain… baseline level of
hazard.’ Sherlock beamed at him as though this were a great virtue rather than a deeply shameful character flaw. ‘As I was saying, his partners in ownership are always looking to use money to make yet more money, meaning they were happy to allow Gruener —’

‘Free rein?’ John grinned from ear to ear.

Sherlock looked appalled. ‘How you managed to get a book contract is a grim reflection on the present state of publishing…’

‘Shit,’ he exclaimed. ‘I never replied to that editor.’

‘They’ll keep. A few days’ delay makes you seem busier and therefore more desirable.’

John smirked. ‘Yeah?’

Rolling his eyes dramatically, Sherlock returned (alas) to the case. ‘Gruener clearly fancies himself more than a distant operator, as seen by the complaints (or rather, lack of same) from the high turnover of jockeys and trainers: no explanations. Same about the sudden “retirements” of three promising young horses. Virtual silence.’

Considering this, John sipped his tea. ‘And you make something of that?’

‘It suggests that, whatever Gruener’s methods, many of his staff found them competitive to the point of cruelty. Confidence, arrogance, and ruthlessness: a master of his own fortune, in every sense.’

A million metaphors — first and foremost, breaking a horse before it could be bridled — all conspired to send a chill up his spine.

Sherlock seemed to follow his thoughts. ‘Animal cruelty is almost always cited in cases of abusive or sociopathic abnormality.’

‘So you think he’s keeping Violet that way? By hurting her?’
He shrugged noncommittally. ‘Too early to say. But we’ll both know more by this afternoon.’

‘Will we?’ asked John, finishing off his beans.

‘I find it’s best to take the molehill to Mohammed.’

John nodded at the table, refusing to smile.

After a minute, Sherlock cracked. ‘Is that not it?’

‘Nope.’

In an old comic book, a cloud-shaped bubble would have appeared over Sherlock’s head, with a petulant, ‘DRAT!’ As it was, he just scowled and ducked behind his phone.

Today, his blood chugged with each heartbeat. Today, today, today.

‘What time are we going to visit Herr Von Trapp, then?’

As expected, Sherlock waved away the reference with a curt shake of his head. “‘We’ are not doing anything: I am calling upon Gruener while you are introducing yourself to Miss de Merville.’

Well that seemed like the worst idea imaginable.

‘Hang on, don’t they live together?’

‘Gruener keeps a converted abbey in Kingston — the symbolism is appallingly tedious — while Violet has a flat in Covent Garden. Her own property, or, well, her family’s, but same thing, essentially. Trust fund.’
Blimey. Well, that’d make a change — getting a proper cheque for a case for once. But —

‘And why are you wandering alone into the home of a pretty certainly multiple murderer and mental case?’

‘He didn’t see me at the opera,’ Sherlock pointed out. ‘And you know I can’t get the same amount of data sending you or, heaven forbid, Lestrade and company in. Everything of importance will be there. Gruener is old-fashioned. He keeps a tight —’ (he only just caught himself in time) ‘— lead on his staff, all his dependents. But that means he’s sure to have ruffled some feathers, even among those who’ve elected to stay in his employ. Plus he didn’t kill all three of those people himself.’

‘Just the one,’ John said reasonably.

‘Well. At least the one…’

How reassuring.

But as he started to put his foot down, Sherlock snapped shortly, ‘We need to keep them separate: need to hear Miss de Merville’s logic, if one may be so loose with the word, as she states it, and at the same time to know what Gruener believes to be at stake. It’s even possible that he’ll start throwing people under the bus at the mere hint of an investigation.’

‘Just so long as it’s not you under the bus, I’m not actually all that bothered about that.’

Sherlock, whose ethics were relative at the best of times, barely batted an eyelash at this. ‘He’s not as clever as he thinks he is, and I doubt he considers himself in any danger — a miscalculation, of course, but it means he’s far less likely to shoot me first and ask questions later. Too much work.’

John frowned. ‘It still seems like a bad idea.’

‘And yet, needs must.’ Sherlock hopped up and swept himself off to his bedroom before John could say anything more, followed after a minute by the clanging of the pipes.

_Drama queen._
As he finished returning some order to the kitchen, his mobile *prrriinnngg!ed* from somewhere nearby. Must change that text alert. Spotting it on the side table beside the microwave, he dried his hands and picked it up.

**JOHN!!!! Lunch Weds? Seriously you can’t dodge my texts 4ever little brother! Don’t make me come round there LOL xxx**

Where did she learn to type, honestly? And she acted like she was his best mate — when was the last time they’d had a meal that hadn’t ended in gritted teeth and muttered goodbyes and a lot of necessary time effectively not speaking? Before Sherlock had jumped —

He cleared his throat, pushing that thought aside. Even so, she was right: he’d given her the brush-off for the last three coffee dates and dinners she’d suggested since he’d moved back to Baker Street. (Not that it stopped her from texting or commenting on his blog, sounding most often like a shouty kid half her age who couldn’t spell to save her life.) But now that things were different between him and Sherlock, maybe it was a good idea to try to — well, include her, a bit. He’d already told Bill Murray, over a pint two weeks ago, which had earned him a clap on the back and a series of increasingly joking questions of the level of obscenity only a soldier could accomplish. Mrs. Hudson and Greg had both found out pretty accidentally, and been more relieved than surprised (though Greg groaned that he’d never hear the end of it from Anderson and Dimmock, who apparently called a stalemate on their bet years ago).

**After work Wednesday is fine. Late lunch alright? x**

The immediate reply didn’t remotely surprise him. **ABSOLUTELY! Will pick a great place! You can pay HAHAHA can’t wait!!! xxx**

Sherlock’s footsteps in the corridor brought John’s eyes back up. Sadly, he was already — well, partially — dressed. For a man who’d kipped at most two hours on the sofa, Sherlock cut an annoyingly fine figure even in bare, damp feet. Perhaps more so.

’Your sister wants to meet for a meal,’ Sherlock deduced breezily, plopping down into his chair. ‘You don’t. You’ll have a miserable time, as you well know: you’ll come home disappointed and upset. Yet you persist, out of a misplaced belief that “good people” are close with their blood relations, even when said relations consistently refuse to respect anything that matters to you.’

John brought his nearly finished tea and sat. Evidently Sherlock had rearranged things last night,
after he’d gone to bed (since their chairs had, he was pretty sure, been facing the settee when they’d got in), so that they were facing each other again.

Assuming (rightly) that John wasn’t about to respond to any of that, Sherlock went for a different tack. ‘Surely we’ve met our collective familial obligation quota this week.’

‘Are we pooling our siblings now too? Does that mean I can send you to lunch with Harry?’

Sherlock feigned interest. ‘Only if you go to the West End with Mycroft and my parents at Christmas.’

He snorted. ‘Ten hours of Wagner? Bit of Philip Glass?’

‘Worse: *Les Mis.*’

Sherlock’s stupid smirk was contagious, and very quickly they were both giggling and grinning like idiots. His stomach unclenched a bit.

Maybe, he daydreamed to himself, as Sherlock continued to smile even while scrolling through his phone, they could come back here tonight. Get a little tipsy — just nearly-drunk enough to loosen them up, to scoot their chairs close together so John could stretch his legs across and dig his bare toes into the warmed leather of Sherlock’s cushion, brushing the sides of Sherlock’s shins — or, if they really did get drunk, maybe nudge their chairs right up close, so that when he leaned forward, he could find the inside of Sherlock’s knee (clad in John’s favourite dark jeans today) with his thumb.

He blinked. Sherlock was watching him again, grey-green-blue-brown eyes gone large and receptive like saucers (flying saucers, more like). John’s skin itched all over.

‘What time is Gruener expecting you?’ he asked, rather than anything close to what he wanted to say.

‘He isn’t,’ Sherlock corrected, ‘but Miss Violet de Merville is expecting you at eleven.’
‘Of course she is.’

* * *

About an hour later he was buzzing the high-tech video intercom for Violet’s flat, having already shown his ID to the front desk man (a very friendly, fatherly-looking bloke who seemed as though he hadn’t had anyone here actually speak to him like a human being in about ten years) and been directed to 6C.

Preparing with his hands behind his back to more or less argue his way in, he nearly jumped when instead the heavy chrome door swung open to reveal a silken blonde-haired woman regarding him with a combination of mischief and disdain.

‘Hello,’ John managed, a little thrown.

‘Dr. Watson,’ she pealed, and for god’s sake when was his life going to stop being a parade of plummy-voiced toffs who thought they were above the law? ‘Do come in, we’ve been expecting you.’

He'd never been a fan of an ambush, but now he was here, he reckoned he might as well go in. And he'd be damned if he was going to be the one who blinked first.

Naturally, her flat was bigger than 221A, B, and C put together. Plus a garden balcony. Her cut-out orchid-print sofas (two of them) looked like they cost as much as he'd made in a year in Afghanistan. And... empty. *A slightly underwhelming ambush*, he mused.

‘I have to say,’ she said, opening her mouth no wider than if she was talking through a straw, ‘you’re not what I was imagining.’ (Then again, her bold, wide red lipstick drew attention to her botoxed lips: how old was she, twenty-five?! These *people.*) She smiled at him brightly, chin on one spindly hand, eyes even wider than Sherlock’s. She wasn’t trying to flirt with him, not with any real aim in mind, but she gave every impression of the kind of silver spoon young woman who flirted by default and took advantage of most people fawning at the attention.

‘I'm flattered you were imagining me at all,’ he risked with mild flirtation in his tone, taking a seat at the high marble bar behind her sink and grounding himself in a way that (sometimes) got women's subconscious favour.
‘Well,’ she looked him over as though he hadn’t spoken, then laughed. ‘Do you know, I’m not entirely sure now.’

It was a dawning possibility that she had emerged straight out of an Edwardian murder mystery, something with Maggie Smith and seven kinds of hats.

‘But where are my manners! Can I offer you something? A cup of tea?’

For a second, he deliberated: he needed to develop a rapport with her if he hoped to get her trust, however unlikely that was at the moment.

‘I never turn down a cuppa,’ he tried amiably, feeling the rougher edges of his accent come out in spite of himself. He watched her move about the kitchen, aware just how out of place he was among the sleek modern finishings and distinct lack of family photos, dirty dishes, or personal touches of any kind. Even her keys on the ring by the door glittered like something from an interiors magazine that people flipped through wistfully at the clinic. ‘Just milk for me. Ta.’

As she reached up to replace the sugar behind a frosted sliding panel, he noticed small pinpricks in the crook of her elbow. Fan-bloody-tastic.

‘Lived here long?’ he asked, sipping, falling into his familiar role as calming small-talker.

‘Oh, not really,’ said Violet indifferently. ‘My father always kept a place in town, though I’m sure you know that. I said I needed a place to have friends round when everyone comes up, and he thought this would suit. But it was my fiancé who surprised me by completely redecorating it: he has excellent taste.’ She sipped her tea, awaiting his disapproval.

‘Last person I dated, best thing I got her was to shave off my beard.’ (A lie, but it sounded better than that he’d shaved for Sherlock Holmes.)

She gushed with cool laughter at that. ‘And so I shouldn’t be surprised not to see a ring on your finger.’

The worst part was, she was a charismatic young woman — the kind of girl he could see hosting out-of-control, tabloid-bound parties, hands dotted with real diamonds twirling real champagne, being pandered to by all kinds of celebrities and rich daddy’s boys in clubs; the kind of girl who
would be high as a kite four nights of the week and whose friends would shoot up while sprawled on her expensive sofa but not wonder if she’d made it home safely or had ended up choking on her own sick in an alley.

‘I didn’t love her,’ he admitted, which was the first time he’d said that out loud. Retroactively he felt apologetic — he really should call Mary and make sure she was all right. They’d ended things a little ambiguously, just sort of drifted out of touch, which suddenly seemed strange since he’d damn near proposed to her.

Violet broke into his thoughts: ‘Yes, well, you see — that is the most important thing.’ She took a sip of her tea. ‘I love my fiancé. We share everything: he knows everything about me, and I him, including these allegations, which he — he, you see — confessed to me freely and openly. He is… charming, sophisticated, mature, attentive. I scarcely believed such a person existed on earth who could have all the qualities I value, but… We are the world to each other. I believe him with my whole heart. And I fear that, this being the case, there will be no hope in your attempting to convince me not to marry him, whatever my dear godfather has told you.’ She tilted her head sympathetically, but her eyes were flint. ‘I will be married to him in three weeks’ time.’

So she was happy to cut right to direct. Fine. He could do direct. ‘You know he’s responsible for three deaths — his wife’s death.’

With an elegance matched only by a certain pair of sparring brothers in his life, Violet rolled her eyes and stood up straighter from where she was leaning over her worktop. ‘A woman drowned, Dr. Watson. It isn’t as though she was pushed off a building.’

(He swallowed the razor-winged panic that rose in his chest, and pressed on.) ‘There were the other people that did see her. They turned up dead, too. The student who'd met her that morning in the docks. And the officer investigating. Coincidences are not actually that common in murder investigations.’ (Sherlock, no doubt, had some sort of maxim about coincidences that he would have flourished at this moment, but John had to make-do with paraphrase.)

‘I’ve heard all of this before,’ she deflected without emotion. ‘Heinrich cannot possibly be accused for every person who overdoses in every city he’s ever been to.’

‘Does that include the drugs he’s giving you?’

Her expression turned instantly to ice. ‘What I do with my friends of an evening is simply none of your business. And for your information, Heinrich has instructed me to stop seeing the friends who were the worst influence, with their horrid drug habits. Heinrich wants the best for me.’
'Maybe,' he conceded. They needed to agree on something before she'd really consider what he needed to say. 'And you trust him, then, do you?'

'Utterly,' she swore, with almost breathless fervour.

John considered her for a moment. Had she seen so little of life, or been so oblivious to it, that she genuinely couldn't see this man for what he was: a fortune-hunting, power-mad vampire -- and she was the prey?

'You seem sweet, and a beautiful woman like you, with a father worth as much as your father is... You know better than I do the kinds of men that go for that: the whole package. And so what I don't understand is how you aren't curious —'

'I have seen Heinrich's bank statements,' Violet insisted smoothly. 'Heinrich is not interested in me for my money, or anything so mercenary. I am sorry that you were disappointed with your girlfriend, but I'm afraid that does not mean that you should feel justified in imagining failures in others' relationships.'

*I'd say being on the INTERPOL watch list is a pretty real red flag in your relationship.* ‘But why didn’t he let the medical examiner see his wife's body? Let anyone see her body? You’re a clever woman, surely you find that more than a bit suspicious? Do you want to wake up, ten years from now, and realise that all along he's been lying to you? Do you really want to be one of those girls?’

'Men love to tell me that I don't want to be "one of those girls". Then they congratulate me that in fact "I'm not like other girls" — because I am not. I am not some rash, naive schoolgirl. And I neither wish nor require some man who's just come in off the street to patronise me and tell me he knows better than I do how to run my life.'

‘I’m a doctor, Violet,’ he change his angle of attack, scenting that he was several hands down, and need to come up with a better hand very, very soon or lose the whole round. ‘and I have a sister, and I’m just saying I wouldn’t want my sister spending time with someone who hurts animals for fun, and whose ex-wife filed for divorce only to wind up gasping for air, choking in the middle of the sea —’

‘I really think I’ve heard enough.’ With a soft but brittle chink of china, she set her teacup down, then walked briskly to the door, heels clacking on the slate floor, and held it open. ‘If these lies and hateful rumours are the best my father and his feeble-minded friends can do, you can tell them that
their desperation is not convincing. Please *don’t* bother me again, or I shall press charges.’

He shook his head, frustrated, but it was damn obvious that he wasn’t going to convince her in one go. Gruener really had done a runner on her. ‘Just —’

She rolled her eyes again, and for an instant he caught a glimpse of a spoiled child who had never been told ‘no’.

‘I’m really not bothered when those kinds of people come knocking at my door, or convinced just because they offer to pay to get things sorted their way. But I know a bad man when I see one, Violet — a dangerous man. And when the cleverest person I know thinks someone is bad news, I try to listen. So… just keep that in mind, yeah?’

She slammed the door behind him.

‘And…,’ he sighed, ‘thanks for the tea.’

* * *

‘Sherlock?’ he called, heading up the stairs, not especially expecting an answer. The flat remained hushed.

He hadn’t been gone all that long, the Violet interview (if he could even call it that, rather than a massive waste of time and a frustrating failure of his ability to stop someone doing something incredibly stupid) taking only about an hour, and Sherlock had informed him (as he grandly swooped into a cab) that he would probably be occupied all afternoon. Even so, it was difficult not to take out his phone immediately to text him. Since they’d gone back to taking cases, they hadn’t separated very often — not more than the length of Sherlock’s running stride ahead of John’s, and usually that only last a block or two before John caught him up.

‘Right.’

The leftovers from Mrs. Hudson’s fantastic stew heated up just fine (Sherlock would almost certainly be a brat about the grease) so he settled with his laptop in the kitchen and finally composed his response to the editor.
Dear Mrs. Wilder, ...

(God, he hated writing formal letters. It made him feel like he was at school.)

Once he’d finished, he saved it to his ‘Drafts’ folder to look over later, not sure what else he needed, or if it sounded stiff or absurd. He felt like his focus was elsewhere.

*Tonight tonight tonight*, he reminded himself. Christ, it was going to be a long day, at the end of which his balls would probably be so blue he looked like a bloody Smurf…

A sudden horrible *SCREECH* of tyres — he tensed automatically, waiting for the impact — but instead someone blasted a long *beeeeeeep* of a car horn — and he relaxed.

‘*Bloody blind —!*’ Mary had sworn, on the one weekend they’d taken together, for his birthday. She was a terror at the wheel, but since he hated driving and she said she loved it (which, as a bonus, he found incredibly hot) she was the one swearing and overtaking on the motorway like a menace.

‘*Christ, Mary,*’ he’d hissed, trying to calm his heart back down from spiking with braced panic. ‘*I’d actually like to survive to be forty-one!*’

‘*What! It’s these French idiots who refuse to SIGNAL WHEN THEY CHANGE LANES!*’ she had bellowed, glaring at the — ah yes — elderly couple in the Nissan beside them. ‘*They shouldn’t even HAVE licenses anymore.*’

Charming.

‘*This is worse than Kandahar,*’ he’d muttered under his breath.

‘*You bet I am,*’ she’d agreed, and he turned to see her grinning devilishly, eyes flicking back and forth off the road to his face.
'I love you,' he'd said, before he'd really had a chance to think about it.

'I know you do,' she said, smiling almost sweetly, before switching gears and revving to overtake the next car.

But then, Paris had been awful — too much time together in too-close quarters, and they couldn’t agree what to see or when to eat — and they’d come back on rocky footing with each other.

He got a cup of tea — he hadn’t more than touched the fine china at Violet’s before he’d been thrown out — and sat down with his laptop. Maybe it was time for him to consider brushing up a bit on literary technique, editing, marketing, that sort of thing. He had an audience, and this publisher sounded keen, but (then again) they were paid to do that. And more to the point, if and when he ever got the shock of seeing his name on the spine of an honest-to-god book in an actual bookshop, he wanted to be able to be proud of what was between the covers. What was that cliche advice he’d got from that sergeant — Daniels, who’d treated them to some original poetry — during a knees-up of a poker game past midnight? Know your favourite poets, then write something they wouldn’t prefer to use to wipe their arses instead of read.

He browsed, finding and bookmarking some old lines and pieces he’d loved as a kid, others he’d remembered years later when heart-pounding he’d whispered the words like a prayer after losing another kid to a stupid, brutal explosion he hadn’t even known to cover from, or heart-sore over some girl he’d barely gotten to know…

During Sherlock’s time away, John had in fact only dated — and for one absolutely insane week considered proposing to — Mary. It had begun as a whirlwind (how John, not-so-subconsciously, best liked to do things). She’d chatted him up in January, just after a shift as he went to lock up his things, and on pure impulse — defying the prospect of yet another night with surely too much whisky for a man alone on his sofa — he’d flirted back. They’d gone to the pub and, still flushed with the spirit of a fresh year of opportunities and turning new leaves, gotten spectacularly, painfully drunk, made it back to hers for what under any other circumstances would have been a quick, rough, and terrible shag, without even folding down her embroidered, button-ornamented duvet. In the morning he’d been hungover and embarrassed, unsure which of those was a more shameful way to wake up (and two days before the anniversary of Sherlock’s death, to boot). But then at work the day after, she’d smiled brightly rather than ignoring him or nodding briskly, and asked if he was interested in getting together that weekend. He’d been floored. He’d considered how he’d spent this time last year: spectacularly, dangerously plastered, sobbing out a whole year without Sherlock into his cardigan (the one with the burn hole Sherlock had made grabbing a pathologist’s cigarette and tossing it over his shoulder) on his bedsit kitchen floor. He’d told Mary yes.

They dated for three months before, feeling awkward after that bad weekend in Paris, he had ducked into a jewellery shop in early March. For days he’d carried it around in his coat.
It really hadn’t been expensive enough to be serious, and he’d been very uncomfortably aware, when the attendant asked about ‘the lady’s taste’ and what would go with her birthstone (he was nearly sure her birthday was November the fifth… or twenty-fifth?), of how little he knew her. Worse had been the realisation, walking home very late one night from Mary’s, that he had been wondering how many miles the ring would travel, and how big a splash it’d make, if he simply chucked it in the Thames. Or better yet, he’d imagined, losing it on the way to work, getting mugged, having it involved in a great international inheritance fraud case, all of which ended in it being taken out of his hands, plus a little excitement besides. After that night he’d returned the ring, told Mary he’d phone soon, and begun thinking of ways he could break it off gently.

That had been more five months ago. He was slightly ashamed to realise he’d barely thought of her until now.

Maybe he’d send her a text, just to check in and… well, apologise, for everything. He had another hour before his shift.

‘I didn’t love her,’ he’d told Violet frankly, but it had stumbled out of his mouth without his completing the thought: ‘because I was always in love with someone else.’

* 

Chapter End Notes

Series 3 had more almost-Sherlock/John moments than I even believed. And so here they are, in my alternate reflecting pool of a universe, as they ought to have been.

La Forza del Destino (either transl. as The Force of Destiny [quelle surprise] or more in the spirit of the original Italian, The Power of Fate -- listen to the famous opening overture, including the leitmotif they're thinking of, here.}
The theatrics of criminals really did deserve its own monograph, Sherlock mused, strolling unhurriedly towards his adversary. The man had, entirely as a power play, kept Sherlock waiting in this overlarge treasure house (a converted church turned ultra-modern mansion, a sepulchre to his self-aggrandizement, as chilling and offensive to taste as the man himself) filled with his eclectically displayed objets d’art for nearly a quarter of an hour. Had it not been for the guard (an idiot with a hangover, only marginally more effective than a scarecrow), Sherlock would have located the book, covered his tracks, and been on his way back to Baker Street before Gruener had even made an appearance. Still. Sticking to the script had its uses.

‘Well, Mister Holmes… I rather thought I would be seeing you… sooner or later,’ Gruener chided, with a twitch of cheerless amusement across his thin lips.

Sherlock struggled not to roll his eyes. ‘I’m so glad not to have disappointed you.’

‘Oh, I should not say that, quite yet.’

A cheap shot. Sherlock was hardly impressed himself.

The Baron (challenging even Mycroft’s standards for bespoke tailoring) came round the desk and, with a quirked head, considered him. His somewhat wiry, muddy brown (the worn-through earth tone of the unrefurbished fabric on the Bakerloo line; unhelpful association) hair included a high widow’s peak that seemed to draw up and back his skull away from his long, bearded chin (well groomed, of course). (Alec had had a similar air of magnetic prowess; but Gruener carried none of Alec’s penchant for the boyish pleasure of behaving badly… and roping others into joining him.)

‘You might have saved yourself the journey…’
And as expected, Gruener launched into a tedious, self-indulgent monologue for several minutes, during which time he made the customary threats and insinuations (telling him not to pursue the case on penalty of grievous bodily harm, blah blah blah, dull). Shaking off the man’s sickeningly suggestive demeanor, Sherlock replied in kind, trading all the usual jibes (‘I think you ought to be a lot more cautious than you’ve been up to now. Not that it will make a difference, of course’), all the while collecting data — the layout, CCTV locations, scents, the sounds and thence routines of the guards — for later perusal and sorting in his mind palace.

Nevertheless, in spite of the forms and formalities, a shiver prickled across the nape of his neck which had little to do with the truly ghastly architecture, and much more to do with the audacity of Gruener showing off, without fear or shame, his salacious choice of home décor. If the one ‘sensitive’ picture Sherlock had managed to examine in detail before Gruener entered the room was anything to go by, the entire room was essentially a boastful exhibition of depravity.

Standing before him now, Gruener opened a heavy brass (ornate, gold-gilded, well-polished) box and withdrew — because of course Sherlock’s reputation preceded him — a cigarette. He then removed a book of matches and antique silver humidor from the inner pocket of his close-fitting lapis lazuli suit. His grey eyes, as he struck and lit the cigarette, looked unblinkingly at Sherlock: no doubt it was more a function of smooth, skeletal cheekbones, hot-white shirt, and rich blue jacket that made those eyes seem so flat and… inhuman. As though he might even blink in slow motion, then strike.

With all the coolness of feigned (but familiar) disinterest, he blew out a puff of nicotine, tar, carbon monoxide, acetic acid, acetaldehyde, ethanol, and hundreds of other ingredients (Sobranie, by the smell (and ash) of things) that Sherlock forced himself to remember were unnecessary to his happiness.

‘I hope you do not mind if I smoke?’ Gruener added, with another flash of wry confidence, as if this false-afterthought would put Sherlock off-balance. Little did he know…

‘Please believe me, Baron Gruener, I would delighted.’

Quirking an elegant eyebrow in dismissal (the man had an unusually mobile yet opaque face, revealing very little apart from the mask he deliberately put forward), he shrugged and shut the box with a muted thunk.

(A great deal of saliva clung to the end of the cigarette when he removed it from his mouth — with a flick of his tongue — and exhaled. For a moment, Sherlock feared that, however much he craved the heavenly taste of proper burning vice, accepting the offer might lead to Gruener handing him this one. Soggy. Tantamount to allowing Gruener to lick the inside of his mouth.)

‘I am renowned around the world for my collections.’

‘Yes,’ (obviously). ‘Your books provided some captivating reading on that front.’

‘Oh! You’ve read my books: how flattering. How quick you are, Mister Holmes,’ grinned Gruener with glinting eyes.

He opened a black volume— no key, fingerprint ID, nor even passcode… it just… opened — upon which his hand had been resting, revealing a box container. (Useful for storing archival pages that could not be bound, and required limited exposure to light.) With his bare hands — important! — he lifted out a matted but unframed rectangle. Sherlock couldn’t yet see the details of the engraved image printed on the paper within.
‘Tell me, then, were you quite shocked to see my most recent work was printed with such a reputable publisher?’

Casting his mind back to yesterday’s research: he located it — *Death and the Maiden: Images of Beauty and Decay Across the World, 1500-present* (2013).

Rather than answering, Sherlock looked now at the dim shelves before which they stood. The facing side of the display case nearest Gruener’s desk was darkened — low-lit behind probably polarised glass (considering the sunlight filtering into the room at all angles). Though he couldn’t quite make out the specifics, he had counted thirty-two small- to medium-sized objects, the top shelf displayed etchings on paper; below that were more painted, carved, printed, or otherwise impressed onto wood, canvas, or, on the bottom shelf, what appeared to be a fragment of bone. In all of the different variations on the scene, various women — in some cases, clearly very young — were swooning, sleeping, struggling, or (in the more pornographic works) enjoying themselves in encounters with (to take Gruener’s monograph as a guide) Death: a skeleton, a reaper, a beast, a devil-figure…

‘Death comes even to the young,’ Gruener purred, with lascivious awe, taking a few steps closer to stand by Sherlock’s side, admiring. ‘Even to young lovers. The most beautiful of God’s creatures are those most fragile. Bodies so ripe and new, filled with hope, and yet only a moment’s space away from being reduced to parts. So small and so easily broken.’

Sherlock’s eyes fell on a miniature, in oils most likely, of a female figure reclining over the side of a bed, displayed for the beholder; in her bared breast was lodged an arrow (artistic license? In a real woman, that high in the chest, she would have seen the shot; almost certainly fatal), clinging to the arrow where it entered her body and lying across her abdomen was a — was he? — peculiarly smirking infant. Looming over them all, holding up one finger in admonishment while, with its other hand, either removing or (more probable) forcing the arrow deeper into the woman’s chest, was a skeleton encased in sinuous, transparent skin.

*Nude Girl Stabbed by Cupid and the Spectre of Death 1812*, explained a line under the image in flowing, faded, precise penmanship. A woman’s: antique.

‘Many of these were difficult to acquire,’ Gruener preened. ‘These English vendors are so squeamish. Fortunately, I have friends who are helpful in these matters.’

‘Yes, I’ve been hearing a great deal about your friends, not to mention your relations.’ (‘Relations’, honestly; if he’d wanted to spend his life speaking this way he would have gone to work for Mycroft.)

‘I don’t doubt it.’

Sherlock’s clusters of deductions were swerving, coalescing into a clearer picture of what they were dealing with.

‘My beloved Violet has now a necklace of diamonds and a lover whose devotion is impervious to the slanders of devising minds. I can be quite… hypnotic, if I choose, you know, Mister Holmes.’

Yes, with that voice — almost beautiful; like a politician’s intrigue-plotting adviser crossed with a Leipzig professor — ‘hypnotic suggestion’ as such was no more than a magician’s trick, but certain people could be beguiled, as it were, due to the right combination of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response and, of course, a willing mind.

(No doubt John was finding Violet precisely such a sensual, gullible person.)
Gruener finished his cigarette, returning to his desk to tap out the ashes. (Yes: Blue Russians, definitely.)

‘You first wife found your charms somewhat… diminished, eventually,’ Sherlock volleyed at Gruener’s back.

The man turned slowly like a serpent, glaring with icy fervour. ‘Did you know the agent Le Brun, of Paris?’

Sherlock resisted rolling his eyes once more. ‘Yes, of course.’

‘Then you know that, by curious coincidence, he was left for dead on the Montmartre steps, crippled for life. This tragedy, only a week after his partner’ — Gruener gave him a particularly broad smile that made Sherlock want to see blood run and spurt through those exemplary (whitened) teeth — ‘was known to be inquiring into my affairs. Don’t do it, Mister Holmes. You’ll only spoil your celebrated reputation, and much more precious matter besides.’

As ever, people fell for the misconception — one of the main reasons why John’s blog was so (surprisingly) useful — that Sherlock cared one iota for his ‘reputation’. Nevertheless, he cared for his legs (for John’s legs), which was also part of Gruener’s message.

‘And what about your own reputation?’ Sherlock attempted, now casting his eyes around in ostentatious appraisal of the majesty of the Baron’s accomplishments. (Of course he really was hedging for time: he hadn’t worked out more than that Gruener — likely — wouldn’t keep the book/collection/album/records of his conquests in the display cases (too risky for the sacred objects); nor in the black album — though no doubt he amused himself with that red herring…) ‘You are clearly a man of intelligence. Surely you would prefer to have your smooth waters remain smooth? Your fiancée’s family is one of the most powerful in England: they will make things very difficult for you, dredging up the submerged past and bringing it to the light.’

He turned around, to find Gruener now sitting at his desk, entirely at his leisure, though still coiled like a cobra, chuckling.

‘Excuse my laughter, Mister Holmes… It is really very funny to see you trying to play a hand with no cards in it. I doubt that anyone could do it better, but it is pathetic all the same.’

Sherlock bristled at this. ‘So you think.’

‘So I know. Now I believe that is an end to the matter. I urge you once more to draw off. Not doing so would be most unlucky. Others have found this out. Go your way, Holmes, and I shall go mine. Good afternoon.’

***

Wholly boringly predictable, nevertheless some revealing moments which needed to be reconsidered — not least the maze (where pews ordinarily went) of glass, HVAC-sealed cases of artefacts that would rival any museum — the ‘book’, such as it was, would be well-hidden among these heterogenous objects — Sherlock had seen — no, smelled — the acrid scent of… chemicals, but which? He ran through his general mental list: mold, damp, water-related? No. Animal hair or skin, living or dead? No. Blood, or other bodily fluids (sweat, semen/vaginal secretions, urine, faeces, etc.)? No. Cleaning materials: sodium hypochlorite? No, though — ah, but which — an acidic tang piqued his interest…

Deductions fired, sifting through the earlier barrage of data and attempted to classify, organise, and
reflect upon useful data points. Sherlock stopped the cab, disembarked, and began to walk in the open air. After ten minutes of immersive retreat into his mind palace, he decided to throw himself into legwork (which was to say, proper research).

Which meant: time for a check in with the other side of the tracks.

It continued to astound him that he could take two turns off Commercial Street, almost precisely one mile from the deafening droves of tourists in Union flag t-shirts interspersed with middle-aged women in svelte jackets and sensible footware, young men with expensive ties, all with earphones often merely for show (certainly over the din there was little chance of hearing music without incurring permanent hearing loss), and suddenly find silence, as though John had abruptly shut off the television in the middle of roars of edited laughter. London: a city of eternal, familiar contradictions.

Billy was successfully not selling his charity newspapers (already met his quota; required to stand outside for another eleven minutes; recently had his hair cut short (though still greasy), by a short woman with long black hair, his girlfriend then, left-handed and — pregnant) outside the Tesco Express.

’S’not my area, Mr. Holmes,’ Billy sniffed, dropped consonants left and right. Sherlock had given him a tenner. Billy had insisted upon handing him the latest edition.

‘“Not your area” how?’

With glassy-blue eyes quickly scanning the passersby as they darted into or were disgorged by the shop, Billy’s mouth wriggled slightly over his teeth. (Clean: over a month; nevertheless, old habits, etc.) ‘Maureen’d know more,’ he equivocated at last. Interesting: usually he was more (though seldom wholly) forthcoming with Sherlock’s enquiries, or at least offered a hint of his own.

His hoodie was almost sparkingly clean: well, Billy was a dab hand at chemistry. Unquestionably this more banal, literal sort of laundering was a ‘moral’, or at least legal, improvement upon his previous endeavours. A new, positive influence, then. To which end…

‘If it helps,’ Sherlock offered, inclining his head slightly to one of the less hearing-damaged of Billy’s saucer-sized ears as nonchalantly as possible, ‘my present client is attempting to bring down Gruener.’

To his mild surprise, Billy laughed once. ‘Yeah, well, that’s all right then, innit? All them kiddies and people, everyone looking the other way. But some princess gets a scratch on her wrist or her pony looked at the wrong way and suddenly…’ He shrugged, sniffed.

‘I’m not a charity, Billy,’ Sherlock reminded him.

With a smirk, Billy turned to look at him again. ‘Don’t I know it.’

Sherlock smiled in return, hoping to encourage Billy to disclose just a bit more of the knowledge churning behind his scraggily, shadow-carved face. He waited.

‘Like I say, Mr. Holmes, it’s Maureen you want. She’ll be able to help ya. This guy, though, he isn’t… well, he ain’t intelligent.’

Sherlock snorted. ‘They never are —’

‘But he’s mean.’ The intense gravity of Billy’s usually flippant voice, his unblinking stare under heavily hooded (chronically inflamed) eyelids, his stillness as though chilled from his usually
fidgety, incessant movement — this from a man who had spent the better part of his adult life on the street, or thereabouts — indicated in concert that Sherlock ought to reconsider the seriousness of his investigation. His mind erupted with fresh questions all clamouring for primacy.


At that moment a short — ah, the girlfriend — raven-haired (though streaked with electric blue highlights (unflattering)), lactose-intolerant, *thin* in ways that still made Sherlock, after all this time, itch eagerly then burn with guilt — not yet ‘showing’ — emerged and, it seemed, put an end to the interview.

(One more deduction there than he’d been expecting. He made a mental note to send a gift around the middle of April.)

Finding the elusive Maureen involved, blessedly, some actual searching. Not without digging deep into his mental map, after two hours and several semi-lucid tips, did he find her wandering, ghost-like, up an alley not far from the canal (still mid-afternoon, yet almost deserted). She was chatting dully to another homeless person (alcoholic; over fifty, long time on the streets; Mancunian — it became clear as he got closer — by birth; not transgender herself but evidently frequent enough among their number; early-stage layer of *sarcophs scabes* transmitted from the mixed collie-spaniel following loyally at her side, also recently afflicted) when she spotted him.

‘Holmes,’ greeted Maureen, abandoning carelessly whatever they had been discussing; her companion similarly dropped her unfinished, almost certainly aimless thought to stare at him.

He wasted no time. ‘Did you speak to a journalist approximately five months ago? Interested in an undercover exposé of pornography involving minors and… less than consenting adults?’

Her already dehydrated, bloodshot eyes blinked darkly, pupils dilating in (he surmised quickly based on available evidence) genuine fear.

‘She dead, then? Got herself killed, like I told her she would.’ Her laugh was bitter and aspirated: smoker since early adolescence. ‘Stupid cow.’

‘What makes you assume that?’

‘Stupid people, always curious to see real life instead of just watching *EastEnders* all day — thrill on it, the dangerous way the other half lives, no feather pillows or fancy cars or wigs and collars.’ She scratched at the wiry hair on her chin. ‘Not so thrilling when they’re messing with people that’s bigger and meaner than them.’

He attempted to school his expression into one of staid attentiveness — hardly difficult, this was *fascinating*, and at last the glimpse of true evidence beginning to emerge.

‘I need you to tell me everything you can that might get this man arrested and sent away for life.’

Wearily, but with a flicker of vengeance, Maureen nodded. ‘Come on then.’

* * *

He put the bow through its paces, springing indiscriminately from Shostakovich to Paganini to Chopin without stopping to acknowledge rests, line-breaks, or key changes.

(Gruener’s vulpine eyes had glimmered with mirth as he struck a match, lit, and inhaled deeply,
almost soundlessly; Sherlock had despised him instantly, imagined taking one of his glass-fronted pictures, smashing it over his head and twirling it — after taking the cigarette for himself, of course.)

His fingers were beginning to ache so he pulled all the harder on the bow, scraping the D-string on the next pass, the calluses on his middle and ringer fingers searing, so he clenched his toes in his shoes to distract his mind from the pain and played as the violin wailed.

‘Ah,’ said John behind him. (Basil, peppers, coriander, garlic, fried oil, basic sugars; petrol exhaust; body odour; expensive lemon-scented antibacterial floor cleaner and furniture polish; trade paperback. Sexually excited, hopeful. Late.)

He refused to turn or to stop — to deduce (beyond what he did automatically) — simply because John’s tone was one of amused exasperation. Surely this was better than shooting the walls (or shooting up)? He threw in an extra piercing trill just to retaliate.

‘Mrs Hudson said you were upset,’ John persisted, yes, very astute, the pair of you voice slightly louder, intending to be heard.

The touch at his waist caused him to jolt in surprise, releasing the tortured strings from their ordeal. He side-stepped away and faced him.

John was looking at him in mild surprise, palm still gentle curved, flat, as though ready to receive Sherlock’s hip if he slid back into position. His other hand was raised slightly (placatingly? defensively?). As an overall figure, he looked as if he was about to ask for a waltz.

‘Bad day?’

Sherlock’s eardrums were possibly about to explode. Had he cared less about the precious instrument in his hands, he would have hurled it to the floor. ‘You know me, John. I can never have a “bad day” when I spend it among junkies and vagrants.’

John’s expression immediately coalesced into understanding, which was so infuriating that Sherlock fleetingly considered shouting and storming out (was that reaction now solely acceptable when John did it?). He bit down the impulse, squirmed, hating the slithering, too-soft, too-silky, merlot-coloured dressing gown; his long hair curling and wisping where it most needed to be cut; the distant rumble of hunger in his gut, GOD, but he missed cocaine —

‘Find out anything interesting?’

Rolling his eyes, he strode past John into the kitchen, to examine the recently-procured plastic (his skin grated even to contemplate the synthetic-crinkly sound) takeaway bags.

‘Got samosas,’ John announced, joining him. ‘Couldn’t resist, they smelled absolutely — ’

‘Not hungry.’

It was true and infuriatingly false — he hadn’t touch anything since his half-finished buttery toast this morning, the remembrance of which made him feel distinctly sick.

After a moment, John stepped around him. ‘Right, then.’ He kept his tone in check, but his strained patience was almost palpable. (Thai: even with their contacts/favours, it was hardly the cheapest meal for a non-occasional dinner. And out of the way from the flat, hence his delayed return time.) ‘Well, I’m starved, so don’t mind me if I don’t pretend to be above human food.’ He moved around the kitchen with his usual ease, shoulders more tense than a single minute before, almost
certainly rethinking his remarks about voluntary celibacy, but thoroughly determined not to show his disappointment as he gathered a plate — no, two plates, ever optimistic —

‘I didn’t tell you to spend unnecessarily on dinner, so it’s hardly fair for you to be upset with me when I’m not interested in eating it.’

Fingers tensed, balled, then released — he grabbed two forks. Sherlock’s skin screamed.

‘No, you didn’t.’ He put both settings on the table, not meeting Sherlock’s frown. ‘Funnily enough, I wanted a proper dinner without having to cook, so I decided for the both of us.’

‘Ah, well, there’s where you went wrong.’

This time John did meet his gaze, a heated smile of dangerous, banked warning across his face. ‘Sherlock, I don’t expect — ’

It twisted in his gut, the wrong-footedness of this whole conversation: they had planned — John had been clearly thinking all day about it, even bought extra supplies in a very conspicuous, self-defeatingly ‘subtle’ dark plastic bag — this morning he had looked at Sherlock like he wanted to ravish him in their sitting room where anyone could see — and — and Sherlock hadn’t even finished putting his violin case away.

As usual, his body did precisely the opposite of what he craved: somnambulantly carrying him to the uncharacteristically regulation-tidy bed (he ground his teeth), throwing him down upon it so that his whole vision was taken up with Poe’s sunken, peculiar face. He too contemplated murder.

He lost track of time trying not to contemplate anything else, though he was not especially successful.

(The problem was, his deductive faculty insisted, that Gruener had built a near-seamless sham in his outward mask as ‘gentleman collector’, one which enabled him to drag Violet subtly under his power with pitiable excuses for his past. The Austrian had — Sherlock knew without having to hear confirmation from John — preyed upon Violet’s natural coldness, her vanity and privilege, her addictive nature, her isolation… Nor was he, Sherlock, unaware of the irony threaded through Violet’s story — how could he be, he was socially impaired, not stupid. And Gruener, dark, cunning, arrogant, provided the rest of the mirror image: it was as though Irene (not now) or Mycroft (oh god, couldn’t he have a moment’s peace!) or another such enemy had selected a magnet, south to south, with which to attract his worst qualities and send them all flying off dangerously in opposite directions. The question was not why Violet was not sickened, repulsed, by the thoughtless, hideous cruelty of her lover, but rather how to convince her that her obsession for Gruener would outlast her utility to him; that when that happened, the best she could hope for was to be merely heartbroken… And in the meantime, the cost…)

The dip of the bed behind him nudged his focus back to the lamp-lit room. (Basil, peanut sauce, chicken (all consumed); generic dish soap; foot/sweat/faintly damp cotton odour.)

‘Obviously you don’t want to tell me what it is that’s got under your skin. Which is fine. It’s up to you. But I’m just… you can, if you did want to. That’s all.’

The reverberation of John’s voice suggested he was facing the door — still sitting up, looking away — giving Sherlock space. It crashed heavily against the fortifications Sherlock had constructed around the information (poisonous, corrosive: radioactive) that Maureen had given him. He had told himself not to burden John with them.
'We're not having sex tonight,' he stated firmly.

John *tchuked* a harsh breath. ‘No. No, we definitely are not.’

A threat? Agreement? Resignation? Wonderment? A challenge? (The false note by one of the trumpets in Act 3 —) *Too much DATA* —

He shut himself off, down down down *down DOWN*, and waited for the barrage of stimuli to pass, ceasing… *hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hush hushhlishhhhh…

When he resurfaced, John had risen to his feet (almost imperceptible on such a good mattress, unlike on John’s appallingly cheap one) and — the rustle of fabric-against-fabric, -against-skin, -against-metal and -leather — undressing. Not for the first time in his career, he wished he couldn’t picture the events he’d heard described in such visceral detail; his stomach clenched, and he exhaled through his nose. More than anything, he dreaded his own reaction if John should attempt to touch him.

Only once John was down to a shabby shirt (procured from the stack of clean laundry on the dresser) and pants did he resume his seat.

‘You’re on my side of the bed.’

Sherlock blinked at Poe’s statue. He supposed, now he thought of it, he was — the pillow was his least favourite (too firm); it smelled more of aftershave and unscented shampoo than his own.

He rolled 180°. John was sitting — leaning really —, spine twisted, (beautiful) collar exposed, on *his* side of the bed. Up close, John was almost out of focus, high-definition, surrealistically present as his entire field of vision. Downturned, set mouth: either angry or simply… ‘concerned’ (likelihood, 3:7). Lines and pores. Eyebrows. *Close*. How did anyone *stand* it.

He seldom kept his resolutions when it came to John.

‘Gruener keeps a book. It involves personal anecdotes of his assignations with underaged young women — girls, ages approximately thirteen to sixteen. When one of his employees procures a new “worker” who meets Gruener’s approval, Gruener reserves the right to “break her in” to her new career. *Primae noctis*. There are at least two houses, superficially merely crack dens but in reality pornography mills and human trafficking hubs, where he takes them. He records his memories directly after, and keeps a photographic portrait of some kind from each episode. In several instances, he has instructed one of his victims to read the previous entry until he becomes aroused, at which point he.’ Sherlock swallowed. ‘He conducts the assault. Many of them are drugged. A few of them had previously consented to be photographed, or filmed. More than a few were refugees, or certainly of dubious immigration status, and intending to save enough money to stay or send funds back to family members. None of them has yet been induced to testify in any capacity against him.’

He felt out of breath, dissociated from the strangely stable voice who spoke from his mouth.

The world, tipped on its side and therefore wrong, didn’t seem to affect John, who was next to him, gravity-pressed; yet somehow — physics was not Sherlock’s primary scientific speciality — John was most heavily creased along his brow, the low, pained dip between his eyes, running perpendicular to the earth’s pull. He might be on reconnaissance, for all the noise his breath was making.
‘I’m sorry,’ John told him, which was so ludicrously irrelevant that Sherlock couldn’t help but wince.

‘It’s not as though any of it happened to me, John.’ As flicker of doubt stole into the blue, and Sherlock huffed to think such a suspicion had survived so long. ‘Whatever your assumptions about my heroic yet somehow simultaneously idiotic time “away”, I was never sexually abused or even realistically threatened with it.’

‘Good,’ he replied, not looking remotely relieved. ‘As it happens, I’m concerned right now with what happened today. You found this out from, who? Your homeless network?’

That was very much the problem: homeless witnesses were notoriously untrusted, unreliable, unprotected and therefore unobjective. Objectivity, Sherlock mused, was the privilege of those who didn’t have to worry about whether they would be knifed in their sleep on a bus bench for their honesty. And addictions only muddied the waters further.

‘He must keep it on his person, somehow,’ he explained aloud. This was the conclusion he had reached since arriving back at Baker Street. ‘He’s old-fashioned — loves antiques, loves hard material evidence, loves the possessive control he has knowing there are no other copies, no leaks he wouldn’t know about instantly. But it must be concealed — it’s not as though he keeps an actual scrapbook of his crimes.’

‘Why not? People do.’

Sherlock frowned. ‘People in films do. In reality, Gruener at least is — well, if not too clever, at least too shrewd, too careful to keep something that big — something that might be searched or seen by accident when he travels. He’s old-fashioned. And he makes them “read” from it, which suggests there is something to read… Maybe his glasses?’

A flashdrive was too obvious, too modern for the likes of medieval, macabre Gruener — and anyway electronic files were the stuff of too many hacks and scandals. So it had to be real, tangible, original.

He came back to himself when a flutter interrupted his field of vision: John was falling asleep. Even too-close, he was beautiful, like the indigo landing-lights on a runway just before touchdown. Thrilling, welcoming. Secure.

I’m on your side of the bed, Sherlock wanted to say, but John was already unconscious atop the covers, guardless and guileless in a way Sherlock found terrifying.

When Sherlock rested his forehead against John’s, John emerged from the early stages of sleep, long enough to sigh, and smiled just perceptibly at the edges of Sherlock’s sight, before sinking in relaxation once again.

As ever, it was not merely remarkable that John could fall asleep so quickly, or in such a bright room (Sherlock hadn’t bothered to turn off the bedside lamp), with Sherlock positioned so near: ever the doctor, or the soldier… or both. (John’s leg jolted, but his breathing continued to slow.) Instead, it was the simplicity of what John offered (his sleep) which, on another body, up-close, would have grated, felt lecherous, invasive, mocking at such a moment when sleep and/or arousal felt irrevocably out of reach. Intimacy, John would probably have labelled it, and in the privacy of his own weltering thoughts, Sherlock admitted to himself that he craved it, that he had been without it his entire life before meeting John who offered it, so foolishly, to him.

La forza del destino, Sherlock thought, then chided himself. Even in his own mind, he was
disgusted with how heavy-handed could he be. Evidently he getting maudlin in his middle age.

Gruener’s gentle chuckle felt like it was tolling ominously in his mind, clashing painfully with Maureen’s acetic scepticism.

‘It is really very funny to see you trying to play a hand with no cards in it,’ lilted the Austrian with a smile, and Sherlock had felt his skin itch with rising fury and (loathe though he was to admit it) some wariness.

Without any evidence, he was indeed counting on a bluff based entirely on his own, as-yet unfounded certainty. Fortunately for them all — except of course Gruener — his certainty was worth more than most.

*

Chapter End Notes

Comments and feedback generally give me life. Other than that: Happy New Year -- ie, Happy Oh God I Can't Look But I Can't Not Look.
Not that either of them were especially good at talking, but he knew that on occasion when Sherlock was rattled he flitted around the flat, impatient and needing a ballast. But this morning Sherlock had proclaimed his intention to venture to the British Library for further research, so John had decided there was no point hovering and making things worse.

They didn’t kiss goodbye.

Chapter Notes

Ooh boy. No S4 spoilers but... yeah, John's kind of a shit. It is known.

(Pure reason toppled by sheer melodrama...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5: John

‘Your precious time, your darker days, the days I left you with no space
To breathe or even think of me without the worry that I'd always leave
I'll never leave, I'll always stay, I swear on all that I keep safe
I'll never leave, I'll always stay, I swear on all that I keep safe...
I'll never leave, I'll always stay, I swear, I swear, I swear, I swear

But it gets harder and harder...’
—The Lone Bellow, “Tree to Grow”

It was, John reckoned as another patient sat down across from him, a lot like being a doctor: the ability to switch on and off, with decent success, any erotic interest in another body. Much though he had been thrumming all the previous day with the itch to stand that certain way next to Sherlock, to weave their fingers together and kiss slowly and pull each other together and apart until they lost track of everything else, this morning he had felt only brisk, watchful concern. He’d considered begging off surgery duties for today. Not that either of them were especially good at talking, but he knew that on occasion when Sherlock was rattled he flitted around the flat, impatient and needing a ballast. But this morning Sherlock had proclaimed his intention to venture
to the British Library for further research, so John had decided there was no point hovering and making things worse.

They didn’t kiss goodbye.

For one thing, he wasn’t sure even now how Sherlock would have taken the gesture. Whatever else he had found out yesterday — beyond some evidence that Gruener was in deeper with the worst kinds of crime (kids, for Christ’s sake) — it had apparently set him reeling from any kind of distraction, back to the admittedly life-or-death matter of the case.

But today, here was John, sitting and trying not to lash out at his patient from the niggling feeling that he should have found some way to reassure Sherlock, to reaffirm that putting off their big plans for one night — indefinitely, even — was not going to chase him away.

Since living at Baker Street, John hadn’t known what went on in Sherlock’s room when he stormed off mid-case, though he’d hovered near Sherlock’s door wondering, listening, waiting, often enough. Last night, he’d finally caught a glimpse of what happened on the other side.

‘We’re not having sex tonight,’ Sherlock had snapped, a low note of panic lurking in his tone, in the raised, stiff hunch of his shoulders beneath his jacket.

‘No,’ John had replied, a bit surprised that the idea had occurred to Sherlock when it had very much gone from his own mind. ‘No, we definitely are not.’

Here, he’d thought to himself, was a clear fork in the road. Black moods were par for the course when living with Sherlock Holmes; this was not news to him. But equally he had learned that at critical moments, Sherlock craved reassurance — that it determined his ability to handle normal life, normal people’s mistakes and missteps, for an indeterminate period afterward. Historically, this had meant that both of them flapped around, getting on each other’s nerves, sometimes driving each other up the bloody wall, John struggling against the impossible urge to wrap Sherlock very tightly in a hug that might force Sherlock’s breathing to sync with John’s, steady, under control, until he really felt it.

The thought, occurring to John as it always had, had taken a moment to register as not so impossible. Not anymore.

As hungry (and hell, massively keyed up) as he’d come home feeling, he’d forced it aside. Got to
his feet. Went through the steps, unsure if the curled up lump behind him was listening or, worse, not. Put his phone and wallet and watch on the dressing table — stacked, since there wasn’t room on this side, amidst Sherlock’s mysterious selection of knick-knacks and the very low lamp. Folded his trousers and shirt with the familiar motions of undressing with that air of privacy reserved for groups of people pretending they couldn’t see each other’s bits. Fortunately their washing was mixed (because John was the only one who bothered to do it, when Mrs. Hudson was too busy or too put-out), so he could at least avoid trespassing (yet) in Sherlock’s dresser for a shirt. Hesitated for a moment, with a hand on a pair of pyjama bottoms. Fork in the road.

They’d stayed folded on the dresser, sandwhiched between another of John’s shirts and a grey pair of Sherlock’s pants.

Sitting a bit uncomfortably, John had turned to stare across, wondering if it was only the weird proximity of his left hand to Sherlock’s spine that made it feel very late all the sudden. Only a few moments after, when Sherlock had finally, still tensely rolled to face him, did John stop holding his breath.

Not how he’d envisioned the night going.

‘And then I started getting these headaches, you see,’ continued the nasal-voiced man in front of him, as John rejoined the present to find his hand still scrawling notes on the chart on his lap.

Sherlock, as it happened, had continued to deny snoring ever since John had first woken to it, more than a month ago now. ‘Deny’ was probably too light a term: ‘outright denounce the possibility of, at an increasing volume’ probably hit closer to the mark. But years of playing the role of teasing annoying little brother were not wasted on John, nor was the time-honoured British pastime of taking the piss out of a fellow soldier. For a week, he’d hidden nose strips in Sherlock’s nightstand, mentioned in Mrs Hudson’s hearing that Sherlock might need an herbal soother for his post-nasal drip, even renamed Sherlock in his phone with the little yellow symbol of the nose. Sherlock’s face when John had begun typing a blog post describing Sherlock’s snores and snuffles in the moments before a bomb explosion at a stakeout (a true story) had been so hilariously furious that John had spent the rest of that afternoon forgetting and remembering it by turns with giggles under his breath. Sherlock had, naturally, retaliated with the entirely anticipated jibes about the size of John’s own nose — but of course he was about thirty years too late for that one to sting. Once again, John considered the fact that a peevish Sherlock resembled nothing so much as the disgruntled ravens at the Tower of London, or maybe the squawking parrot John had had to prevent Sherlock from keeping, because nothing about them could be normal. But that evening after dinner and two large glasses of wine, they’d kissed quietly on the bench in the kitchen, John murmuring apologies while creeping his fingers beneath Sherlock’s clothes and suggesting ways he could make it up to him. And when the next morning he’d found breathing strips stuck all over his body, he’d laughed and invited Sherlock to help him get them off under the warm spray of the shower.
John hid his smirk by rubbing his upper lip.

So: it wasn’t that the little moments were unromantic. Little moments of comfort and affection were all too easy between them. Always had been. But this morning John hadn’t kissed Sherlock goodbye, hadn’t even thought about it until he was taking his jacket off at the surgery and spotted one of the nurses who occasionally flirted with him. He and Sherlock had been in some warped version of a relationship for years. He just wasn’t used to thinking of it like any other relationship he’d had.

He was staring blankly at the tray of Keflex in the supply cupboard. He really shouldn’t text Sherlock. They could go a few hours without each other. And besides —

Dr. Dhawan came round the corner, starting and making a joke about wool-gathering, successfully jolting John back to himself. With a laugh he recognised as collegial but obviously forced, he made a nondescript remark and grabbed the packet he had supposedly come in for, kicking himself all the way back to his office.

Between that patient and flicking on the signal for the next, though, he found the internal conversation ready and waiting to fill the silence: How was he meant to keep in his mind at all times that he was supposed to feel sexual, romantic things about the person who also filled so many unsexual, unromantic roles in his life? A person with whom he spent more time than he did alone? And how, for that matter, to tap into those feelings when for so long it had been of critical importance that they never, ever leak out of the dark box he stuffed them in? So far, yes, Sherlock’d somehow struck the perfect balance of sexually voracious and occasionally aloof, giving John enough time to get a mental running start on wanting, for example, to suck him off, something — good 90% of his life — he genuinely hadn’t contemplated at all. With Mary, he’d done everything in the right order, if at breakneck speed: flirting, sex, seriousness, rude and awkward realism, proper caring. (She’d really seemed to care for him, anyway.) He and Sherlock, though, had spent so many years loving each other quietly, imagining fantasy versions of each other, in amongst the everyday of bad tempers and absent-minded scratching, that were never interrupted by mismatched desires or poor communication or just plain awkwardness. Was it possible (he thought, in a slightly out-of-body way) they had missed the opportunity to be in love with each other?

But… sometimes, after other days — often ones that coincided with Sherlock having no particular case of interest (and John shied away from thinking too much about this correlation) —, days of dancing around each other, suddenly Sherlock seemed like he couldn’t help but touch him, crowd him, radiating heat and want and adoration (John had half-convinced himself that he was reading Sherlock right and not just projecting). And then John’s unreliable homosexuality kicked in and he wanted him, not ‘Sherlock Holmes, Great Detective’ but the lanky mop-headed marble-skinned git of a man who looked at John with dragon’s eyes blown dark. Who shivered as John stepped close and even more when he brushed back his curls, who melted, groaning needily, at whatever rush of words John whispered in his ear, intoxicatingly weak at the knees before John had done much of anything. Sherlock, who folded clumsily into John’s advances, and from there it was no struggle at
all for him to want anything and everything from Sherlock’s body. To love him so deeply they were both shaking with it. To want him, all of him, and no one else ever again.

Above all, though, was the enormity of the truth that, even if whatever uneven thing he and Sherlock had fell apart — even if, someday, Sherlock decided the demands of the flesh were not worth his time and that he would prefer to go back to partners in crime only; or if, a different darker voice prompted, John found himself incapable of watching Sherlock rush off without him one more time, do one more reckless thing and nearly get himself killed, without regard for where that would leave John — even then, John could not imagine feeling this much, this mad welter of things, for any other human being.

Which was, he supposed, pretty much the whole game.

***

About halfway through his lunch break, he saw a familiar shape walked past and, unresolved curiosity getting the better of him, called, ‘Beth!’

A woman in slightly too-small magenta scrubs ducked her head around the door smiling. ‘You rang, Dr. Watson?’

He smiled back. ‘D’you have a minute?’

She brought the rest of herself into the room and pulled up a plastic seat. ‘Everything all right? And, by the way, I’ve been meaning to say: I like the long hair.’

He smiled again, a little more genuinely. It had been getting more attention, otherwise he’d have cut it back down to regulation length weeks ago. ‘Yeah, fine thanks. And you?’

‘Not too bad! Mondays, you know.’ She shrugged and adjusted her apple-red glasses absent-mindedly, limp black hair still brushing the frames. Her St. Andrew blue ‘YES’ referendum button, a little the worse for wear, somehow clashed with everything. ‘Working a double shift at Chelsea Road tomorrow so that’ll be long one but…’

Excellent, exactly the window he’d hoped for. ‘Are they short-staffed? What about Mary?’
Beth gave him a funny look. ‘Mary… Morstan?’

He held off giving any expression. ‘She’s still working there, isn’t she?’

‘She quit ages ago,’ Beth said, looking at him as though worried about his memory. ‘Remember? Just after you left. Haven’t seen her since.’

‘Right, yeah,’ John echoed, trying not to give away that this was as startling news as it was. ‘Been a while.’

‘You two were seeing each other, weren’t you? Last spring or so?’ Beth made a sympathetic frown. ‘I know…’ She considered him for a moment, then went on, ‘Well, it’s none of my business, is it? But I did think you seemed like a nice couple. “Looked well together”, my mum says. And blondes have more fun — as you know too, I bet!’

‘Ha,’ he coughed an awkward laugh (today was a parade of them, apparently), getting to his feet, suddenly very grateful his sister had never subjected him to long girlish conversations about her dating life (or his, for that matter). ‘Right, well, thanks, Beth. I’ll see you later, yeah?’

‘Was that all? I thought you were going to ask me about the rugby league Gwen and I are starting.’

Since he only skimmed (alright, deleted) the monthly clinic newsletter, he had no idea what she was talking about, but he tried to make a noncommittal noise that allowed her assume whatever she liked.

‘Some of the women in the group were already signed up, but we were hoping for a few more of the men to get involved. It’s minimal effort, really — just an excuse to go to the pub, as much as anything.’

It wasn’t a bad idea. He’d loved playing rugby when he was at uni, and the few pick-up games he’d managed between messes in the army. Sholto had been the reigning team captain every time — and Christ, there was another person he’d basically forgotten since Sherlock had come back. Another email he ought to send. Though, then again, he doubted (knowing the Major’s reclusive lifestyle, after everything that had happened) he’d be willing to come to London just for a pint and a catch-up.
‘Go on, put me down for a match or two,’ he offered. ‘Though the whole detective thing makes me a pretty unreliable back. It makes me an unreliable spectator, if I’m honest.’

‘Oh, don’t worry! It’ll be a help just to tell some of the others you might be there — give a little star-power to the team!’

*Just wait til my name’s on a Waterstone’s shelf,* he thought, then berated himself for letting it go to his head before anything was even settled.

His break was up, so he wished Beth a good luck, gulped down his tea, and told her to be in touch with details of matches.

‘No problem!’ She nodded merrily and (blessedly) went the other direction down the corridor.

He had a few seconds back at his desk, so he took out his phone and pulled up a blank email.

*To: Mary Morstan*

*Hi Mary —*

*I know it’s been a while, but I realised we hadn’t spoken in a few months — can it really be that long? Anyway, I wanted to check in and*

… And what? Suddenly it occurred to him: he’d texted yesterday, and she hadn’t texted back. Hadn’t texted in months. Come to think of it, Mary hadn’t phoned him in all that time either. Or come round, not even to throw something at him while shouting about being left hanging without so much as a kiss goodbye.

He’d stopped working much at that surgery, near his old (temporary) flat, but he surely still had her number… unless his attention-hogging flatmate-stroke-whatever had erased it. He could almost imagine it.

He saved the unfinished email and scrolled through his contacts: yes, he did have her number, buried in his call history. Last used more than five months earlier. And, above his outgoing
message of yesterday, the last text from Mary beneath the little grey date mark reading, ‘Received Weds, 19 Mar, 4:52pm’:

See you at 8? xx

He hadn’t replied. (He couldn’t remember if they’d met up or not.)

It seemed surreal. Empty words, from a different life. (Maybe, in his eventual write-up of these years, he could weave Mary’s story into a case. One of the rich City clients that preferred to remain anonymous. Not great, he admitted, with grim humour, that his first thought of Mary was to use her as a plot device.)

But… he went through his mental calendar: that must have been only, what? Three days before Sherlock had shown up? Stiff-limbed and exhausted, Sherlock had made his grand re-entry into John’s world, 26 months and eight days after he’d died, and any thought of rings or other lives had been shoved violently, joyfully from John’s mind. They had gone back to Baker Street, caught up in a case (but, more deeply, in each other) and he’d barely wanted to sleep or even breathe at the wrong moment for fear it would all come crashing down. He’d been too numb even to be relieved not to have to invent a fake reason to end it with his sort of-fiancée/soon-to-be-not girlfriend. His mind (his heart (his bed)) had been too full of Sherlock to give much space to anyone else.

The knock on the door followed by the entry of one of the temps who handed him a patient intake form, ‘Mr. Summerson,’ then in a low, dramatically disgusted hiss, ‘clamydia,’ before giving John a sorry-you-pulled-the-short-straw-mate face — which was a little annoying considering the kid had worked here for about a week and really shouldn’t be messing about when the patient was right there (but not, despite the prickle along his neck, because Mary had been so much more subtle when she’d done that) — and John was already tucking his phone back into his pocket, determined not to forget much longer.

* * *

Whatever Sherlock said, John didn’t always barge back into the flat shouting like a drunk teenager stumbling in after curfew. (Not until the army had he even had curfew. Though some of them had still been teenagers.) Half the time Sherlock was making enough of a racket to be heard down the block, and the rest of the time the silence — even when Sherlock was in — spoke volumes of a different sort.

Climbing the stairs, he heard the muffled conversation of the deep familiar voice and — a woman, talking in wide vowels punctuated with a piercing laugh. John could imagine Sherlock’s look of unconcealed distaste. Still surprising, how the smallest things visibly ruffled him, when the enormous things sent him retreating into himself, outwardly still and unmoved.
‘… Anyway, there’s no convincing some people, is there? Don’t want t’be told, do they.’

‘I find that is often the case, yes,’ Sherlock agreed in a put-upon deadpan, sounding much more himself than this morning. ‘John, do come in and join us.’

Sherlock’s eyes met his from across the room in a smirk, and with the force of a dam bursting John really wished no one was here so they could discuss if Sherlock needed more time to ruminate on Gruener’s crimes or if it wouldn’t be better to forget about it all right now and not-literally ‘call it a night’.

Instead he hung up his jacket, shoved his rucksack under the bottom shelf, and swiveled his armchair towards the —

‘Dr. Watson? Suze Winter,’ volunteered the (very, very petite, in very loud outfit) woman on their sofa, rising immediately (to, at most, five foot tall) and extending a hand, bracelets jangling.

‘Right, sorry, hello,’ he got to his feet, never quite standing all the way up, ‘sorry, I didn’t know we were expecting anyone.’

‘I’m unexpected,’ she replied, without missing a beat. ‘Just how I like it.’

‘Miss Winter is, as you can no doubt hear, John, a fellow Essex native.’

*Yes, to very much, he could hear that, he managed with a sharp glance. Sherlock deflated a notch and looked away, lips pursed.*

Though she was smiling brightly at him, the strain behind it was evident — and not just for being teased about her upbringing. Everything from the grip of her long orange talons of nails to her crossed, plum-coloured jeans to the thick, animal print jacket she had zipped up all the way to her chin (she was probably boiling) screamed of someone fiercely putting on a brave face but all the while scared for her life.

‘Chelmsford,’ he admitted, allowing some of it into his voice.
She, unlike Violet de Merville in possibly every way, seemed to warm to him a little. ‘Billericay.’

‘All friends together!’ clapped Sherlock. ‘Fantastic. Now, please, do continue, Miss Winter, I am all ears.’

John considered having a word with Sherlock about interrupting when, clearly, some clients would actually open up better if they didn’t feel like they were being hurried along, but Suze was already moving on.

‘Suze, Mr. Holmes, I keep telling ya.’

Sherlock sighed, and smudged his mouth together. But his tone was surprisingly gentle as he allowed, ‘Of course. Please, call me Sherlock, if it will be of use to you.’

‘Just gonna keep it in my pocket for a rainy day, then,’ she grinned, then looked conspiratorially at John, who couldn’t help but grin: anyone who could make Sherlock blush was worth having around. ‘But that’s not what I’m here for, as I said. I’ve heard, through m’old job —’

‘Journalism. Tabloid or broadsheet?’

‘Daily Observer,’ she balanced, and Sherlock bit back a curse, probably at not having deduced it before she spoke. ‘Haven’t worked there for nearly a year, but still keep in touch. Just to know what’s going on of a weekend an’ that. But me mate Shinwell Johnson said you were up t’something, and that I should get in touch, and here I am.’

(John resisted rolling his eyes. Shinwell, mostly known as ‘Porky’, Johnson was one of Sherlock’s underground informants, happier to spill to them than to the police and get himself a visit from some nasty people. Half the time his information was bollocks, but Sherlock persisted in meeting him all over the city, peevishly groaning that ‘Even the smallest mote of dust could be the foundation for a criminal case some day.’ Utter crap, John thought, so he usually kept his remarks to the short (and admittedly sarcastic).)

‘You’re here because I asked Shinwell to send me anyone with information that they had not shared with the police about Baron Heinrich Gruener.’

The chill that stole over Suze seemed deep enough to dampen all the laughter of the past few
minutes down with it.

‘Whatever hell I’ve been through, he deserves a lower one,’ she spat. ‘And Porky told me you know about some barmy girl who’s got herself engaged to him? Must be deaf, blind, and off her bloody head. Not that it doesn’t happen to the best of us, as much as the worst.’

‘“Hell?”’ Sherlock repeated, examining her with a tilted head that made him not a little bit intimidating himself.

Suze took a deep, shuddery breath and shook her head, tongue worrying one of her false-brightened teeth until she found her voice. ‘It’s over now. I nearly went broke trying to take him to court — or to put it in print. Lost my job, my references, my lease, every appeal I put in, took out a loan and lost m’great-grandmother’s good china that we’d had since before the war.’ She took another minute to prevent her voice from breaking again.

It was all true, plainly written in her every movement and unconscious gesture, but John was positive — almost as positive as Sherlock would be — that she hadn’t yet actually told them what had happened to her. Yet in the back of his mind reverberated the words Sherlock had confided in him last night.

‘And you knew him… from an investigation?’ John attempted, to prevent Sherlock having to engage more with this topic than was absolutely necessary.

Shaking her head, Suze grimaced with what he diagnosed as shame. ‘Worse than that. I… I fancied him. Met him at a club one Saturday when I was out with my mates — m’thirty birthday do. Completely bladdered, and saw a gorgeous looking fella in an even more gorgeous suit, staring at me. Let’s just say, after the luck I’d been having, I was ready to go home with anyone who looked at me twice. God, my dad was rolling in his grave then, horrible old tosser.’

She bit her lip to keep it steady.

‘After that, he wined and dined me, took me to all the best places and always wanted to pay — even took me to Prague, one weekend. Sorted everything for me — told me not to lift a finger, said he’d take care of it all. I thought, Finally. Cash in my chips on one solid man. Paid my dues, and now it’s my turn. Didn’t even want me to go to work, said he could look after me better at — at home.’
'Was it before or after you caught him in bed with a minor that you discovered you were pregnant?'

*Christ.* All the distant impassivity of the previous night had reasserted itself in Sherlock’s expression, through his muscles, turning him to stone.

Her eyes, shining with clear tears, flicked over to Sherlock, then back to John. After a moment she breathed, ‘After.’

He didn’t try to guess whether her mouth quivered more with disgust, self-reproach, or fear.

‘She was — for god’s sake, she couldn’t have been *fifteen.* She didn’t even look like she was *awake.*’

When finally John interrupted the tainted silence of the room, he tried to draw on every comforting experience and every ounce of faith in Sherlock and Mycroft, the whole bloody Met, his own Sig if necessary, to get through to her. ‘Suze. We are going to find this *bastard,* and we are going to make sure that he never hurts anyone ever again. Yeah?’

Brushing away tears with carefully flattened fingers, she nodded at him, though neither of them seemed especially comforted.

‘He keeps… notes…’ she started, but thankfully — Jesus — John was glad she didn’t have to go through the ordeal of telling them *that* from scratch —

‘We already know that he records his episodes and that he photographs them,’ Sherlock carried on unemotionally, hands perfectly still. ‘What I need to know is if you can tell us anything about *where* he keeps his collection, or what it looks like.’

For someone who looked very much like she, small though she was, could deck not only another woman in a catfight but probably a fair few of John’s RAMC mates in a sparring match, all in high-heels and with only a *pop* of her product-stiffened peroxide-blonde hair, Suze’s choked up frown made John want to find Gruener himself, to make sure the bastard felt every ounce of pain he’d unleashed on others.

‘No…’
Again, John was sure — well, he’d have to wait until they were alone so he could confer with Sherlock — but his instinct told him that there was something, if possible, worse, and it was to do with her knowing about the ‘notes’ in question.

‘He… I never saw it. I tried once, and. Like I said, it didn’t make one bit of difference. And now little miss dim-witted twat thinks she knows better, just because she’s sitting pretty in her million-pound druggie flat —’

‘You’ve been there?’ John cut in, shocked.

(He usually made an effort not to interrupt, but for some reason the image of two polar opposites, fire and ice, who could easily have bumped shoulders (or at least elbows) on the way to the loo in a nightclub without knowing it, was impossible to picture against the backdrop of Violet’s pristine, manicured, sterilised flat.)

‘Fat lot of good it did anybody,’ she scoffed. ‘Knew me on sight. Said she didn’t want to hear my “slander” and shut the door in my face. Spent an hour outside shouting through the door, just in case she could hear — or maybe one of her posh neighbours — but of course when the police showed up, all they wanted was to get me the hell away from there. Didn’t seem very interested in anything I had to say.’

‘That’s consistent, anyway,’ muttered Sherlock sardonically.

‘And did they give a rat’s arse when my flat got wrecked a few days later? Ha! Thank god I’d decided to go to me mum’s. Back home,’ she added, to John, who dug deep through his horror and smiled back. One more for the parade.

‘You’ve gone to a great deal of personal trouble to see that a woman you don’t even know doesn’t end up reaping the harvest of her own mistakes?’ Sherlock pointed out.

‘It’s not just her. It’s… Did you ever see someone with big, dark, romantic eyes, Mr. Holmes? And at first you think, Cor, I could get lost in them. And then the longer you’re lookin’ at ‘em, you start to see that they’re just… dead. Flat. Like a painting. No light or… or soul, or nothing, underneath. And somehow they seem like they’re gonna swallow you up, like a black hole. And no matter how hard you try, it’s like when somebody’s holding both your hands, and you pull and you pull but you can’t get away — only it’s just in those ten seconds between the person asking you a question and those dark, flat eyes almost telling you you’ve got no choice at all but to give up? That’s what he’s
like, Mr. Holmes. Sucking in all the parts of you that know how to fight back until you’re… you’re too exhausted.’

‘Yes,’ said Sherlock finally, and John hated how deep with memory his voice had gone. ‘I do know what you mean.’

Wiping her cheeks one last time and then rubbing her hands on her thighs as if to warm herself, Suze got to her feet — she was shorter than either of them — and came round to stand by the door. They both went to shake her hand, neither of them (John knew) giving a damn if it was clammy or flakey or covered in thick mascara.

‘Good luck, boys. And let me know if there’s anything I can do.’

‘We’ll keep you informed,’ Sherlock told her, before turning towards his desk and beginning to type dramatically on his laptop.

‘In the meantime, keep your head down,’ John added sternly, before she could leave. However afraid she was, she was also clearly hurt and enraged, a combination that had led to more body bags in his lifetime than he ever cared to count. ‘From everything we’ve got, this bastard’s not going to go quietly.’

‘I’m not important,’ she shrugged. ‘But I’ll mind how I go.’

‘You’re important to us,’ he told her fiercely. If there was one incredible thing about people, it was their ability to fight if they thought they had someone or something to fight for — even themselves. ‘We’re going to need all the help we can get if we’re hoping for any justice to come out of this. Don’t go quitting on us now.’

Her reddened brown eyes — far from flat or dead — studied him for a long, yearning second. ‘I don’t think I believe in justice any more. But it’s nice to meet somebody who still does.’

He let her words hang in the air, solemn and unnervingly like a premonition.

‘Go on,’ he nodded bracingly after a moment. ‘And — if you’re looking to let off some steam — I’ve got a rugby squad that’s looking for a forward. Bet you could take a bunch of scrawny medical students for their money?’
Suze laughed. ‘Can’t be worse than Chelmsford High Street on a Friday night.’

* * *

Sherlock played beautifully for over an hour after Suze left, and John ached with gratitude to be able to sit with a nice glass of scotch and simply get lost in whatever sad, crooning melody Sherlock was drawing out of the violin. This was how they worked best: the two of them sitting with a client between them, and then hours of closeness unspooling, alone with each other, punctuated only by asking the other’s opinion on the best strategy for taking down a criminal or on what they’d like for tea.

John had just enough time to sift through his inbox, flag a few potential leads for cases, and revisit the email with Mary. Eventually, having written a semi-decent draft, deleted the whole thing, rewrite it, then — possibly buoyed up by the scotch and the scratch of Beethoven (or whoever) — force himself to hit ‘send’, he set his phone aside and enjoyed the rest of the concert.

After a while, when night had come on properly and the windows rattled every so often with a gentle shudder of autumn wind, he looked across to find Sherlock standing at the desk as he put away his bow.

Blood hell, it had only been yesterday morning they’d been here, talking about…

Clicking shut the violin case, Sherlock suddenly marched across the room, headed — evidently — for the bedroom.

‘Sherlock?’ he called, because none of this boded well.

Echoing down the corridor as he walked away, John heard, ‘If we’re going to steal Gruener’s scrapbook or files or whatever they are, we ought to do so as soon as possible. And we need a way to be assured that we truly have enough irrefutable evidence for Mycroft to counterbalance the repercussions for all those involved.’

‘Okay,’ he agreed in a loud voice, scenting danger and rising to his feet. ‘Agreed.’

He waited for a reply. When instead all he got was the sound of rapidly opening and closing drawers, though, he went ahead to stand in the doorway.
‘I haven’t touched your sock index,’ he added, a bit sharply.

Sherlock was hanging his jacket and replacing it with the one he tended to wear when he expected trouble: hand-to-hand trouble.

‘I’ll be back in a few hours,’ he muttered, sitting and toeing off his shoes before reaching under the bed for his noiseless ones.

The remaining warmth in John’s chest vanished like smoke on a breeze. Mrs. Hudson was probably wondering what all the rowing was about lately. John hoped to heaven she was out at her book club tonight.

‘I know you could hear what I said to Suze before she left.’

‘I stopped listening a long while before that —’

‘Sherlock, this isn’t news to you, but Gruener is not a nice man. He is, in fact, a murderer — a murder who’s managed to get away with it several times. Something you were the first to point out to me.’

Sherlock looked up in mock-thought. ‘And?’

John resisted the urge to kick him. ‘And so, what’s the plan? Because rushing in when you have no idea where he keeps his records or, for that matter, what they bloody look like —’

‘Five minutes alone in Gruener’s study would be more than sufficient, I promise you: I would leave with more than enough proof to put him away for a decade.’

‘Were you even listening to a word that just got said?’ he demanded, feeling his temper rising in spite of himself.

With an eye-roll of profound impatience, Sherlock waved his hands in the air, ‘I heard every massacred ‘d’ and ‘t’ that died on her tongue —’
'Oh, you know what —'

‘And I’m very, very sure that I deduced more during that interview —’

‘— you can fuck right off, we’re not talking about her eligibility for best Princess Di impression, we’re talking about the fact that she knows a hell of a lot more than Gruener would like, and she’s lucky she isn’t dead for it!’

‘— than you could in the prolonged hours and hours you would like us to spend “preparing” when you obviously would be just as satisfied walking in and shooting the man in the head!’

‘Yeah, I would,’ John admitted, chest tight, ‘but I’m not going to, because, whatever you’ve convinced yourself, it’s not actually always the best plan, breaking in to the offices of infamous criminals on the chance you’re pretty sure you’ll get out again.’

‘I appreciate the mistakes I made with Moriarty,’ said Sherlock almost with a snarl. ‘Gruener is not the same man. Cruelty and malice almost never come in that perfectly, psychotically intelligent a package. Gruener doesn’t have a master plan — as you say, he hasn’t even killed Suze, when that would plainly be the easiest thing in the world, should he wish to!’

‘So just because she’s still walking and talking, you think Gruener’s not as dangerous?’ He eyed Sherlock, because this was very much the problem Sherlock had: he liked drama, loved showing just how clever he was by daring death up against a ticking time bomb — and the thing he somehow still neglected to consider was the way it left John on the pavement watching him jump —

‘John,’ Sherlock murmured, confused, ‘this is not your preferred tactic, I appreciate that, which is why —’

‘HA!’ he barked. Unbefuckinglievable. It was never-ending. ‘That’s not — absolutely not — If I’m not coming, then you’re not going. End of story.’

Sherlock glared at him, assessing, and John's nails bit into his palms and he refused to speak first for fear he’d just shout some more.
Brows drawn, Sherlock stood up, looming as he oh-so-enjoyed doing. ‘I was always intending to come back.’

A punch in the gut — no, clocked from his blindspot. John *reeled*.

‘Okay, well. That must be fine then.’ His throat felt sore, the same knife-edged panic scuttling around inside him, never entirely quelled, rising. ‘In that case, I guess I just have to be glad the universe bends to the will of the great Sherlock Holmes.’

Leaving Sherlock blinking in the half-light of his room, John turned his back and went. He needed another scotch for this.

* 

**Chapter End Notes**

As ever, remaining mistakes have nothing to do with my beta and everything to do with changes I insist on making after she'd seen it. Comments and feedback incredibly appreciated.

And let me just say: having been on Chelmsford High Street at midnight on New Year's Eve, I would not suggest going without a battleplan.
Six (Sherlock)

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNING: mentions of canon-typical depressive and suicidal thoughts. Also: the rating is real, and getting realer.

Most of this was written in the aftermath of Series 3, with its swings of terror, profound yearning, and almost indecent enjoyment. In other words: everyone's a mess.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 6: Sherlock

‘it does not help much to recall
how unlikely it is that we
turned up here with the beginning
strewn around us of which we know
nothing hear nothing remember
only the moment before us
which we believe as it happens
when it appears to be likely

oh be unlikely forever’

—W.S. Merwin, from “To the Unlikely Event”

Alcohol was almost certainly an unfortunate component in this argument. Even so, John was not drunk (his tolerance was lower of late, but much as he might wish to deny it, he had a lifetime of practice, to say nothing of genes, as his baseline); nor, certainly, was he insensible either to the danger or to the siren call of vengeance upon a man he assuredly deemed ‘evil’.

Sherlock had determined, halfway through a particularly precise movement of Mendelssohn, that Gruener, being ruthlessly methodical, imperturbable, and patient, would be planning for a long, elegant chess match. Their first engagement (their opening salvos, to borrow from John’s preferred metaphorical terrain: the martial) had exposed their respective modi operandi, and given (as intended) Gruener the sense that he’d gained first advantage. Entirely false.

This, coupled with Suze’s information (and something, some stray fibre of relevant data that had lodged itself in his subconscious but had not quite surpassed the threshold to full awareness — i.e., an intuition), convinced him that they should waste no more time. So he’d played until the sun had
descended beneath the earth (or something), thinking…

And yet: here was John, resisting. Why? (What were the limits of human stupidity?! Or… well, perhaps, if not ‘stupidity’, at least obstinacy and perversity!)

‘John,’ he’d therefore pivoted, calibrating his voice for gentle, ‘this is not your preferred tactic, I appreciate that,’ (a partial truth: John’s preferred tactic certainly did involve rushing headlong into danger, but only after more hospitable (boring) options had been exhausted) ‘which is why —’

‘HA!’ John had scoffed, face smarting with unconcealed fury. (With Sherlock himself? Or with the admittedly ludicrous suggestion that he remain behind?) ‘That’s not — absolutely not — If I’m not coming, then you’re not going. End of story.’

Sherlock had felt his nostrils flare. This was… inconvenient. In his peripheral thoughts, Sherlock had already been halfway to Kingston (by the time they reached Waterloo, the commuter traffic would have died down considerably, making it far easier to get a cab: it was — he thought briefly — Monday; good). But John uncharacteristically dragging his feet presented an unusual impediment to his careening thoughts.

Which had prompted his, admittedly less-than-fully considered (busy!), speculation that — as people were always stressing to him — the words on the surface were merely that: superficial, designed to deceive, or at least obfuscate, their subterranean meaning:

‘I was always intending to come back.’

Ah: evidently the wrong guess. Only someone who observed John Watson less closely (which was, as it happened, virtually everyone) would have mistaken his crashing stillness for defeat, therefore missing the sudden ozone tinge to the air — the blinding crackle of lightning when the thunder was still too far off to be heard. Avant la deluge.

John’s rages, unlike Sherlock’s, tended to be silent in their ferocity. But if John barged out to ‘walk it off’ now — no, he was pouring himself another measure — two — of Scotch. It was so frustratingly, wastefully irrational.

‘Surely,’ he insisted, hoping to get back to the matter at hand, ’it would be preferable to take Gruener out sooner rather than later? You saw how Suze flinched when she thought you might try to hug her — her long sleeves and trousers: all clear signs of abuse, whether self-harm or simply
scars from the brief affair with Gruener, it’s too early to say.’ (Almost certainly the latter.) ‘But wouldn’t it better?’

(Isn’t that kinder? a four-years gone version of himself asked, during a similarly ominous row.)

Five uninterrupted minutes in that study, he was sure, would do the trick — enough time to get a sense up-close of the locks, desk drawers, potential decoy Tang vases or Rembrandts that might be hiding a key or switch or encoded document of some kind — better still, a quick run through Gruener’s clothes to see if he had any false pockets or secret compartments in a humidor—

‘So you think a man who killed his wife —’ John cut in, hand poised over his glass as if preparing to use it as a projectile, ‘a man who runs a human trafficking ring in kids, who attacked a journalist who was carrying his child, who as of yesterday not only saw you but threatened you to your face. And you think it’s best to just, what? Pop over for a quick peek at his sock drawer?’

‘More or less!’ Sherlock admitted, exasperated.

‘Ah.’ John's face did something complicatedly inauspicious. 'Right. Well, plans are for amateurs, aren't they? I'm sure we could just turn up: not like there’s a chance of an ambush. He won’t have big guards with guns or dogs or anything. D’you know, I think you’re on to something.’

Hm. Sarcasm.

John took an overlarge gulp of his whisky — his throat convulsed (burned).

‘We don’t need an immediate confrontation,’ Sherlock went on, unsure how to allay John’s fears (or, for that matter, what precisely they were). ‘We simply need to locate the necessary proof to take to my brother.’

‘Oh, it’s “we” now, is it?’

‘Yes!’ Of course! Was that a genuine question? Sherlock was standing here, making an effort to convince John, not because it was necessary: but deep down, John wanted to do this, as much as Sherlock did. And Sherlock wanted him with him (how could John be so obtuse as to believe otherwise). ‘Barring complications, that is very much the point of the plan. The two of us, against the rest of the world. It’s dangerous, of course it’s “dangerous”, that’s why we don’t let idiots do
“‘Complications,’” repeated John, rubbish a finger (habit) over his right eyebrow, in the same flat, unimpressed tone. ‘Do you have any idea how lucky we’ve been?’ He shook his head, then swallowed. ‘Two bloody years wasn’t enough of a “complication” to make you consider that you are not in fact omnipotent?’

Oh, for — so that was it! — were they never to be out of this shadow? Every argument since his return continued to be reducible to their perpetual, haphazard attempt come to terms with the consequences of the Lazarus affair (with John’s ferocious heart).

‘I repeat, I was always intending to come back.’ But John’s body language presented only a studied, grounded intractability, giving nothing away. Sherlock had followed him into the sitting room, defiantly not chasing him from room to room. ‘When — before. I made an error in judgment, failing to tell you, but… I was certainly always working towards Baker Street.’

(Towards you, he couldn’t quite say.)

John stared at him, chin raised. ‘Were you.’ Voice: flat.

‘Yes,’ he reiterated, losing his patience. ‘For god’s sake, John, I understand you were upset, but you cannot allow this mental block to prevent us from doing the work!’ Bewildering in the extreme, to waste time in hang-wringing now — they were in the middle of case! And moreover, it was moot, when Sherlock demonstrably had come back, whatever the (un)likelihood of his having done so. ‘I’m here, and you’re here, and we are just in time to put a stop to Gruener’s… depravity! Surely those are the only facts of importance?’

‘Yeah well.’ John shifted to stand up straighter, withdrawing into himself. ‘Suppose London should just be rejoicing that you made it back in such good time. Well done there.’ After a second he moved around Sherlock, hand mere centimetres away as he angled past, back to the kitchen where he stood with his back to him, but assuredly frowning down at the table. Deciding.

Despite the substance of their quarrel so far, Sherlock’s tongue caught on the image he wasn’t supposed to have: Mary Morstan, a woman he wasn’t supposed to know existed — an assassin (a fact not even John knew (Sherlock himself was only 95% certain)). Timing. There had been a ring, true; but then again, John had returned it and never spoken to her (never; Sherlock was at least 65% certain), and Sherlock had come back before things were irreversible. Before his return, however, he could only imagine… A blonde, objectively attractive woman’s body curling around John’s in their sleep, giggling with him at their clinic, lacing her pale feminine hands in his blunter, darker
ones, keeping him in danger even when (especially when) he didn’t know it. All the while Sherlock himself had been in hotel rooms and mountain forests and snowy alleys thinking of not thinking of John — nauseating. His mind dismissed it all viciously —

‘Had I arrived at Baker Street before I did, you wouldn’t even have been here.’

He was pushing it — he felt John’s tense resistance like a concrete wall instantly erected around himself, protecting him from Sherlock’s onslaught. (Yet for over an hour, John and Suze had sat there, sharing some unreachable common thread, an inside joke between people who’d only just met. One of John’s well-worn skills, intimacy. All highlighting the simple fact: John needed other people; Sherlock didn’t.)

John’s bitter laugh made something slither in his stomach. ‘No,’ he warned, and his voice had dropped to that pitch that meant Sherlock was indeed playing with fire. ‘No. I’m not doing this. Don’t get off subject.’

‘I simply mean,’ Sherlock goaded, drawing himself up to his proper height because if John couldn’t forgive this, couldn’t move past it, then he had damn well better tell Sherlock now, in his brusque, plain words, and let Sherlock begin to sort out a life without him, ‘that you were apparently quite able to keep yourself entertained while I was out of the picture. Mycroft kept me generally apprised of your status: Mike Stamford and the new clinic and that truly execrable moustache. You would have been just fine.’

For all the obvious ways John could have rent this flimsy second-hand account apart (including with his literal fist (somebody loves you)), he instead remained silent. Trained to hold position even when his body screamed for action. At last he shuffled, a changement en avant that only placed him a matter of inches (approx. 20° anti-clockwise) closer to Sherlock. His hands spasmed, clenched.

‘Your brother had no idea.’ He was smiling, a cruel, pained twist of his mouth that made Sherlock want to recoil in spite of his anger; his voice (thick: altered) carried no amusement, only fierce, dangerous restraint. ‘I was not fine. Bad. I was… bad. All right? Now, enough. Gruener is —’

‘Ever the eloquent man of letters.’

‘NO,’ John shouted, head shaking and shaking like an enraged horse, ‘no, no, no. This is not some experiment. This is not some bloody autopsy, I’m not dragging this all out into the open just so you can dissect it and avoid what we were actually trying to get at.’
‘How poetic, Doctor,’ Sherlock sneered. ‘Perhaps your writing really is improving —’

John charged towards him suddenly, crowding and stopping only a foot away, breathing hard.

‘When I say, “bad”, what I mean is that I sat, and worked, and drank, and thought day after day about the fact that, at least if I killed myself, they might let me lie with your bones.’

Sherlock blinked.

(Rage and grief, it recurred to him, were sometimes indistinguishable. On John, especially so. Mouth, facial muscles, throat, all strained the effort not to quiver; eyes hard and bright; fists cramped so tight they’d be subdurally bruised. Ache: ubiquitous.)

It wasn’t good, not even a little bit good, that John thought such things — not ever — not even to himself. But once, not so long ago, Sherlock would have immediately accepted it: the idea of their bones, their hair, their remaining organs putrefying and crumbling after death into a single embrace of matter was simply the logical terminus of the completeness he felt every time he was near to John. It was wrong, he was sure, to want such a thing. Fortunately, it seemed John was just as bad as himself.

A staggered exhale from John’s nostrils wrested Sherlock from the tornado of his own thoughts. He found his own mouth dry, rear molars ground into each other as though cemented. With effort, he unclamped his jaw a fraction of a pascal.

‘John.’

That wasn’t what he had meant to say, but he was apparently in no control of his rough voice, nor his face. Whatever his muscles were doing, though, seemed to satisfy — or at least subdue — John’s surge of emotions. John nodded, once.

They stood in silence for a moment.

Sherlock wasn’t sure what to do next. He felt overly aware of his involuntary processes, as though he could hear the gummy reflex of his blinking, the bristle of his leg hair beneath his trouser-legs
and socks as he shifted his weight. (No doubt John, being exceptional, had conquered this alienation early in his medical career. Sherlock, being exceptional in an entirely different way, was seldom free of it.) Did John — want to be touched —? or was that inappropriate, in some way —

‘We’ve been lucky,’ John repeated exhaustedly, and Sherlock’s focus snapped back to the tense lines of around his mouth. ‘But I don’t want to count on it every time.’

Contrary to any reasonable man’s actions, John took a solid step towards him. (This proximity, to any hypothetical onlooker, would connote…. intimacy.) John’s chest was still labouring slightly, but his stance was firm, unhesitating — waiting.

(Thus, the source of Mycroft’s great maxim: ‘Caring is not an advantage.’ Because unquestionably it would be necessary to break into Gruener’s estate and search for clues, if not tonight — and it seemed all hell would break loose if Sherlock carried out that mission just now — then very soon. So long as Gruener kept, as Sherlock suspected, the whole or the critical piece of his collection in a place he deemed adequately safe, naturally it would come down to locating said place and plundering it, even against the (frankly, moderate) risk of injury or discovery.)

But John was still looking at him almost entreatingly, and Sherlock couldn’t deny that he understood, down to his smallest biological units, how desperately he would resist letting John go into that man’s house on his own.

‘I’ll try,’ he murmured, feeling desperate, though whether he wanted John to hear him or hoped that he hadn’t was unclear even in his own mind.

‘Try what?’ John demanded, grasping at this lifeline.

‘Not to kill myself.’

John stiffened, holding a hard breath in his nose — so close Sherlock felt the pause skitter across his skin.

‘I don’t mean,’ Sherlock began again quickly, throat thick, wishing he could clutch John’s upper-arms tightly for balance, ‘I was not referring to suicide. I meant rather that I… will try, not to let my tendency to rush in override…’ he searched briefly for the words, all of which made him sound like a parody of the security services he so reviled, ‘proper communicative channels.’ He grimaced at his own terrible phrasing. ‘I will make an active effort not to get myself killed, for you — or, I
suppose, any other reason, though your safety is quite obviously of critical importance to me, so it would realistically only be you for whom I would consider such unilateral action and regret it. Anyway, that — I will no longer allow that, without giving you some… point of entry into the situation.’

John’s jaw was clenched shut, and he waited, evaluating Sherlock carefully. Then: ‘You’re saying you’ll… keep me in the loop? Properly in the loop?’

Rational responses all seemed to come up short, none fitted quite right, too many caveats or qualifications, too glib or too literal (John almost certainly would appreciate neither), so he nodded instead.

After a moment, John bowed the crown of his head (Sherlock scrutinized the difference between the fair blond strands in the light at the top of his head versus the earthly brown (or so it appeared in the shadows on either side).) Then John exhaled again. ‘I think — I need you to promise.’

Those places which Sherlock could all but feel him even with this gap between them: tense; anticipatory. But Sherlock could not stop himself from correcting the vow. ‘I promise to try.’

Another minute passed, and another, until finally John shook his head (why??), but then his mouth (finally) tipped up at the side, and then he rocked forward. ‘I can work with that.’

John Watson was perhaps the last surprising man on the planet.

The soft warm liquid electric reverberation — John’s lips and hard palate tasted of peat, fire, malt. Like smoked cherries and stream water. The strangeness — two skulls clacking together; two fleshy, porous cases around rattling skeletons that sweated and stank and rippled and peeled back, curdled meat, when applied with fire or water or air or metal instruments, to reveal only skeletons that couldn’t hold themselves together once the tendons were gone — Sherlock shoved past it, FOCUSED; closed his eyes and concentrated on what John managed to tell him without speech. Heat and wet, numbed and smarting as if shocked by jumper cables, familiar like everything about John had become familiar, even his cells.

‘Sat and thought’ about his gun, most likely, and the resultant guilt-inducing mess of afterward (also characteristic) and probably shuddered sobs and counted backwards from twenty, nineteen, eighteen —
Something in the pit of his abdomen pitched and heaved at the very idea, at the pointless sickening almost-emptiness, and he tangled himself further into John to escape it — no, it was not good, not acceptable, it would all have been for nothing — less than nothing — a crime beyond any rational estimation, that John’s hot scratchy skin might have gone cold before Sherlock had had a chance to touch him like this —

‘C’mon,’ murmured John, and retroactively Sherlock put two and two together: the pull of John’s hands (, the loss of his jacket,) and the shuffle of their footwork across the worn carpet over several previous minutes guiding him, dazed and drained, to the settee.

Were they going to try penetrative sex, here? Now? Would it be acceptable, with John half-drunk on middling Scotch and adrenaline and sympathetic pain for a woman he’d known for all of an hour and new-forged forgiveness? Would he be angry, if Sherlock didn’t stop him (didn’t want to stop him) getting carried away?

John managed to get an over-stuffed pillow behind himself while Sherlock, probably unhelpfully, held John’s skull tipped up towards his in kisses, entwining them, kneecaps bumping as he climbed — too many limbs, fitting awkwardly, arms and legs like crash test dummies or puppets, knocking about blindly —

‘C’mere.’ (John was reduced to contractions and what he could steal back of his own oxygen. A fact about which Sherlock did not felt even remotely contrite.)

‘God,’ John pushed the curls flat back (up/down) against the top of Sherlo...
‘Christ, that’s not helping,’ John gasped, blinking with shock, but Sherlock kept his mouth over the bulging navy cotton without remorse, and John whined and bowed into the heat and threaded his fingers in Sherlock’s hair so it was demonstrably fine.

(Clothes were nonsensical attempts at self-fashioning intended to fool the minds of others, which was of course patently moronic as it fooled exactly no one as to the actual shape beneath the clothing — fit, lanky, pudgy, undernourished, obese, etc. — all plain as day. Suze was a case-in-point. But John was positively the exception that proved the rule. The scent, the mouth-watering taste across Sherlock’s palate, even through this remaining layer, was nearly eclipsed by the wonder of John’s skin, surprising for being at all surprising once exposed: he was beautiful, solid and heavy— almost immovable and yet taunting at Sherlock to try —, hot beyond belief, delectable. Sherlock tongued at the jut of him through the fabric and dug his fingers sharply behind John’s knees, memorising everything all over again.)

‘Fuck,’ John was yammering, quiet enough to be heard only by themselves, ‘god, yes,’ — involuntary and completely unselfconscious, heavenly. ‘Here,’ he interrupted breathlessly, thrusting a hand (leaving a clammy spot where his palm had been gripping Sherlock’s bicep) to dig between them — unnecessary — wait? to, what? — ah — his jeans, squashed at his heels, between Sherlock’s knees — his wallet — ‘here,’ he insisted, with a crinkle of plastic which (hateful) required both his hands, including the one that had been caressing Sherlock’s scalp.

Voice croaking, Sherlock lifted his head enough to protest, ‘We don’t need —’

‘Yes, we do,’ John rumbled mulishly, using the absence of Sherlock’s mouth to get his fingers under the elastic band of his pants and tugged down.

He couldn’t stop himself staring, even as he argued. ‘We didn’t last time!’

‘No, but we should have.’

Nonsense, it took far too long, and this was still new (so much sensory and conceptual data to input; infinite places he could consider as parts of John parts of him had reached, thus diminishing the quotient of parts-to-whole that remained stubbornly untouched), but Sherlock’s jaw ached so close to John’s now freed cock, redpurplepink (like bright visceral organs, open-heart surgery, raw oxygen-rich meat) and hard and scent-soaked of John, so familiar Sherlock’s mouth filled eagerly with more saliva as his groin gave a swoop of pleasure so sudden he felt momentarily sick.
'Please,' John panted, ‘for me.’

Sherlock blinked up at him: irises barely visible (Pacific Ocean in wintertime: deep, almost black, unfathomable blue), eyes which had been furious with him only minutes ago, and were now daring, hungry, challenging —

Grabbing the condom none too carefully (well, he wasn’t the one who wanted it) Sherlock rolled it over him, watching John’s penis bob, as John dropped his head back in a low groan, words shattering (and probably profane?) ‘Christ, fuck, ah.’ (Yep, confirmed). His toes were curled, grating along the loud leather of the sofa. ‘Fuck that’s good, god, you’re — you —’

He felt ridiculous still, somehow childish, in the face of such obscenity, of taking someone else’s genitalia into his clumsy-eager mouth, a caveman chasing an evolutionary dead-end, relishing the primal cues of arousal and blood and sour pubic hair so close to his nostrils, along his tongue. He tried not picture himself as though from the outside, ever-failing (he failed more often than he succeeded: such was John’s magic that anyone believed otherwise); tried to focus on John’s marquee-lit display of pleasure, erotic surrender, the quiver and cant of his hips, thighs, the jerk of his shaft when he nudged the inside of Sherlock’s cheek.

‘Fuck fuck, I’m close already, Sherlock — Jesus, you don’t — fuck —’

For a split-second he considered drawing back, removing the latex, coating not just his throat but his chin, his cheek, his nose, his eyelids in spunk, humiliating, so he pushed the heel of his hand up along John’s testicles (‘UGH!’) and swallowed nothing while John jerked, shook, on and on, licking and sucking and breathing through his (clean) nose, trembling half with relief.

‘Christ,’ John gulped. Melting back. Languorous. Even his eyes, closed, curved up along with his mouth as he sighed minutely (almost weak: ‘bowled over’, he might have described it. Or ‘well-shagged’).

Sherlock sat up and wiped his flushed stretched mouth on John’s shed vest. He tried not to think about digestive acids, gag reflexes, whether some part of John would find a way to be broken down and reused as proteins to keep Sherlock alive.

After many long seconds, heartrate returning to rest, John opened his eyes (pupils sluggishly contracting to normal, at a standard rate) and blurrily turned his face.
‘You…?’ He considered Sherlock. ‘Do you want to?’

Sherlock’s stomach give a pitch and roll of fear — was that it? How could it be so thrilling, so physiologically as well as mentally stimulating, surpassing the threshold of mental intake so that data seemed still to be flooding his system, as if on a delay: did he want to? Did he want anything more than to drink in the multi-sensory wonder that was John Watson gone spent with pleasure? Sherlock declined with a too-long shake of his head, eyes bouncing back and forth over John, unable to keep still under the lamplight of John’s gaze (he appreciated the irony).

Before he could quite prevent himself, he had buried his nose in the space between John’s ear and shoulder, squeezing himself into the unrealistic sliver at John’s side, squished on either side into the sofa or John’s neck. John shuffled obligingly, planting his outside foot on the carpet, wedging a warm arm to hold him (limited mobility (probably already losing circulation) notwithstanding) away from the sweat-adhesive leather, stroking so softly above his shuddering lungs, down his ribs, his lower vertebrae, until it was too much to bear — Sherlock kissed him where he could reach (the underside of his jaw), probably harshly, not tender at all like John was holding him; lips and teeth and choked airways and kissed and kissed until John’s dextrous (sinistrous) alien fingers found his cock — he whimpered, humiliating, a burning touch, and he sucked at John’s pulse-point and clung until he felt his muscles lock and he ejaculated all over John’s thigh.

Messy.

There would be impressions on John’s hip later where Sherlock had been gripping him tight, though his brain had never processed doing so as a conscious decision.

John kissed his temple.

‘Eventually,’ John muttered, sighing into his hair, ‘we should consider trying to have sex when no one needs to apologise.’

‘Ever the optimist.’

Thankfully, John laughed, and Sherlock loved him so distractedly he shut his eyes and was glad there wasn’t an afterlife, since they would not have gone to the same place, and in any event there was nothing better than John’s touch and his forgiveness (however temporary) and his wish to be with him for no reason other than wanting it.
A humid gust of breath stirred the minute hairs on his upper lip, nose… John. (Good.) Probably waking up ((bed)room temperature low: still early) to go to work or some other ill-advised distraction from the far more interesting work of the case (and Sherlock). The usual sounds of morning (it had to be morning: Sherlock hadn’t even come to bed until just before half-four), John rolling over to verify the time on the bedside clock (as if he couldn’t deduce it: soldier’s habit!), then drowsily moving around more. Not nearer to Sherlock: unimportant.

He dozed.

Much later (possibly), he felt the tug of the sheet underneath him as someone — still John? Interesting — tucked their knees up to just barely not brush Sherlock’s knees. Another warm, quiet exhale.

‘Either kiss me or go back to sleep,’ he instructed, vocal cords caked with sleep.

The astounding variety of John’s laughter deserved to be the subject of a (very controlled) study (with himself as Primary Investigator). Often, his laughs were easier to understand than his words.

‘I want to kiss you,’ John told him, hushed, almost inaudible against the dreamy white noise of the waking street, the bristle of innumerable fibres encasing them in the aural equivalent of cotton wool.

Then again, not always easier to understand.

After an uneventful moment, however, Sherlock opened his eyes. John was gazing at him: a flood of information washed over him, a complex ocular data stream of depth and light and colour that, when perceived in the mind, was flipped (contralateral processing: not affected by spikes in adrenaline or dopamine, thankfully) and redirected and interpreted as shapes, sizes and scales, weight, recognition, emotion, desire, language,

John.

John kissed him, sighing and sucking Sherlock’s lips with his sun-burn-hot lips shoving and embracing and pulling his body so hard against Sherlock’s that it hurt in a way that dreams couldn’t achieve.
‘Thank you,’ John murmured, after Sherlock shivered leaned to kiss the hollow of John’s throat (minimally responsive — or was it?).

‘This is not an especially erogenous spot for you.’

John ignored this. (Correct, then. He moved up to his carotid.) ‘You didn’t leave last night.’

No. Nor had he lit anything on fire — something of a personal victory. Instead he’d run several of Violet’s friends to ground, then — when that proved so utterly asinine as to prevent his being able to carry on — he’d taken and solved two cases via Skype (simultaneously, and separated by four time zones). Read up on new technological innovations in crime predictive algorithms in conjunction with CCTV recognition software (flawed: predisposed to hone in on racially/ethnically/economically marginalized populations, where it was in the details of careful, methodical detective work by which even the most petty criminals could be swiftly caught. The police were already frighteningly incompetent, without the added complication of removing all human discernment from the process). It had got him through the itching curious hours of the night.

Now, though, a full REM cycle and the escalating temperature under the duvet was making him feel almost dull witted. ’Mmm.’

Even at the best of times Sherlock was not especially interested in staying still — boring, impossible at precisely the moment it became compulsory — and to have John, who was more alert (had been awake for a long (uncertain) time, but had stayed in the disorderly, soon-to-be rank bed, except for ducking to the lavatory to relieve himself and rinse his mouth) and had a head-start — possibly (probably) had woken up ‘in a state’, refused to do anything about it — had stared at Sherlock instead, wasting time, refusing to do anything about it —

At some point in the midst of the hazy, vertiginous whirl of kissing (and hands roaming, teasing, snaking between pillows and tangled sheets), John pulled his mouth back far enough to say, thickly, ‘Did you want to go back to sleep?’

‘Shut up,’ Sherlock ordered, forcing John to clamber over him giddily and spread Sherlock’s limbs beneath his (stretched, exposed) in an excruciatingly careful, languid punishment. Sherlock, in turn, rolled his hips and made sure that John felt very, very sorry for putting his clothes back on before going to bed and for keeping them on after waking, where Sherlock had not because he was brilliant and never actually interested in sleep, especially when nudity (specific, not general) was the alternative.
‘Good,’ John muttered admiringly down at him, while somewhere either miles or centimetres away John’s toes were rubbing the wrong way up the hairs above Sherlock’s ankle.

Another kiss, more, lingering, narcotic, blissfully slow. (For himself, he would have been content to do little else for the next several hours but continue to breathe in and out, bodies fusing slowly until he could not expand his lungs without crowding space occupied by John’s heaving chest… But, as expected:)

‘Cos I really want to fuck you.’

(Obviously, Sherlock intoned to himself. Why else would John (still in his (tented) pants) have positioned himself on top when in most previous situations he was perfectly comfortable to lie anywhere? Why else would he have bothered to brush his teeth and wash himself, return to bed, inform Sherlock as though calming a skittish colt… (Sentiment; ‘ethics’; consideration.) John’s intentions (desires) broadcast in a thousand small tells he didn’t bother to hide.)

By now, the scars across his lower abdomen and back were an open, undiscussed secret between them — it would have been impossible to keep them hidden without disappointing and/or offending John, who valued (though, or for precisely that reason, held in suspicion) trust and vulnerability, who wanted to know everything he didn’t know already about Sherlock’s 797 day time ‘away’. So Sherlock kept them hidden whenever possible, even from John, even though the damage was in every sense done. But he could at least give this to him, however much uncertainty was mixed with his (incalculable) other responses.

He nodded.

(What a martyr, said a scathing voice in his head. He ignored it.)

Apparently this gesture was insufficient for such a (supposedly momentous) proposition.

‘Can we, tonight? Or…?’ John left the real request unspoken, fingers now drifting with delicate touches to Sherlock’s neck, the dip of his clavicle.

Not for the first time, his body felt over-large, disassociated, outside of time. He wasn’t entirely sure where his own fingers had got to. (He wondered, briefly, if John had drugged him. (Intriguing; understandable. Alas, not likely.))
‘Sherlock, we don’t have to do this now, or ever, if you don’t want. I’m more than happy to snog for the rest of the morning. But you’ve got to give me a little more to go on than a grunt.’

(Patently false: too many examples to bear enumeration.)

He sighed, then opened his eyes.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock agreed, ‘I would like you to fuck me,’ pointedly over-enunciating, on the hypothesis that John enjoyed Sherlock’s sporadic use of vulgar language, ‘unless you’d rather wait,’ but John ignored the long-suffering attitude and the ironic barb and glowed, a gunpowder flash!, and Sherlock couldn’t help himself and said, ‘yes,’ again, affecting indifference, ‘yes, yes, I fear you must,’ and John’s grin as he kissed him was absurd, illuminated as if in victory, though Sherlock couldn’t think of any reason to congratulate him.

‘Turn over,’ John encouraged him, scooting back. Sherlock swallowed and turned over.

* 

Chapter End Notes

I am indebted, in ways conscious and unconscious, to the staggeringly beautiful and unique style (and observations) of greywash -- whose works constitute a huge chunk of my bookmarks. Fandom is tricky when it comes to borrowing/imitating/emulating from/thinking with other authors, so I both admit this debt and urge you all to go read some of those works. They are incredible.

Other footnotes: (1) LOL Mark Gatiss pastiching Conan Doyle's letter 'To An Undiscerning Critic'. Alluded to here, because Sherlock is also a dick. (2) The Bert Coules/Clive Merrison/Michael Williams adaptation of 'The Illustrious Client', which is excellent btw; (3) Homer. Again via Mark -- the portion he read for the Almeida theatre's *Iliad Live* production, from (obviously) the Iliad: John, in this case, is somehow both Achilles and Patroclus. [Video clip #62.]

As you'll have noticed if you're following, chapters are posting on Tuesdays and Fridays. As a result, we'll have a whole new 1/12th of the show to wrangle with before Chapter 7 appears. *braces for impact*
Seven (John)

Chapter Summary

Shit. That sounded — He really hadn’t meant to make it a challenge — No doubt Sherlock would find the kinkiest, weirdest (and most expensive) lube or — Who was he kidding, there’d be gay sex toys from the darkest, most sordid corner of the web, stuff he wouldn’t even know how to use.

But… it wasn’t as if, if John were honest with himself, he wasn’t half intrigued by that.

Chapter Notes

An ever-so-slightly shorter chapter but WOW if you weren't sure about the rating before, you best be certain now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 7: John

‘Shake hands, we shall never be friends, all's over;
   I only vex you the more I try.
All's wrong that ever I've done or said,
And nought to help it in this dull head:
   Shake hands, here's luck, good-bye.

‘But if you come to a road where danger
   Or guilt or anguish or shame's to share,
Be good to the lad that loves you true
And the soul that was born to die for you,
   And whistle and I'll be there.’
—A.E. Housman, “XXX”

Finding Sherlock still in bed with him come morning was still a pleasant surprise. ‘Still,’ he thought to himself giddily: he was counting their relationship (their proper relationship) in weeks, not years, for god’s sake. But moments like this made just breathing feel like the culmination of aeons of evolution, of human achievement. This morning, waking to the up-close marvel of Sherlock’s eyelashes, the soft dark brown dusting across his upper lip and jaw, the steep crests of his bare freckle-dotted shoulders, all tending towards John — it uncoiled a knot that had been pressing on him for he didn’t even know how long, chaffing at his dreams and preventing him from
ever really feeling off-duty from high danger alert.

The high danger recently, as so often before, was Sherlock. That he would want to solve the case on his own, in the hopes of startling John into being impressed by the big reveal, rather than waiting for him to come along and be impressed in person, as he always was... often by how shockingly bad Sherlock was at keeping himself out of harm’s way.

John woke first, naturally, around sunrise (later every day, noticeably so at this time of year, even in the city). The previous night’s row was still ringing in his ears, confessions of things he’d hoped never to say out loud, to simply erase by blotting them out with more writing of new stories and new confessions, brighter of actual, honest-to-god happy memories, everyday scribbles over time. And of course, it was nearly impossible, in John’s experience, to hear such a terrible account as Suze’s and not to want to cling desperately to the closest person and hold on for dear life — to prove that there were things in life worth chasing, having, sharing, enjoying to the peak of your ability, more to being alive than just darkness and loss. It had been true in the desert, and in every hospital he’d ever worked at. Little surprise, considering how much darkness he and Sherlock saw on their cases, that they didn’t so much cling as collide.

By the time Sherlock stirred — dark curls gleaming with strands of auburn in the new day — John was half-hard and brimming with every absurd romantic thought he’d ever had. Most of all, he couldn’t silence the exultant chant in his head, Thank you, thank you, thank you, to the gods, fate and chance and genetics and whoever was in charge of criminally soft (and surprisingly ugly) striped duvet covers; to Sherlock, for coming back, for coming to bed when he almost certainly would rather be playing Russian roulette with a madman, for (it seemed) breaking all his old rules and letting John in.

Before he knew it, they were here. ‘Yes,’ Sherlock clipped sarcastically, the spoiled git, ‘I would like you to fuck me. Unless you’d rather wait. Yes, yes yes, I fear you must.’ As though he was a Victorian gentleman miffed at the inconvenience of a servant’s slow attention.

Unsurprisingly, the 24-hour notice before sex policy was pretty much lost cause.

The pause as John staggered off the bed, almost dizzy, to shuck his clothes unintentionally gave Sherlock a moment to bury his head in his pillow. (‘If there were anything I didn’t want from you, John, you would know’, he’d said that first time, on the sofa... but John wasn’t sure he believed him.) Quick as he could, John discarded shirt and pants, dug the lube — damn, he’d forgotten to bring the new one upstairs — and condoms (thankfully, plenty left in this box) from the gap between the mattress and headboard. All this took less than fifteen seconds, but he couldn’t help but notice the tension creep back into Sherlock’s body.

‘I already got another of these,’ he noted with deliberate bravado, waggling the bottle in the air
despite the fact that Sherlock obviously could not see it with his face crushed down like that. ‘And unless you have a preference — to the tune of doing the shopping yourself — I’m gonna keep getting this brand.’

He shifted, propping himself on one elbow, a scoot down along Sherlock’s side trying not to overthink the small fidgeting Sherlock was probably unconscious of doing. Sherlock’s ears, on the other hand, pricked up, catlike, at the click of John thumbing open the plastic cap.

Through the muffled down of the pillow, Sherlock’s voice drawled, ‘The internet, I am given to understand, provides few things in variety so well as sexual paraphernalia.’

John snorted. ‘Alright, then. Order what you like. Surprise me.’

Shit. That sounded — He really hadn’t meant to make it a challenge — No doubt Sherlock would find the kinkiest, weirdest (and most expensive) lube — Who was he kidding, there’d be gay sex toys from the darkest, most sordid corner of the web, stuff he wouldn’t even know how to use.

But… it wasn’t as if, if John were honest with himself, he wasn’t half intrigued by that. Even in the rare moments he’d let himself daydream (alright, fantasise about) what else he and Sherlock could get up to, he hadn’t imagined either of them to be especially squeamish. Not when it came to this. And he had thought about lots of things, largely within the realm of fantasy: how many buttons down from Sherlock’s collar he could persuade him to leave open at their next crime scene (a test of his own will-power as much as anything); and lately, about if Sherlock had ever been with a woman (if he’d been with Irene; though when John had wanked angrily to the idea, he found himself picturing one of Mary’s friends, Janine, whose dark-creamy-olive skin and dark-silken hair and amazing dark-against-light breasts would look mind-blowing while Sherlock fucked her, first with his long gorgeous fingers and then his indecently talented mouth until she came while John fucked Sherlock from behind, shoving him forward and his tongue deeper into her until he whined and came at the same moment as John, choking John’s name…).

Christ.

Sherlock was looking over his shoulder. John tried not to look guilty about where his mind had been. Blinking away the haze of his fantasy, though, he realised Sherlock’s eyes were focussed acutely on his thumb, index, and middle finger where they were coated in translucent, viscous fluid.

‘I will,’ Sherlock vowed, and something in John’s gut flared hot and quick as he pieced this back together with his accidentally kinky show of hand, and he smirked so hard his teeth hurt. Surprise me.
Another day, then: definitely. Prove Irene wasn’t the only person who could make Sherlock Holmes beg for mercy — twice.

For today, John resettled into the present, where he was — somewhat improbably — perched, half-sitting half-lying, just over Sherlock’s bare arse, suddenly aware that they hadn’t discussed histories about this particular — or, come to think of it, any relevant specifics. (He knew, from snatched hints and blurted admissions, that Sherlock had indeed had sex before they’d taken up, which squared with John’s twin assumptions that, 1) Sherlock was fundamentally curious, particularly when it came to anything sensory; 2) Sherlock had been reckless as a young man, and not just about the cocaine.) But, if he knew one thing for certain about Sherlock, it was that his mind — entirely contrary to the face he showed the world — was very easily overwhelmed: with data, with sentiment, with sensation. And just to make things really helpful, such inundations usually came over Sherlock in unpredictable moments.

Never did things by halves, his mum would have said. He smiled fondly at this, looking at Sherlock again and appreciating that, whatever the answer to his question, Sherlock really did seem to want this, and him.

But sentiment was a sure-fire way to put him off.

‘I didn’t…’ He licked his lips. Clinical voice: steady, confidant, devoid of judgment. ‘Have you done this before?’

The startled blinks and eventual self-conscious nod (and the blush that went with it! He never thought he’d see the day!) were apparently all the answer he was going to get, but he felt suddenly swamped with feeling. Right. Not his first time. But their first time, at this, anyway. He wanted it to be good.

John leaned forward enough to plant a steadying, heavy kiss on Sherlock’s shoulderblade, a hair’s breadth away from his birthmark at the base of his neck, ignoring the scars, then — as he knelt and pushed wider Sherlock’s splayed legs and petted the silk-prickly hairs on the back of thigh with his dry hand — reminded himself that it was his job to take the lead here, including in all matters of tone.

‘You do have a perfect arse,’ he commented, laying one slick and one dry hand on each cheek, respectively, relishing the shivers that radiated from the contact. ‘Fit for royalty. No wonder the Queen’s butler didn’t throw us out.’
The way to keep Sherlock out of his own head was, he knew, by diverting him via his own argumentatively stubborn mouth.

‘He wasn’t the butler, he was —’

John chose that moment to skate his slippery fingers between the crease of Sherlock’s arse — he didn’t give a toss if the man had been the butler or the secretary or the sodding ghost of Christmas past — and Sherlock sucked in a breath so fast he nearly choked.

‘Sorry, what was that?’ John couldn’t help but be smug. Rather than removing pressure, his fingertips prodded Sherlock open, a wholly surreal experience that made his blood feel like it was rioting, fit to burst through his skin — Sherlock squirmed, and John had to bite his lip to keep from groaning at the sight of his fingers, two at once, nudging just slightly inside the vice-tight whorl of Sherlock’s body, an action, probably more than his words, that well and truly shattered Sherlock’s breath into accelerating snatches.

Swamp-voiced, Sherlock muttered, ‘There is no — logical reason why a royal “arse” should be — any more attractive than any other.’

‘I can vouch for that,’ rejoined John wryly, not bothered if that made absolutely no sense, but just as Sherlock began to protest, John crooked his middle finger inside him, stroking him from the other side of his skin.

He felt Sherlock’s body clamp down on the hot, strange breach — heard, through the shout of hot blood in his ears, the grunt Sherlock made, dropping down his head to hang on his neck like he was already overcome. John counted to ten before moving again. God, he was so turned-on and they’d barely got started. He was never going to leave this bed, just wring every ounce of pleasure out of Sherlock, every low broken sound that deafened them in the roaring quiet of his room, press every part of himself, bumps and ridges and inside and outside, into every part of Sherlock he could get to, outside and inside, until they’d ruined the bed. And then they could buy a new one and start over — no! They didn’t even have to — his old bed was upstairs! He had never been so happy to have his old, separate room as now.

Meantime, Sherlock’s own hands were clutched, buried under his pillow, apparently in fists (judging from the strain of his forearms and the lumps in the pillowcase).

After a taut-tense moment and arriving mentally at Ten, he made sure to ask, ‘Do you want me to keep going?’
Rather than dignify this simple question with a response, Sherlock actually rocked down, hard and fast, so that John’s slicked fingers sunk in up to the second knuckle: he groaned in hungry anticipation because *fuck*, never did things by halves was right.

‘*Christ, you’re a bloody menace.*’

The astonishingly basic difference between sex with a woman and sex with a man was how miraculous the female body was at expanding, wet and open and so warm — it defied all modern technological advances in laser sensors and camera-assisted remote surgery — with just the stimulus of time and arousal. Lube was fantastic but *god*, the difference on his fingers (or mouth, or eyelashes) of the pungent dripping mess that could coat your hand *before* anybody had climaxed even once, never mind again and again — that was the stuff of *dreams*. With men, though, it was all about skin, and muscle — about pushing and feeling the other person push back; the otherwise illicit feeling of one long bare arm or leg wrapped around you, yours around him, unimpeded by fabric or fear; sweat across undulating ripples of smooth, taut muscle over bone, all escalating pressure and tension; how they defied your sense of inside/outside, soft/hard, pain/pleasure, hot/cold, *him/me*...

Adding more lube, he gradually become more forceful, more direct, allowing Sherlock’s body to accommodate him, stretching just barely around him, deliberately finding — that helpful stereotype about doctors (well, it wasn’t wrong) — Sherlock’s prostate and provoking a positive shout. John added a third.

‘*John,*’ Sherlock begged, shivering, impatient, and for *fuck’s* sake, John’s cock was so hard it could break *rocks*, twitching neglectedly where it was curved up touching the inside of Sherlock’s upper-thigh.

‘It’s a good thing we weren’t doing this when you were wearing only a sheet around Buckingham Palace,’ John persisted, voice spring-tight, knowing Sherlock would focus in on this train of thought rather than allow his restless *rocking* to drive them both out of their bloody minds, ‘I would have been thinking of getting you bent over the Queen’s sofa and making a mess all over it instead of having tea.’

It was true — though of course John *had* thought about that for a brief second, smirking at the idea of a royal commission and wondering if Sherlock had been hoping instead for John to come home and find him wrapped in a sheet, to fuck him on the carpet, like he’d just about ended up doing the other day.

‘*Liar,*’ Sherlock managed, gritting his teeth, and John would have rolled his eyes if he hadn’t
needed them to watch his fingers scissoring slowly in and out into Sherlock’s body. ‘You would have insisted on finishing the tea.’

He couldn’t help it — he barked a laugh — but he punctuated it with a twist of his hand, sparking Sherlock’s prostate again, sending a jolt down Sherlock’s leg that curled his toes. Sherlock’s prick was caught underneath him, even more neglected than John’s (which was finding some maddening level of friction leaking onto Sherlock’s leg), squished between Sherlock’s stomach and the sheet and no doubt leaving a wet spot that he’d be making John lie in later, the bastard.

‘John,’ began Sherlock, clearly moving towards demanding but no less desperate and red-hot and shrinking around the places John could feel him, inside and along his long gorgeous (horrifically scar-striped) back.

‘Not before you’re ready,’ John insisted, because he was nearly there, but rushing things was not an experience — medical or romantic — that he fancied having at any point.

Some part of his brain was transfixed: suddenly watching Sherlock ram himself down sharply onto John’s fingers, groaning furiously like he did when they ran up against a roadblock in a case, and the low swipes of arousal tipped John over the edge, feeling like his brain was swimming in honey, warm and tractionless. Even in his most vivid daydreams, even when once, last year (on Sherlock’s birthday) — following that visit from Lestrade, providing him with the worst birthday gift he’d ever received, hating and craving it, and ending up absolutely trolleyed — he had sat, shaking beside the toilet in his flat, biting his hand so hard to keep back the sobs he had to wear a brace the next day to cover it up — even then he couldn’t picture how shockingly, glaringly alive Sherlock insisting on being at all times. There was no way to conjure up the explosion, numbing, thrilling, terrifying, invigorating all at once, that he was.

And his gaze went, as it so often did (even when they were covered up beneath shirts and jackets) to Sherlock’s scars: pink-turning-to-pearlescent, a patchwork of shimmering lines and blotches and burns… John’s free hand was providing leverage, soothing Sherlock’s heaving ribs with his palm, but his thumb was smudging the end of the worst line — a deep, deceptively-gently curved lash reaching almost from his kidney up to his right pointy acromion where it stuck out like the tip of an epaulette. It would have hurt.

‘Come on!’ commanded Sherlock furiously, and John couldn’t wait any longer either, pulled his fingers out so fast it provoked in Sherlock a startling cry of shock and the ghost of a pain (which was, of course, at this stage, only identifiable as the absence of pleasure).

The sounds of his gasped air, of the foil wrapper, the plastic bottle again, of Sherlock’s suppressed panting, of the hum of gathering traffic out on the street, of Mrs. Hudson’s television downstairs, all felt blurred and dimmed as John rolled the condom briskly on and adjusted up onto his knees.
Slow, he told himself, harder than he could remember being in his life, sense-memory anticipating the skintight hotslick grip of Sherlock around his cock, and he barely managed to hold his voice together when he asked,

‘Alright?’

Sherlock nodded, visibly clenching his hands, and John lined himself and — and — John filled him up, sedately but insistently, nudging forward, body arched over and around Sherlock’s body as he penetrated him, not all the way yet, with breaths gone tripwire-taut.

From this position, with Sherlock’s head curled under his shoulders, back bowed, John couldn’t see his expression — whether it was shock-blank, or grimaced with pain, or biting his lip, eyes bright and eager and unfocussed —

On a sudden impulse, John folded his hand gently over Sherlock’s right fist where it was seized on itself, planted beside his ear as though he was holding an old wheel-dial telephone receiver. Immediately on John laying his own hand over him, however, Sherlock unlocked his fingers, tugging on John’s to interleave with his. (Additionally, he realised, this position brought not only John’s arm but his entire body down to lie closer to Sherlock’s, wrapped over him like a fire blanket attempting to smother a flame.) He held tight, pushed a fraction back, then a little bit deeper, and tried to breathe through his nose.

He had almost forgotten the reason why people loved this. The closeness and breathless pressure of being sunk so carefully inside another person was almost secondary (though not quite) to the wave of relief that settled on his sweat-dotted skin. Sherlock was perfect, in a way that John was sure he was unique to experience. He knew Sherlock’s libido was fickle, perhaps more ungovernable than his mind, but Jesus Christ he was glad they could do this — they could be together, in the most intimate possible way. No fantasy third parties, no pretending not to want it or need it or love it to the depths of his bones: sex between them was something that just fit. Every mediocre or empty previous sexual experience with quickies or tipsy fumbles that only got one person off or that ended with a guilty promise to call someone he had no intention of seeing again, whose presence outside the bedroom irked him — all of that was done. His hips against Sherlock’s arse, his hands cradling Sherlock’s hands. That, and a kiss that could scorch the roof off a rocket, was all he ever needed again.

Here, he couldn’t even imagine Sherlock ever coming to harm, so impossibly opposed was it to the full universe of reality that was this embrace, right here, where Sherlock forgot every word except one.
Several moments went by, and it was not until Sherlock had evidently felt the ebb of smarting discomfort that John dared squeezed his hand questioningly. Sherlock loosened his grip slightly and allowed his thumb to stroke the arch of John’s palm.

John leaned over again, sorry for the whine of pain that this elicited from Sherlock, but he needed to kiss him.

‘Hey,’ he murmured, nosing his cheek, and Sherlock turned his head and just barely caught the very corner of his mouth, so sweet and soft John was sure he would deny it later.

That wonderful birthmark, just at the very bottom of Sherlock’s cervical/top of his thoracic vertebrae, sang in contrast to the unnatural healing miracle of Sherlock’s body: this piece of his skin had been there from the start. John kissed it next, letting his lips linger there reverently, never mind how cliché it was, or if Sherlock was itching for him to get on with it. His brow dragged down and remained there, catching his breath, soaking up the telltale scent of sweat meeting sweat. His eyelashes fluttered enough to make Sherlock shiver again.

Then he rolled his hips, carefully, and Sherlock breathed John’s name, as though to prove he was still paying attention.

The rest of things went more quickly than John would have liked, but as usual, they got carried away. He knew he was murmuring an endless chorus of endearments and reassurances into his skin (‘you’re incredible, you have no idea, god do that again, you’re a bloody genius, fuck, ugh, you feel amazing, you, Sherlock, god, do you have any idea, you bastard, I love you, fuck, please, Jesus, *fuck*’), brushing his lips over scars which had not been there for him to kiss the day in Buckingham Palace, would never have been there in the first place if he had been able to save Sherlock, to love him enough, Before, and Sherlock whispered John’s name again and again and again, and John felt like his heart knocked so hard it would surely kick out of his chest.

More erratic, more brutal, instinctual, every time he rocked into Sherlock again he grunted louder, losing and finding a good angle with each crash of the tide, never releasing their right hands though definitely approaching his climax.

‘Sherlock,’ he growled, left fingers ungripping the pillow to splay over Sherlock’s ribs in soft counterpoint to the rough obscene slaps of their sticky skin. He was close, could go over at any minute if he left himself, and he wanted to get Sherlock there too, to give in to the feedback loop of pleasure that Sherlock’s moans gave him, so he slid his hand down beneath Sherlock’s ribs and found his cock, a forgotten ache, immediately so rock-hard that Sherlock shouted in surprise and frustration, riding John’s angled thrust that pummeled his prostate to push himself into John’s fist, only twice, until he came with a long groan that, in a matter of seconds, triggered John’s hiss and a stream of words shuddering into white noise…
Blinking himself into conscious, he felt, as Sherlock continued to be jolted with aftershocks, that he was in danger of declaring all sorts of things.

*(Don’t move,* he said inwardly, though to himself or to Sherlock, he wasn’t sure. *Stay.)*

He picked up his head limply, nose and lips sighing along Sherlock’s skin, the closest approximation to kisses available in his still-submerged lassitude. He wondered too, as he pressed one proper kiss to Sherlock birthmark — and Sherlock ‘hmmed’ beautifully, a noise that John wished in the unspeakable depths of his soul he could locate in Sherlock when they quarreled, just to remind them both how profoundly right they were together, when there weren’t any words to get in the way — he wondered if any of Sherlock’s former lovers had lavished attention on this delightful quirk of his skin. If they had noticed, or cared.

A bell tolled somewhere in the distance — seven o’clock — and, rather than wait for Sherlock to push him away, he drew slowly apart. Sherlock cringed.

Some time later, after he’d been to the loo, grabbed a flannel for himself and another for Sherlock, surreptitiously (and not a little giddily, despite trying to achieve some level of professional objectivity) checking Sherlock for any signs of damage, and wiped them down. Settling down on his back beside him, his fingers moved of their own accord, drawing faint crosses over Sherlock’s ribs, enjoying what, if he were in a writerly mood, he would let himself call the *frisson* of touching Sherlock softly while loving him so much he couldn’t breathe.

Eventually, when he trusted his voice, he cleared his throat to get Sherlock’s attention. ‘Alright?’

Sherlock, for the first time in too many minutes, looked him directly in the eyes. He wasn’t smiling, not in any obvious way that creased his silly wonderful face or that raised the hairline he was so fond of having brushed back (by John). But even so, those every-colour eyes bored into his, a combination of such intensity of every emotion there wasn’t an English — or any — word for it, not even close, and John unabashedly drank him in, hoping his own expression could say a tenth of what he saw.

He had, a little accidentally, said the big one — the three words he had said to Mary, to Hanna in Kabul and to Janet from uni (on holiday in Egypt), even to Marianne, his first — and meant it more this time, in the hazy early sunlight of a September morning, with a man who had broken his heart for almost 800 days, and who drove him mad on an hourly basis, than he had even known it was possible to do.
'Sherlock,' he began, finding his voice shaking again, but this time he didn’t care.

Sherlock shut his eyes, pressed himself closer in every place until they were entangled completely, and John didn’t need to hear him say it to know it was true for him too.

* * *

‘Oh—’ He turned round and grabbed his phone off the worktop, with fingers still damp from the shower — if he hurried he might just be on time to get to the surgery — and saw that he had one unread text (Harry, with the details of their ill-advised lunch tomorrow) and two emails: one from the publisher, Billie Wilder, who (he skimmed) was ‘very excited’ for him to be ‘part of the team’ with details about a meeting ‘next week, if that suits you?’; and a second, earlier one…

‘Hmm.’

From: Mail Delivery Subsystem
Subject: Long time no… anything?

Delivery to the following recipient failed permanently:

m.e.morstan.rn@hotmail.co.uk

Technical details of permanent failure: Hotmail tried to deliver your message, but it was rejected by the recipient domain…

Well that was. Odd. Did people actually delete their email accounts without forwarding them? Or did this mean she had blocked his emails specifically? He wasn’t a complete fossil, but the auto-reply function of a bounced email seemed to leave a great deal of ambiguity (apart from an error code, like that meant anything to him) for him to muddle over.

Sherlock strode into the room, buttoning John’s favourite of his shirts, because he was a complete dickhead and he apparently wanted John to get sacked for being late and to destroy that shirt with his teeth.

‘Don’t worry, John, I’m sure there’s a course you could take that would get you beyond two-digit keypad typing.’
John refused to smile at this (much), and instead played along. ‘And for those of us who don’t consider the ultimate goal of humanity to be cyborgs with reality telly playing on our fingernails, what’s this about?’ He turned his mobile around and handed it to Sherlock.

Sherlock blinked at the screen for a moment, then handed the phone back. ‘Surely you haven’t forgotten how to read?’

‘No,’ John agreed with a growl of patience, ‘I just mean: does that mean it’s been blocked, or —’

‘Email “failed permanently” — I’d say that’s a fairly clear indicator that this “Miss Morstan” has deleted her account. Alas, you’ll have to find other correspondents for your’ (he wrinkled his nose) ‘poetry.’

John shook his head, unimpressed, but he knew he was back to smirking like the sop that he was.

‘Little do you know, you are going to start getting limericks pasted all over the flat.’

For a split-second, he heard his voice — worse, heard the words lurking within his speech (‘little do you know, you’re the one I think about seducing with sentiment and rhyming couplets: we crossed a line today [that sex/’I love you’] and it’s going to start being visible everywhere’) — and wasn’t sure how Sherlock would react. But thankfully, whether it was a feint or the afterglow of their rather eventful morning, Sherlock’s eyes flashed with mirth. ‘“There was a young soldier from Brighton…”’

‘Sailor,’ he insisted on a sigh, relief rushing through him and dousing him afresh with fondness. He let his hands tug, almost magnetically, on Sherlock’s hips until they were touching and he could smile into Sherlock’s mouth.

He was going to be late.

*

Chapter End Notes

Lo, an east wind coming...
Chapter Summary

‘This wasn’t exactly what I meant when I said you should surprise me,’ he imagined John saying.

‘And yet you are surprised,’ he murmured to the apparition, checking ‘Expedited shipping’.

Chapter Notes

Head's up: some series 4 references in here. Since this ‘verse and the show arc are still quite plainly separate, I'm not sure they count as spoilers (or at least -- if you haven't seen the show -- they won't be obvious as such), but in case you're very opposed to even a whiff of a hint of a thing that happened in the tv series, here's your Exit.

Sorry I missed Friday (for those of you in applicable timezones): and see endnote about upcoming delays...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8: Sherlock

‘the embers
of a
Thousand
years
Uncovered
by the Hand

that
fondled
them
when
they
were
Fire

Will gleam
and
Understand’
—Emily Dickinson, from “Long years / apart”
'Don’t do anything too dangerous while I’m gone, yeah?’ One last swooping peck of a kiss (mouth reddened). ‘Can’t have you hogging all the fun.’

And with that, and an involuntary (unconscious) sigh, John’s lopsided grin disappeared out of the flat.

Leaving Sherlock alone with the presence of awakening dread unfolding beneath his lungs.

The germ of the problem lay in the obscurity of John’s motivation(s) for emailing Mary Morstan — an alias (although John was unaware of this) — in the first place. The subject-line of the email allowed for any number of possibilities: was he seeking her out simply to maintain his self-image as the ‘good bloke’ who remained friends with his exes? (Unlikely: he was not friends with any of his other former partners, excepting Sarah, a friendship borne of necessity (working together) not of any especial fondness (that Sherlock could tell); and Major Sholto (though the details of that relationship were scarce).) Even more unlikely, however, was the notion that John had attempted to get in touch with ‘AGRA’ to… attain ‘closure’: did people do that? reach out only to say goodbye? Nevertheless it was a possibility.

(So too arose the possibility, as argued the Mycroft-schooled voice of plumbeous, logical disinterest in his mind, that John wanted her for something. A romantic/sexual something. But something he didn’t mind Sherlock being privy to?)

Amidst so many variables, the most glaring were the facts of the (returned) engagement ring, and the length of time between their last (known) communication and this failed one. The most unfortunate caveat, on the other hand, was that there was a bland, rational, dispassionate lump of tea and cake who had assured Sherlock, during his first week back to Baker Street, that the assassin who had so nearly been John’s wife (*how near?*) was ‘no longer a threat’, and that he ‘shouldn’t worry’. Sherlock had been so voraciously focussed on the wonder that was John Watson that he hadn’t chased down the trail before it was (almost certainly) expertly washed away with military-strength, MI6-funded bleach.

(The pang of fear that had stayed with him had not been that AGRA would turn up to kill either him or John, but rather that John would miss Mary Morstan — that there were things he needed or wanted from his life that Sherlock couldn’t or didn’t know how to provide. And when John hadn’t appeared to do so, Sherlock had been all too ready not to look that gift horse in the mouth.)

***
As per John’s injunction, Sherlock set himself the task of (removing the Mary Morstan problem from his mind, for now, and) devising a plan to entrap Gruener in a legal and inescapable net of his own creation.

Miss Winter had usefully corroborated the information Sherlock had acquired from the homeless network: the ‘records’, or ‘accounts’, or ledger, or book (terms suggestive but none definitive) was indeed in hard-copy, a physical — and therefore eradicable — object. During his long rumination on the problem, he had determined that:

(Deduction 1.) Gruener kept the ‘book’ (for want of a better term) on his person. Evidence: Mycroft’s people had assuredly turned Gruener’s house upside-down during more than one of his absences, as Sir James had informed him: nothing found. Then again, whether the ham-fisted morons were too cloggy-minded to think beyond actual codex-format books remained to be seen. (As if they weren’t all on Facebook, for god’s sake!)

(Deduction 2.) Being on his person, the book necessarily had to be small (either constantly or collapsibly so), inconspicuous, and — judging by his aesthetic tastes and scholarly interests — antiquated in some way: a throw-back, a personal joke that would add ironic savour to the victorious melodrama of carrying such implicating material into the ivory towers and red-carpeted halls of London’s great and powerful.

‘Of course,’ reasoned the John in his Mind Palace, ‘you can’t be sure he keeps both the book and the key, or password or whatever, on him at all times.’

‘Hm. True.’

Hypothesis: Possibly Gruener wore the records on/in his handkerchief, or even somehow on/in his skin, in such a way that it was imperceptible without a visual device or instrument? Again, his fine-wire spectacles or some sort of infra-red scanner came to mind…

(Deduction 3.) Even so, both the size and character traits gleaned from the short lived horse-racing endeavours, the decidedly-failed marriage, and, now, Suze’s account of her brief but tempestuous (and ultimately, probably literally, scarring) affair indicated that Gruener’s attentions were just that: brief; and thus that, whatever his involvement in the under-age human trafficking scheme, he was neither the main player nor even overly nostalgic or sentimental about the women (girls) he ‘collected’. Rather, he enjoyed the fleeting thrill of dominating them before returning to his more serious avocation of studying Dutch printing.

Mind Palace-John stalked the corridor with the air of a prowling lion. ’Let me tell you, the thrill I’d
get out of breaking his arm? Not so fleeting.’

Sherlock quirked a smile.

(Deduction 4.) Though Gruener was no Moriarty, he was unequivocally a villain.

Returning from his Mind Palace to the sitting room wall, Sherlock reflected that he was glad this case had come in. Whatever his renewed commitment to taking seriously the problems of any (even microscopically) interesting case that came to their door, it was something of a satisfaction to know that he could be involved in the unraveling of more serious crimes than simple ones of passion or greed. Gruener, more than most, would not enjoy prison; John would categorise this under the heading of ‘justice’.

For a plan, then. John had been adamant about not simply charging in — a frustrating double-standard, since most of the time this was just the sort of breaking-and-entering that got John’s blood up and whose ends always (nearly) justified the means — but, if he was going to be insistent, Sherlock could work around it. Two alternatives seemed most promising:

Scenario A) Find a way to sedate/otherwise incapacitate Gruener unsuspectedly. This method had the advantage of being rather satisfying (particularly if they could bludgeon the Austrian on the head once or twice), as well as fairly likely to produce results — particularly since Gruener would, almost certainly, destroy incriminating evidence with even a whiff of forewarning. Catching him unawares, searching his person, and escaping with the evidence: an encouraging scenario. (Unfortunately it was that last step that seemed ripe for unforeseeable glitches — not the least of which, matter of how to get both himself and John in and out of the house without being captured or stopped, yet also managing to disable/disarm Gruener without being noticed.)

Plan A was not without flaws.

Alternative B) involved a disguise. (It had been ages since he’d worn a disguise! — not since Norway, a beard that coincidentally had begun just around the time John had grown his deplorable moustache (it aged him ten years at least. What had he been thinking. It was a miracle the man was able to dress himself at times).) Scenario B required one of them — namely, himself — to impersonate an expert in 16th-century etchings (he was sure Mycroft could find a spare Bruegel or, in a pinch, a Corot, to use as bait), who then either managed to take Gruener into his confidence — a long-con; undesirable, though more likely to yield the book if they could get the fool to show it to them voluntarily (as such people were ridiculously wont to do). Or, best of all, to distract him while the other of them (viz., John) scoured the house, clothes, display cabinets, desk, and any conceivable hiding place for clues about how exactly it was done.
This plan was (much closer to) ideal.

* * *

He spent the rest of the day (standing) ordering every relevant exhibition book, catalogue raisonné, monograph, scholarly journal, art studio starter’s guide, and ‘crackpot’ self-published collector’s memoir he could find across the internet — paid for, of course, by the handsome advance they’d taken off Damery’s annoyingly concealed downpayment.

‘This wasn’t exactly what I meant when I said you should surprise me,’ he imagined John saying.

‘And yet you are surprised,’ he murmured to the apparition, checking ‘Expedited shipping’.

(He was banned from many of the local libraries for not returning books in the state they preferred. It was hardly his fault the books he took out so often held glaring idiocy: he was simply improving the reading for the next patron.)

He immersed himself in online reading until the first parcels arrived, shoving into oblivion the obscene scent still clinging to his own fingertips.

And yet… his mind, frustratingly, was carrying on two tracks of thought simultaneously. And on the secondary line, he found himself musing that the other unfortunate element in his brother’s hoarding of information in re Miss Morstan was that John would, almost assuredly, not believe that Sherlock had not insisted upon knowing the full contents of the ‘AGRA’ file. It was precisely the kind of relentless nosiness that John, with some reason, attributed to Sherlock: the fact that Sherlock had not gone out of his way to learn about Mary Morstan — as he patently had in sussing out John’s middle name, his military assignations, his credit (and indeed sexual) history, his childhood home-life — was, frankly, uncreditable.

When he’d been in trekking through Asia (well, on the run, traversing an enormous zig-zag from Serbia that landed him, bruised and shaken, awaiting orders to attend a rendez-vous in Jakarta: but same difference) he’d found refuge temporarily in a Buddhist monastery in Tibet. Nestled into the rocky mountainside, the entire building complex had a stillness that smacked his ears with a hushed, dementing quiet, like nothing so much as the rehab facility he had despised with every fibre of his being ten years before. But the pledges of privacy, safety, and anonymity were too valuable to be refused for the simple matter of his own unfortunate memories. (More recent memories had at that moment been shrieking and hissing in his ears, overwhelming the old ones, analogous to how he imagined electric shock therapy fried whole constellations of neural pathways.)
Waking in a cold sweat at approximately half-past three in the morning (absurd to refer to such an hour as ‘morning’: it was unequivocally, if disorientatingly, night), he’d abandoned his allocated bed roll and gone in search of fresh air (though not hard to find here) and (more difficult) something besides the terrors behind his eyelids to look at.

The sounds of gathered breathing and the occasional rustle of cloth and bodily movement brought Sherlock into one of the open spaces in the main assembly hall, where a group of three monks in turmeric- and wine-coloured robes were working, knelt low over patch of floor and surrounded by small bowls. Sherlock looked around, unsure if his appearance was violating some sort of regulation about outsiders. Several more monks were seated, legs crossed, in another circle, each with a candle set before him, eyes shut: presumably, praying (though given the hour, Sherlock wouldn’t have blamed them for sleeping, as he wished he could). It occurred to him that he had no idea what they prayed for, or how, or to whom/what deity or force. Since nobody seemed especially alarmed at his appearance — he had left his shoes, as requested, outside —, he moved around the outside of the hall, amidst an array of, no doubt meaningfully-clad, statues, circling the low-inset floor to the best of his ability in the ascetic semi-dark.

Upon closer inspection, the trio of men (both about his own age) and boy was hunched (his own back twinged at the mere thought, though of course, freshly striped, it also twinged when he stood perfectly still, and would probably have caught fire and left him breathless had he attempted prolonged stooping bent at the waist as they were doing). All three regarded a square, outlined with the brown towels on which the monks crouched, roughly three square feet in area. Each man held two instruments (pencils? chopsticks? paint brushes?) and was silently moving the brightly-tinted material from the bowls into evidently pre-ordained patterns before him; the group seemed to need no speech, as every person went about arranging his requisite contribution to the tapestry.

Sand, he realised, squinting in the half-light of the candles.

He watched, transfixed by the easy, calm precision of their movements and the slowly resolving shape of the figure (the mandala, he was told later) emerging from their craftsmanship. As the sun rose, patterns of blazing pinks, mint greens, golden yellows, and clear sky blues took on their distinct shades in ribbons and signs which, he naturally deduced, held symbolic meaning for the group. When finally, hours later shaking himself out of the stupor of absorption, he watched the men rise and, bodies aching (his own neck, at the minute angle he’d been watching their process, was sore; he glimpsed, in their muted way, the various strains of knees, shoulders, eyes, and ankles that afflicted them all), nod to him as they exited the hall. The mandala was incomplete (some areas had been traced but not yet filled in), yet already the vast circle of complex undulations, petals, complimentary colours, and dizzying business was demonstrably beautiful.

Somehow, the work of art — was it art, or a devotional service? a requirement of their nocturnal ritual? (were those mutually exclusive? His religious education felt several lifetimes old, and pretty comprehensively deleted) — hastened his resolution to leave. His presence here (his presence, he
though morosely, anywhere) was a danger to them, even if their isolated and famously pacifist location provided some degree of protection. A few solid meals, perhaps a few medical supplies, and a few hours to arrange his thoughts into a proper plan (including how to get word to his brother via the deceptively well-connected head of the monastery) and he would be on his way.

Early the next morning, though, he was stopped in his departure by the sight of (now, seven) monks adorned with the most absurd looking gold and yellow hats, a bit like a golden, velvet imitation of a centurion’s plume, once again peering over the ornament. With horror, he realised they were sweeping the sand into a heap — long gentle brushstrokes with a paintbrush or similar implement, and they were reducing their meticulous handiwork to a pile of mixed multicoloured granules!

‘The world is fleeting,’ informed a voice at his side. The abbot (how odd: the man looked so like the vicar of Sherlock’s foggy, impatient childhood recollections, despite bearing the same title — the same light spectacles (and deep scholarly depressions at the sides of his nose); the same face rounded and creased with age, complete with kind (how was that?) eyebrows; both shorter and pudgier than Sherlock, exuding a patience and gentleness that Sherlock never had) was watching the ceremony — the proceedings were too orchestrated, voices in quiet unison as well as chant-and-response, to be anything else — rather than him.

‘Did they fail to finish it on time?’ Sherlock wondered. Perhaps the power of the symbols expired if un…blessed within a particular (stellar? solar/lunar?) time frame?

‘The mandala was complete,’ replied the man, with a nod of his almost completely balded head. ‘And so we return it to the earth, to restore harmony. It is a symbol of healing. Another mandala will be created in time, and be destroyed in time. There is nothing permanent in this world.’

This seemed a painfully tragic view — this, from a high-functioning sociopath, then thirteen months and 4,600 miles from the one person who might reject that epithet.

After a moment, on a whim he couldn’t quite account for, Sherlock offered, ‘It was beautiful.’ (Ravel’s string quartet; molecular Borromean rings of perfect crystal.)

‘Yes,’ the Rinpoche agreed. ‘For its time. And we saw.’

Months afterward, in an asphalt car parked, seedy motel south of Miami, shivering with the come-down of a cheap but sufficiently potent batch of cocaine, Sherlock reflected on the monk’s logic. Everything was transience. This high, like all the highs that had come before — that feeling of being nineteen, unplagued by the demands of his body, assured with every glance that people saw
him, knew the brilliance of his mind and admired it, wanted to be in his company because he was interesting and witty and fun and capable and liberated from the confines of behaving by the standards so briskly touted by the college dons — the soaring, sated glow slid steadily downwards as it wore off… Everything wore off. He’d never loved anyone for more than ten minutes. A perfect piece of music thrilled in the air until the only thing tethering it to reality was wishful remembrance. John had moved out of Baker Street. Moriarty, even! Moriarty was dead and yet his puny, deadly empire was eroding whatever qualities in Sherlock that people like Molly Hooper and Lestrade and John considered valuable beyond his intellect… Everything was transience, even — especially! — sentiment, so the cocaine didn’t matter, the cigarettes didn’t matter, Redbeard didn’t matter, his sickeningly idyllic childhood didn’t matter, the cases he would never solve didn’t matter, the body in the warehouse was already decomposing into mere matter that didn’t, and Sherlock shivered, chuckling at his own joke, thinking bitterly of painted sand.

* * *

Some time later, he became aware that (cooling) tea and eight brown cardboard packages were now on the coffeetable that had not been there previously, and that the front door and seventeen steps were reverberating with the return — oh —

John quite non-figuratively marched in, catching Sherlock’s glance with — busy day, then — an amalgamated spark of fondness, irritation (with whom?), anger, and… that last look, in the flatness of his mouth, was unclear. He smelled of creamy tomato soup and, somehow also, chicken, bacon, and brown sauce (sexual intercourse generated increased appetite? Unusual, he believed, for John, but… maybe), and that unnameable scent that made Sherlock’s amygdala go haywire. Yet John’s stiff gait sent a grip of dread tangling Sherlock’s insides harshly.

(He’d loved John since the night he’d first met him (‘Did I just text a murderer?’), since they’d first sat opposite each other at Baker Street. Or at least the residual oxytocin from this morning, triggered by the reappearance of the affiliated object, made him think he had.)

Without removing his coat, without a word of greeting, John stepped carefully between the row of laptops and other notebooks of various sorts to sit heavily in his chair. His fingers, *habitus*, went about worrying the seams at the arms where the fabric was already worn. Another year of that and it would need mending. (It was not the first time he’d had that thought, though he tended to forget immediately upon John vacating the armchair; yet with an uncomfortable prickle at the base of his skull, Sherlock considered that it was precisely the kind of quiet, solid act of care that John Watson performed every day.)

‘Long, tedious shift, patients all unspeakably boring; spilled soup on your shoes, had replacement takeaway lunch with’ (he swallowed down the errant panic in this burgeoning deduction) ‘someone you know. Tube horrifically busy — replacement works on the Circle line backing up service through the major central stations.’ *You were in a better mood when you left than when you came*
home, he might have added, though that hardly merited the name of a ‘deduction’.

‘Why didn’t she ever phone me?’ John’s tone was subdued, calm, but curious: nigh on unreadable against the tension in his shoulders, his firmly planted, still-shod feet.

Sherlock froze for a full second by the window, then sat (ow) in his own chair and began typing on the first laptop he could reach.

‘Charmed though Miss Winter was by you, John, she is, I fear, another one of those tedious people who insists upon going to work during the daytime hours.’

As expected, John sliced through this insultingly stupid attempt at deflection.

‘Not Suze, Sherlock. Mary. Why didn’t she ever phone or text or sent a bloody smoke signal. You know about her, and you know why the email didn’t get through.’

Not even a question, it appeared. (Interesting: what had been the tipping point of John’s certainty of Sherlock’s involvement? Actual deductive reasoning? Or simple ‘gut instinct’?)

‘See, I know you, Sherlock. I know your face. And all day I was wondering what that face this morning had twigged in my head even though I couldn’t put my finger on it, and eventually I got there. So. Let’s have it. What happened to her?’

This was not especially illuminating as to why John wanted to hear about her, but Sherlock he could push a little longer and determine that for himself.

‘I did at one point try to follow the constantly-updated news on the women you date, but eventually I was exhausted of receiving daily reports from my dear brother, who had to employ a full-time aide just to keep up.’

Somehow, for some reason as yet unclear, that struck a nerve: John’s expression tipped from mild wariness to outright suspicion.

‘What do you mean, you asked Mycroft?’ John demanded.
Sherlock affected nonchalance but John must have seen — his eyesight, minutely declining though it was, was still sharp at only a hearth’s-width distance (good: he needed to keep his sight for the subterfuge in Gruener’s house) — the tic of annoyance that quirked Sherlock’s face, and —

‘Mycroft?’ John repeated, incredulous.

‘It’s not as though I’ve had her killed,’ Sherlock pointed out quickly, though of course he couldn’t be sure his brother hadn’t done so. ‘And you managed to go almost six months without noticing her lack of contact, after you had decidedly not proposed to her, so I can hardly imagine even if she were reachable that she would desire to be your pen pal.’

‘How do you — no, never mind that.’ John sat forward in his chair, daring Sherlock to stare back at him as he himself unravelled Sherlock’s words. ‘But “if she were” — hang on, she’s not reachable but your brother’s involved? What, did he need a nurse for a black-ops mission to Eastern Europe or something?’

‘Something along those lines, I wouldn’t be surprised. Although, “nurse” is probably not her role,’ he added under his breath.

John bristled, settling back into his seat with a little huff of, ‘Bloody hell. You two never let anything be simple, do you?’ He measured his breathing for a moment, and Sherlock wondered if John was sufficiently annoyed by the conversation to drop it now and take it up with Mycroft at a later date. They had about ten volumes apiece of artwork and pathological narcissism to read.

Just as he was about to switch subjects, however, John looked at him with narrowed eyes. ‘What aren’t you telling me?’

He had known this would happen — John wasn’t going to believe he knew only part of the story. Which was, in a very perverse way, flattering, but not at all conducive to John’s amenability to plans A or B. ‘We’re out of milk,’ Sherlock mock-frowned. (It was true: test cultures didn’t stop just for casework.)

‘Just… just let me know if she’s alright’

The bolt of disquiet this sent through Sherlock made him speak before he could stop himself: ‘She was an assassin, you know.’
Damn, damn, damn.

Fortunately, when he looked over at John — sitting in his damp (was it raining? So it was) coat, one hand clenched on the tartan wool stump of his chair-arm — he discovered John’s eyebrows had lifted well into his forehead.

‘An assassin.’

‘Yes, John, you know the type: blonde hair and kevlar body suit and a silencer even you would envy.’

John snorted, and got to his feet, pacing with the instinct born of years of forcing himself to keep his temper (*walk it off*), ‘Your sodding brother must think I’m the thickest —’

‘You don’t believe me?’ Sherlock demanded, because the murky *something* in John’s expression when he had walked in, the lunch he’d had with a woman he knew, not his sister (that wasn’t until tomorrow), was no less troubling to Sherlock than when the shoe was on the other way round. ‘Ask my “sodding brother” — he’ll show you the file. She was undercover.’

‘No, she wasn’t.’

(Undercover in what precise capacity, Sherlock had elected not to know, more intent at the time to be briefed her up-to-the-minute relation to John and the latter’s up-to-the-second location. Just now, though, he cursed his uncharacteristic single-mindedness. He detested not knowing.)

‘Did you honestly think she was a nurse?’ he parried, because that much, unquestionably, was a blatant falsehood. ‘Are you that obtuse? “Mary Morstan” wasn’t even her real name!’

John shut his eyes, trying to block out this latest assault on his worldview. A moment ago this had been mere idle, if peevish, curiosity, a last remaining disclosure to be made before they could truly invest in this relationship, without lingering doubts or ghosts to be settled. (But John still cared about her — a woman who might, at any moment, have shot him in the head — and this *was not, for once, Sherlock’s fault.*) Now, though, as so often lately, it was a stacking of squabbles that coalesced into an avalanche.
‘You cannot expect me to believe—’

‘That a woman who interested you was, in fact, remotely interesting? I admit that part was a surprise, but statistically it had to happen—’

‘Sod off.’ John’s voice had gone viciously, frighteningly quiet. His jaw would ache later from how hard he was clamping it. Eventually, he frowned at Sherlock rather than at the floor. ‘And you would never have told me, would you? I mean, you went five months without saying anything so I suppose there’s my answer…’

‘Her codename was AGRA,’ he offered, beginning with what little he knew, ‘almost certainly an homage to a famed marksman in pre-Raj India who was involved in the 1857 mutiny —’

‘She was… retired?’ John interrupted, tentatively.

Of that, at least, Sherlock was more certain, though he doubted he would enjoy being the messenger in this case. ‘Not entirely.’

John nodded, taking this in, nodded and nodded and convulsed his fists around nothing and Sherlock couldn’t tell what his anger pertained to, whether he was glad not to be involved with her now or if it was regret over having touched her (loved her? Had he?) at all, if he felt the blood smear onto his hands from hers —

‘Brilliant. Everyone… is everyone in my life determined to lie to me?’ He grimaced. ‘It wasn’t enough to face Moriarty, for you to throw yourself off a building? Had to go and fall for another trick?’

Unable to keep his own hideous thoughts to himself tonight, Sherlock put his laptop aside and ( gingerly) got to his feet. ‘John, you are addicted to a certain… lifestyle.’

‘What?’ John rounded on him.

‘You’re abnormally attracted to dangerous situations and people,’ he continued, wishing his mouth would just once take account of the effect its emissions were having on someone else, but he had spent years dedicated to the study of a single man, in-depth and in all his unlikely specificity, and perhaps if John had all the information, he would more quickly grasp what Sherlock’s dark
moments prophesied. ‘You stick around for it, for the cases and the adrenaline rush, a life where
you get to play the normal bloke at the office and come home to murderers on the settee. Everyone
we know — Mrs. Hudson, the drug cartel runner’s wife and exotic dancer —;’

‘What are you even —?’

‘— your best friend’ (he swallowed any other epithet for himself) ‘is a sociopath who solves
crimes as an alternative to getting high; YOU! You, most of all, you’re a doctor who decided to go
to a warzone. You shot a cabbie the night you met me —’

‘HOW,’ John’s voice hitting the ceiling with enough force to puncture it, ‘is this my fault?’

‘It’s what you like.’

‘Don’t fucking start, Sherlock. It’s not a joke.’

‘I didn’t say it was funny.’

It wasn’t, Sherlock was well aware. Unlike the recent spats they’d been having, this one felt
suddenly charged with things Sherlock had been withholding — fears he had been successfully (up
to now he’d thought so, anyway) deleting as soon as they came into his head since the first
morning Sherlock had searched the kitchen shelf only to realise he no longer remembered whether
the coffeepot had initially belonged to John or himself. Yet here they all were, tumbling out like
spun blue and green marbles spilled across a floor…

(Transient. Dust waiting to be distributed.)

‘That’s not why I liked… Look, I admit that I — that sometimes I get tetchy and restless, like you.
But, as you somehow know, I didn’t propose to Mary, or whoever she was. I didn’t go looking on
some “dangerous nutcase” message board! You weren’t around and I didn’t… Jesus.’

However many times Sherlock had contemplated how the unearthing of these chief facts of John
Watson’s self would go, he found now that he was struggling to anticipate where the conversation
was headed.
John searched Sherlock’s face, deciding (almost visibly sifting through) how much more to say, his own mouth and eyes slowly rearranging into a new (inscrutable) expression. The room seemed suddenly falsely darkened, between the citrus-coloured blush of the lantern and the bright blue-white digital glow of the skull hologram.

‘I didn’t go into the army to get a fix: I went into the army because there was a hard job to do. One that most people would wet themselves even to imagine. And I just thought that, if I could handle it without losing my shit, there might just be a place for me there — people that really needed help and work that I could do… maybe even do well, without letting people down. Not that I always succeeded, even though I tried, every single time. Sound like anyone you know?’

Sherlock rolled his eyes: his motivations were neither as noble nor as self-oblivious as John’s. ‘I’m referring to myself as much as anyone. You tackle more criminals than I do. You need danger. You prefer women like Suze Winter and Mary Morstan over what most men would call a “dream come true” of Violet De Merville —’

Again John bristled. ‘But I’m here. And you’re here. Even today, when… But I’m staying,’ he added, with sudden shift in tone.

‘Yes, fine,’ Sherlock nodded dismissively. ‘Understood.’ He wanted to drop this now, before it got any worse; he needed more evidence on this lunch situation, and on the Morstan matter as well (on the likely (he hoped) chance they were unconnected), before he went any further.

‘Sherlock, you have to understand. I’m not proud of those things. My gun, or how I treated all the girlfriends you helped me chase out of here, or the gambling, or wanting to go punch Gruener’s bloody lights out. I’ve not always been as good a man as I could have been. Should have been. And now you’re telling me “it’s what I’m like”? That’s…’

Ducking his head, a grimace of something like regret spilled into the lines around John’s eyes, and Sherlock couldn’t think of anything past the blinding rush in his ears of John whispering his name with such fervour as they lay beside one another putting off the rush of the morning, newly remade in the impresses of each other’s bodies, awkward and malodorous and yet drawn to each other across continents and years and all statistical probability, so he couldn’t help himself enunciating the grounding fact of his life’s experience thus far:

‘John, I have known many people in this world, but made few friends, and I can safely say you are the bravest, and kindest, and wisest human being I have ever known.’

Maybe that — John looked crushed by this, and Sherlock couldn’t possibly suss out why through
the fog of his own dizzying, disorientating sentiment — but maybe that had been inappropriate.

‘Swings and roundabouts with you,’ John murmured, voice heavy.

‘I apologise,’ because this was the heart of the problem: his own utter emotional inconsistency; an ability he simply lacked. ‘That was not intended to —’

John’s mouth pressed forward onto his with almost no warning, unhesitating except with a soft sighing exhale in his nose as his hand found the back of Sherlock’s neck to tip him forward and a bit to his left, into John’s mouth. (John’s jaw, a prickle of idiomatic stubble. And he was warm — overwarm, hadn’t ever taken off his damp, humid coat.)

After a long (searingly long) pause, John finally pulled away — mere inches, but enough for Sherlock to blink and find his vision no longer entirely composed of the blurry-close tableau of him. Said, in a murmur, ‘I’m never bored with you.’ The room itself seemed to be echoing the same words from another conversation, years previous. But Sherlock finally spoke the nettle-barbed point he’d been biting back since John’s declaration of several days ago:

‘That is either patently untrue, or deeply unsettling, considering the number of women you managed to seduce since we met, some of them here.’

John hadn’t moved back, only a few inches (a breath) of space between them; Sherlock felt crowded, overstimulated, suffocated by his implacable patience, the solidness of him. (He should have been a fencer: a game of true attrition.)

‘None of them here,’ he urged, squeezing Sherlock’s right hand at their sides despite the intrusive heaviness of his sleeve blocking them from holding hands properly. ‘None of them beyond a look, or a word. None of it was really real — not like this. Here. That’s how this works — at least, I think it does. That stuff you just said, about me? You’re the one person who sees me that way, even though all evidence to the contrary is right in front of you every day.’ He paused, eyelashes flickering unconsciously, almost in time with the stutter of Sherlock’s pulse. ‘We’re as bad as each other.’

But you got bored! Sherlock thought to himself savagely. Even before I returned. You fell in love with an interesting, dangerous, complicated woman and you got bored. Everyone’s afraid that I’ll get bored of you, but no one has considered the desolate likelihood of the reverse. It was too easy to see: they were both too stubborn, too similar. He saw across his vision a parade of the same type, the kind of broken couple they encountered in the casework, leaving behind indifferent lovers, secret lives, pools of blood. Fleeting.
And however successful he might deem their intercourse of this morning, the dread lurking in his chest cavity revolved around the fact that it had been a success only because Sherlock had been able to ignore the ghastly sounds of their bodily fluids, the cars and pedestrians on Baker Street, the blare of terrible morning chat shows bleeding up through their floorboards; but his wandering thoughts included other sexual situations they could undertake at a later date (other acts they could try, things Sherlock had tried and disliked immensely, but that he would try again without hesitation if John asked), had pictured other people with whom he had performed this act in the past, something he was given to understand was tantamount to infidelity.

Surely, all too soon, he would be balancing equations and composing and drafting scenarios of crimes they should be chasing mid-coitus, because his body craved John at all times, even when the abstract thought of it disgusted him. A contradiction no one but himself should be forced to live with. Already today, he had been unforgivably distracted from working to take down a monster of a criminal by the thought of John’s hands wrapped around his body. (What if, someday, he didn’t remember to say John’s name?)

This morning had been a success, but to imagine that he could say ‘I love you’ and thereby promise to keep feeling that — to believe that such a feeling would safely shield them against every, entirely likely, change to their relationship (against a future version of himself he could not even begin to predict) — was impossible.

‘I don’t know what happened to Mary,’ Sherlock admitted finally.

After a long moment staring at him, Danube eyes pouring into Sherlock’s as though speaking some otherworldly language of which Sherlock was still only a novice, John replied quietly, ‘All right. I’m gonna need a while to sort out my head on that now, but…’ He exhaled slowly, attempting resigned patience. ‘Just don’t… don’t lie to me. Okay? Please? I’ve really had enough of people — for ages —’

‘It’s unclear how much there is to know,’ he replied, which was as close as he could physically stand to saying he had no more information than John did about what had become of her. He stepped back, giving them each a moment to regather themselves (John sighed again behind him, steadying). ‘I didn’t arrange for her to be extracted in conjunction with my…’ — It was important that John trust that he hadn’t been involved. That, things being different, even had he arrived to find John mid-proposal, he would not have stopped it happening purely for his own benefit. (He hoped, though did not exactly trust, that he would someday find the inner resources to let John go, when the day came that he finally asked.) — ‘… my return. It was, improbably, a coincidence.’

John huffed a breath, then came round and sat down heavily, facing the shut grate beneath the mantle. His thumbs resumed chaffing away the seams on his armchair. The back of his jacket, like
the back of his neck, was now dry.

Another long moment (in which Sherlock tried fiercely not to fidget), John nodded once more. ‘Well. That’s not exactly the explanation I was hoping for, but,’ he looked up at Sherlock still poised in the very centre of the room, ‘I guess it means I can delete her from my contacts list.’

Jokes were John’s primary means of defusing tension, as much as deflecting it; in this instance, Sherlock was deeply grateful.

The slate in front of the (barren) fireplace was the only thing Sherlock’s eyes seemed to want to look at. ‘If you are still interested in discovering what became of her, I’m sure my —’

‘I’m not interested,’ John cut across. Sherlock was, he could admit to himself at any rate, mildly surprised. ‘Do I need to be worried about her coming to kill either one of us any time soon?’

‘I don’t believe so, no. Not unless working with Mycroft has proved as tedious and insufferable an experience as I imagine it to be, in which case I would merely point out that it’s entirely out of my hands that we share many of the same genes.’

Another laugh for his Mind Palace shelf: this one was quiet, a high, fluttering thing that made Sherlock crack a smile, against every odd he would have lain down only five minutes before.

‘I’m not good at this stuff, but…’

Sherlock cringed, uncertain if they were about to relapse into yet more destabilizing self-reflection.

Instead of speaking, however, John carefully, deliberately reached out a hand and waited. Such an action called for only a single ‘appropriate’ response, so Sherlock stepped forward just one step, placing the toe of his left shoe just where it met the leg of John’s chair. Smiling, John weaved (the angle was awkward, Sherlock’s hand almost perpendicular to John’s) their fingers together softly. Distantly Sherlock wondered what John’s hands would feel like in ten years — in fifty — whether he could begin now, by scheduling decennary refurbishments to the chair, as a present (as a promise of something so dangerous as a future)…

‘Dinner?’ John asked, recalling Sherlock to this present. ‘Are you eating? Though…’ he looked around, taking in the sitting room more fully for the first time, ‘I take it we’ll have to find
somewhere that would allow you to bring five massive books to the table?’

He had a fair point. ‘Unlikely.’

‘Yeah, all right,’ John amended, ‘easier to have-in anyway. Can’t expect you to sit still for more than ten minutes anyway.’

Sherlock felt a blush bloom across his cheeks and was aware of the blinking thing that happened when he was genuinely started.

‘Christ, no, I meant—’ John laughed outright now, and if Sherlock’s temporary embarrassment was what was needed to bring at last back a normal tone of voice to the flat, he was prepared (within certain parameters) to accept it. ‘I meant, while there’s a case on.’

A smirk suggested the truthfulness of that statement was entirely suspect.

‘We’ll get this right, y’know,’ John told him, in a familiar sotto voce, tone melding with the distant buzz of the fluorescent kitchen light and the pat-pat-pat-patter of the rain against their windows. All over London, under the same rain-blanketed sky reflecting back at them with misty purple-orange clouds, human beings were carrying on all manner of daily toil: somewhere, someone was achieving a milestone sending dopamine and endorphins flooding their system; somewhere else, possibly in the same building or tube carriage, someone else was wishing they’d never been born, serotonin and other neurotransmitters failing to fire; people died alone in their flats, or fought with their families, or danced with their veins high on substances created by and/or in the nervous systems of humankind over the course of centuries; people made what, to themselves, were enormously important but outwardly mind-numbingly trivial decisions about football matches and travel holidays to the South of France and the fate of the world — passing their precious few, unknowable moments of consciousness in the company, oftener than they liked to think, of people they didn’t even know. John Watson, with brush of his thumb along Sherlock’s palm, was holding his hand.

‘Yoohoo!’ called a voice, and John’s warm quirk of a smile escalated into positive fit of giggles — he caught Sherlock’s eye — oh, yes — the exotic dancing — yes, that was diverting, from a certain bleak, farcical standpoint — ‘Boys! Can one of you come sign for these before they get soaked?’

‘Oh, lord,’ John went on, chuckling, as he rose (releasing Sherlock’s fingers at last) and marched towards the stairs, ‘if she opens a delivery of ten different flavours of condom, you’re doing your own explaining.’
Sherlock almost wished he had, just to see the look on John’s face.

*

Chapter End Notes

BY GOD, the people cried, LET THE ANGSTY RELATIONSHIP CHAT CEASE, AND LET US LIVE! [By god I hope so.]

*Updates for the next two weeks will be suspended while the world, possibly, ends. Between Sunday's ep, next Friday's American end-of-days inauguration of evil, and my enormously important phd exam the Wednesday after that, I really cannot spend as much time as I love to do on getting the last few chapters into suitable shape for posting. But I swear, once we get past those few milestones, up the chapters shall go!* 

Footnotes:
1. FWIW: this chapter is the most substantially different from my pre-S4 draft to this revised published version. But that said, a *shocking* number of things here were remarkably close to what's been going on in 4x01 and 4x02, so the changes were made less to shoe-horn in brand new elements and much more to connect the bits I'd already written to their counterparts in the aired eps.)

2. Also: I'm rather conscious of the orientalising move that happens in the middle of this chapter. My footnotes are: 1) this ties in to the previous two stories in this series; 2) it also ties in to the *Many Happy Returns* mini-ep from before S3; 3) I did substantial research to make sure I was fairly representing, to the best of my ability short of becoming a Tibetan Buddhist monk and devoting years to study, the way the Sera Mey Monastery (on which this one is based) and the Abbot depicted (based loosely on a previous abbot, not the current one) work, so that the squicks of cultural appropriation are, if not dissipated, at least somewhat mitigated by respectful treatment. I very much hope so.
The queue at Pret was ridiculously long. Whatever anyone said about the quality of food on a base, at least you knew... He smirked at his own rosy-tinted glasses. No — things were just as liable to hold-ups over stupid human error there as here. There just tended to be more laughs over lunch. (Well, that, or iron-barred silences.)

He thumbed around the edges of his silent mobile in his pocket.

‘It is a two-way traffic, the language of the unsaid.’
—Anne Carson, from “The Glass Essay”

‘Right, well, Mr. Cassis, that’s that, then. See you in…’ He clicked, flipping the clinic’s diary page over, ‘three months. Linda will set you up with an appointment time, at the front desk.’

‘Cheers, Dr. Watson, will do.’ The man, John’s own age (as the medical chart informed him) but with a brown beard, tame in a way John’s ruddy stubble never looked when he bothered to grow it out, nodded in thanks and, taking the bottle of migraine pills and waving them, rattling, gratefully as he left.

The less-than-glamourous part of this job, he mused to himself as he charted with all the notations and dangling sentences he’d typed up with half an eye on the screen while listening to the slightly round-faced man explain his headaches, was the paperwork. The boring bits they never showed on telly: filling out intake sheets, marching back and forth with charts, NHS pamphlets, gauze and bandages, collecting test results, reading x-rays, muttering to nurses as patients arrived or left, sometimes seeing people into ambulances (once in a while at a run with a shout to clear the way, but far more often at an elderly pace as various cases that needed admitting for overnight care were
sent on from John’s exam room to a hospital bed). Seldom was someone gushing blood, or someone else presenting with a mystery disease. And more than anything, first, last, and in between: paperwork.

And yet today he’d spent the majority of his shift preoccupied by the just-out-of-reach giddiness that followed a night (or in this case, an early morning) of phenomenal, era-inaugurating sex. With this particular person, especially.

Three months from now: three rent cheques, three credit card bills. Christ, in three months’ time, they’d have to be thinking about Christmas and New Year. Maybe he’d pick up that volunteering gig he’d in gone for last year during the holidays, an hour a week at the homeless shelter offering free clinic services. Plus the annual calls for discharged soldiers to gather and get absolutely laddered and keep the blokes who were more recently come home (and, honestly, himself) out of their own heads for a night.

Except this year he’d have a date with said ‘particular person’, rather than with a bottle of bad scotch on his lino floor. A date, this time, who might actually prefer the homeless shelter to the warmer, swankier scene of the banquet, because he was mad and John was out of his mind with love for him.

‘Don’t do anything too dangerous while I’m gone, yeah?’ he’d made Sherlock promise, swearing it right into the grin of John’s lips as they met one last time on the landing. ‘Can’t have you hogging all the fun.’

He’d forced himself to let go of Sherlock, smiling almost tipsily at Sherlock’s eyeroll, and to march himself to the surgery before he was later than he already was.

Sitting at his desk, he found himself doodling on his prescription pad between patients, thinking about Sherlock’s slip — ‘soldier’ for ‘sailor’ — and whether, in fact, there might be an opportunity once this case was finished to dig out his uniform. He could easily imagine it: Sherlock’s eyes gone round as dishplates, John commanding him to splay across the bed and get himself ready with a ‘yes sir’ or else receive due punishment (the exact nature of which they’d have to agree upon, but John was, er, up for anything).

Checked his messages between patients: nothing.

Still, it was only early. Sherlock had looked set to get stuck in to reading up on Gruener’s background, hacking his finances or scouring the message boards or hosting a scouts’ meeting of the Irregulars, or something, John hadn’t caught the exact plan, distracted by the peculiar email
from Mary.

(A weird one that, he thought to himself. It was obviously possible that she’d changed emails since they’d dated in the spring, but — well, he wished he’d managed to remember her sooner. Send her some kind of closure email at the very least. He sincerely hoped nothing bad had happened, though, if he was honest with himself, what would he really have done? They’d cared about each other, sure, got on better than pretty much any of his other girlfriends, suited each other with an appreciation of dark humour and an agreement not to dig too deep into each other’s pasts just for some tit-for-tat ‘get to know you’ game. Even Paris, in retrospect, hadn’t been that bad: awkward, when the hotel he’d chosen hadn’t been all that nice in person, and even more so when Mary insisted on slagging off the French while they stood in a queue for some church or other, then tsked loudly when the evidently French woman ahead of them glared daggers at them. She — Mary, not the Frenchwoman — wanted to hold hands and kiss in public and duck under ‘INTERDIT’ signs and get drunk by the riverbank, and there had been no good reason why he hadn’t loved every second of it.)

“‘There was a young soldier from Brighton…’” rumbled Sherlock’s amused baritone in John’s ears, and he had to cover a smile with his hand as his next patient entered the room.

The day crawled by, with no texts or overly interesting appointments to break up the monotony. It was, by the looks of things, going to be an exceptionally uninteresting, cloudy, humdrum morning.

Which left him far too much time to replay it all again and again in his mind: the huffs and groans Sherlock had made into the mattress, the feeling of that once-forbidden zone just below Sherlock’s navel, warm and sensitive beneath John’s fingertips, of his knees forcing Sherlock’s thick, fur-hair-smattered thighs wider apart, the press of Sherlock to his chest afterwards, so close, heart almost visibly heavy in his eyes, that John had felt — truly, though not for the first time since they’d first kissed and turned his world upside down (yet again) — that maybe they were more than fooling around, more than some romantic dream in his writerly imagination. Maybe they really were meant to be this, long-term. Everything.

Sherlock really didn’t make it easy, though. Didn’t relax, or let himself be at a disadvantage… well, pretty much ever. But today, at least, with the memory of Sherlock’s contented, slightly overwhelmed sigh still brushing his cheek, even now keeping him warm against such gloriously typical London autumn drizzle… Today his imagination wove fantasies out of the threads of the morning, painting a vision of a moon- and candle-lit villa on the edge of some island beach, Sherlock seated across from him, collar opened at the top of a crisp white shirt, none of him grey or wrinkled but just as he was now, breathtaking, as the ocean whispered over their dinner, long fingers caressing the stem of a wine glass dewed against the tropical breeze, quiet and smiling and all John’s.

A holiday: an excellent idea. Maybe with the money from this case, and John’s latest pay cheques
from his locum work, they could actually spring for somewhere like that. In January, if Sherlock would ever bloody tell him when his actual bloody birthday even was.

The next few patients went by even more quickly than the first.

‘Linda?’ John called, finally leaving of his office a while later, stretching and slipping his phone (no texts) into his pocket. ‘Going for my lunch. Back in half an hour.’

The nurse at the desk swished a hand in acknowledgement, continuing her consult on the phone, as he walked through the receiving area of patients (doctor’s badge carefully hidden in his coat, lest anyone want to jump the queue) and out onto the high street.

Outside, he inhaled the first proper deep breath since entering his windowless cell of an exam office that morning. Rolling his neck and twisting his spine to crack from the long while at his desk, John smirked all over again at the burn in his sides, his legs, his own wrists…

*Still thinking about last night,* he found himself typing into a new text.

Then he deleted it.

*Just so you know,* he tried again, *when I said* (as he’d headed for the shower, pecking Sherlock softly on the lips) *that was the best sex I’ve ever had? Wasn’t joking.*

(Sounded cliché, despite being completely true. But he deleted that too, lest Sherlock get all bent out of shape again over being called out for being a sexually-active adult.)

Crossing the road dredged up a stale, almost forgotten memory of the previous contender for the title of ‘best he’d ever had’. With it came the prickle of long-dulled shame, grief, and — because even amidst such an unfortunate cocktail of emotions, some part of him still relished it — a tiny swoop of pleasure in his gut.

Not that he was eager to repeat the incident, mind. Not exactly a night he’d ever been proud of.

* * *
He’d been given dispensation to take his furlough early: his father was dying. For the first time in eight years, he’d made the trek back to what had once been his home. Since his mother died, of course, it hadn’t felt like it, and even then… But it had been like stepping back in time, crossing that threshold. None of the regimental (he’d distracted himself with bad jokes) order or discipline of the military training he was then so close to completing. Almost the polar opposite, in fact: their childhood house greeted him in an absolute state. Empty bottles and molding takeaway boxes strewn across the kitchen and dining table; expired egg salad reeking in the fridge, and a once-washed load of dishes on the rack, long since dry; stacks and stacks of old post and scraps of paper mixed with family photo albums, and opened, unpaid, and overdue notices bloody everywhere, so thick in places it resembled the pictures of ministry buildings abandoned during sudden evacuations in warzones, places he now associated with training classrooms and brisk, efficient movement rather than this… stagnation. Loose change, broken, out-of-date electronics with their wiry guts splayed apart as though they’d burst at the joints. Even half-forgotten cups whose contents (all alcoholic of course) were now just sticky pools at the bottoms of smudged glassware that somebody — namely, John — would have to clean up his fucking self if they ever wanted to sell the damned place once his father…

(Sherlock, had he been there, would have had a field day with the dust.)

Pete Watson lay in bed, face ashen apart from his yellow, sunken eyes, belly distended under John’s grandmother’s quilt. A nurse was seated beside him when John shook himself off the doorframe.

‘Let me do that,’ he offered immediately, and the woman — seemingly only a fear years younger than his dad, her hair wiry flyaway and untidily going grey — hopped up to greet him in a kind murmur, cup of ice cubes still in her hand.

‘It’s no trouble, pet, I’m here to —’

‘I know, but…’ He swallowed. ‘I’m here now.’

Evidently she appreciated all he could (or couldn’t) pack in to this simple statement, and set the cup down on the nightstand, jostling around him in the small, overcrowded room to give him the chair. The cushion had been worn down over the years to a flat, thin bit of faded, brick-coloured wool, all the stuffing gone lifeless with use.

For two weeks — the entirety of his allotted him, ticking away — he watched his father’s laboured, unchanging breathing, then went back to attempting to make some sort of dent in the mountain of work to be done setting the house to rights. He and Anne went about it methodically,
taking shifts by the bedside, where the frustration of groans and needs of his father’s struggling body were the only difference in the room apart from the gradual slide of the sunlight down and then up the wallpaper. John boxed up all the clothes for Oxfam, packaged the photos and posted them to his paternal aunt in Dundee — not that she would be all that interested, but she hadn’t come down to help out and say goodbye to her only sodding brother, so John wasn’t sure he cared much what she did. (He kept a few nice ones, cherrypicked out of the piles he waded through, to make an album of his own to keep.)

As he worked, he tried not to think about what was going to happen if Harry kept down this same road, a road she was apparently inhabiting at that very moment, hence her ignoring his many calls telling her she was running out of time to make her peace with the old man who’d made both their lives a mess since the beginning. He didn’t expect her to ring back, and wasn’t disappointed.

The house either resonated with the television — overloud when Anne fell asleep in front of it (some daytime rubbish she put on as much to keep him company in the next room as for herself, often left blaring when she left that John never bothered to shut off) — or the ticking of the antique carriage clock, only keeping the right time because John had wound it (maybe for the first time in a decade) his first night here. They washed his dad and turned him to prevent bedsores. With Anne’s help, they changed the sheets that second Monday, making smalltalk about the lads in the army with him and her own son who was dating a ‘no-good’ girl that, by the sound of it, was only keen on him for the free lifts to and from her job at the chemist’s.

A few relatives had the decency to phone, but as soon as John — temper frayed, defeated and terse sounding, and shorn of any pretense of politeness or patience — gave them the prognosis, they started sending bouquets and condolence cards instead. The man wasn’t even dead yet, John wanted to bellow, but the house already smelled like an old-age home after a memorial service.

After nine whole days, he’d cleared all but two rooms, ingested more bland tea and boring sandwiches than the entire of his army training so far, and started to wonder how he could delay his return if, as seemed halfway probable, his father carried on like this, unconscious but moments away from death, beyond the next week — possibly indefinitely. By that evening, sitting in the room once again, his own voice echoing in the thin walls as he attempted some poetry (British War Poets: An Anthology — his granddad’s beat-up copy) as a way to pass the time, he was certain he was going to have to smother either his father or himself by dawn.

‘You have a night off, John love,’ nodded Anne with unflagging kindness, as she looked him over. Her handbag, slipping off her arm, came to rest as usual atop his mother’s former dresser. (None of his mum’s actual things — the trinkets, her perfume, her wedding photo, the little crafts like jewellery dish Harry, age 8, had made declaring her ‘World’s Best Mum!!!’ — were anywhere to be found.)

‘Nah, it’s fine,’ John shrugged, putting the book down and wiping his face to shake himself of the
fog in his mind.

‘Oh, it’s all right!’ Anne urged, setting about switching the lamp on, tidying up the bed and moving the half-full waste basket to the door, no doubt to take out once it was properly time. ‘My night shift tonight! You go out, splash some water on your face, have a breather. Rejoin the world a bit. Do you good.’ She sat, and gently looked at him hovering now by the foot of the bed. ‘He won’t go before you’re back.’

It was above all her earnest, genuine smile that made it possible for him to leave the room — and once he was out, he suddenly felt like he was choking with the need to leave the wallpaper, the house and everything in it, completely, if only for a few precious hours.

He fled.

Almost two weeks of good behaviour, floating in becalmed sea of slow feeds and hours lost and naps snatched and colostomy bags and still not one call from Harry, no help from anyone who wasn’t employed by the fucking NHS, a stranger with whom he shared those familiar and distant four walls, and now — the door thudding shut behind him — he was wide awake. He felt keyed up, itching to drive fast and take screeching turns, to gamble (he’d missed Sunday’s poker game with his unit), to go say ‘fuck you’ to his heredity and get blind drunk and prove that he didn’t need a family as much as he needed to feel pride in his work, and maybe himself. But not tonight.

So much the better, he told himself savagely.

He walked, with newly schooled rhythmic efficiency, down to the town’s second best, and biggest, local, a bustling place that attracted as many out-of-towners as regulars. He knew it of old — had practically grown up here. Turned out: it was a Thursday.

The whisky was the first real thing he’d felt in a fortnight.

He drank two, resisting the jolting desire to hurl the glass against the long bar mirror, to witness the shattered faces reflecting at him, gone hushed with shock and horror, at the madman who might jump over the counter, who might then begin flinging bottles of everything they’d got to the ground until the floor resembled an icy-sharded pool of amber.

Instead he ordered a third.
‘Drinking alone?’

He blinked a little thickly at the first new voice to speak to him in what felt like a century. A kind smirk met his gaze, on a friendly, carefully stubbled face, honey-brown eyes smiling brightly with mirth (or mischief) echoed by that mouth upturned at such a wry angle.

‘Not anymore,’ John heard himself say.

The bloke seemed surprised at John’s reaction, sliding instantly onto the barstool to his right.

‘Christopher.’ He offered a hand across his body, a little awkwardly.

‘John.’

He hadn’t been with a man since uni (and even that hadn’t been more than a drunken party fumble) — honestly hadn’t thought about it once since then —, but with the fiery sensation beneath his skin that made him want to break things and scream at the unfairness of the world and be a selfish, carefree, pleasure-seeking version of himself who could get away with murder, he bought Christopher a drink. And then another.

By midnight, the place was roaring with the combination of a small town surrounded by similar small towns, a match on, and a lovely moon in the sky. The mix gave them a perfect excuse to sit otherwise-suspiciously close, budged up beside one another and leaning into each other as punters on either side made grabs for drinks that nearly knocked them on their heads. More than once John felt beer slosh onto his hands, or shoes Whatever was in the air, though, John was drunk on it as much as his drinks, and a little bit on the way Christopher (‘not Chris — never Chris, please!’) was looking at him.

‘Come back to mine,’ Christopher murmured, leaning close as someone behind him was forking over some notes to the barman. ‘I want to see if I can make you beg.’

In one gulp John necked the last of his pint, then stood to fish out his wallet, throwing it down with one hand as he nonchalantly used the cover of the crowd and the shield of his body to hide a hand that slid all the way up Christopher’s leg to where he was, the heel of John’s hand discovered, tented with interest.
‘I don’t bottom,’ John had enough wit to say honestly, while his fingers coaxed a twitch from beneath dark denim fabric. ‘Is that a problem.’

‘Fuck, no,’ breathed Christopher, cheeks pink, ‘God — that’s fine — just — let’s find somewhere.’

Wordlessly and without looking at each other they each dropped a handful of notes on the bar and went their way through the crowd, John not caring at the prickle on the back of his neck as people around them, probably, whispered at their departing forms (‘pansies’, ‘poofs’), didn’t care if they looked like slags or escorts or just strangers about to fuck in an alley.

‘Can’t drive,’ Christopher cursed thickly into the brisk March night air, hands going instantly into his pockets. His collar was open, though, evidently warmed inwardly by the liquor, and John raked his eyes over the exposed skin like a Alsatian eying a steak. ‘Well we can — it’s only a short bus ride, if we can…’ His eyes were a little unfocussed as he swayed a bit on his feet, frowning to make sense of their surroundings. John chose to believe he’d contributed at least in part to the eager hurry Christopher seemed to be in.

‘Taxi!’ John called, because the angels were looking over his shoulder (however improbably) and despite the fact he didn’t have the money for this any more than for five drinks and a nod for the bartender, he wasn’t actually the type to fuck someone in an alley, or in his childhood room just upstairs from — no — that wasn’t an option — so, taxi.

Christopher was drunk and gone a bit soppy, John well into his cups as well and more importantly not giving a damn — not about whether the cabbie or the people on the pavement or the angels overhead disapproved — as Christopher and he hopped happily into the back seat, partners in crime, then played up their drunkenness, giggling and finding ways to get their hands on each other not-so-surreptitiously the entire way. Pulling up only a few minutes later, the house appeared slightly less romantic or clandestine than John might have imagined: a surprisingly average and decent looking attached house (nicer than his parents’), on a street with lamps far enough apart to splash tangerine-coloured light and imperfect shadows. Even the front garden was ordinary, decked with an overgrown attempt at a garden and the one (or was it two?) blurry Council-provided bin(s). All this John had time to glance at hazily as he threw himself first from the taxi, hoping Christopher would pay (since John, even in his cups, tallied the remaining cash in his pockets as ‘insufficient funds’).

After a moment though he turned to find Christopher, still half-inside the cab, looking up unsteadily at him, face twisted in a muddle of alcohol-impaired poor recall and embarrassment.

‘What? Is this not yours?’ Not that he cared, so long as they found some room, any empty room (or empty car even), soon.
‘John, you should know…’ Christopher gulped.

John felt a shiver of cold down his spine, going through several possible ends to that sentence and refusing to jump to any conclusions.

‘I’m married.’

Partners in crime… and adultery, apparently.

After a moment in which he tried to gather his thoughts, feeling a slither of something in his gut, something ugly and corrosive, he shoved it away.

‘Are you getting out or what? I’m freezing my arse off out here.’

Christopher practically sobbed a laugh of relief and leapt out of the cab, shuffling past him on clumsy feet as they made for the front door. The cabbie made a scoffing noise and muttered something John emphatically did not want to hear before speeding away into the night.

‘Nobody’s home,’ said Christopher unnecessarily — John was drunk, he wasn’t an idiot — as he fumbled with the first of two sets of doors, scraping the key in the lock and nearly face-planting on the flagstone just inside the porch in haste and inebriation. The inner door was another problem as John pressed himself up against Christopher’s back (they were more or less of a height), hands already fumbling with his belt, and Christopher whined and let them in about fucking time, and John rushed him forward with sheer momentum until they found an obliging wall at the foot of the stairs.

‘I don’t,’ Christopher blurted, into John’s mouth, sucking his lips hungrily between words, ‘I — I don’t — ugh — I usually — I’m not —’

John, not in the mood for either excuses or lies, and certainly not about to trade sob stories, crowded him further and kissed him deeply, tasting the mix of them and sighing into the kiss like his life depended on it. A moment later, he pulled back a fraction. ‘I won’t tell if you won’t.’

As John had hoped, Christopher melted at this and made quick, messy work of getting them both
up the stairs, losing their clothes along the way.

The rest of the night was largely a delicious, shameful blur of overwhelming, almost unreal pleasure. Christopher remained half-dressed for ages, hitting the bed and finding John clambering over him, stroking down his body and working him into a state, neither of them yet even out of their pants. Then he used his mouth.

He didn’t much fancy that bit, necessarily, but Christopher was grunting with every swipe of John’s lips, back arching up to meet him, smelling of men’s cologne and male BO and everything so unlike John’s last few careful, causal partners, and that went straight to his libido. Christopher was noisy and nonverbal and too off his head to protest the lack of condom, and John was in a mood to set things on fire. When he came in John’s mouth, Christopher moaned loud enough to drown out the muted sounded of next door’s telly blaring the nightly news.

Chest heaving, Christopher was still caught in a grimace of pleasure as John rose and, stumbling, made the (happily) correct guess as to the washroom for a spit and rinse of his mouth. He didn’t fancy the stomachache on top of what already promised to be a walloping hangover. Which reminded him —

‘Got anything to drink?’ he called, ignoring the state of his erection and tottering back to the bedroom.


John, in a rush he didn’t quite know how he accomplished, brought the bottle back to bed.

‘Christ,’ Christopher muttered on a laugh, watching John slide onto his back. ‘You’re — that was fucking amazing.’

John took a swig, throat burning (cheap scotch — so much the better, he thought for the second time). ‘That’s nothing.’

‘Hmm?’ Christopher asked, pushing to sit up, lean and pretty in a way John couldn’t find a way to label otherwise. He had a lovely voice: like poetry, John thought. But that wasn’t the kind of thing they were here for, so he shook it aside.
Instead, with a Cheshire grin, John offered him the bottle, as though they were teenagers drunk on their first trip to the off-license. But that way madness lay. Instead, John reminded him, hands returning to tiptoe across Christopher’s hypersensitive skin, ‘You haven’t had to beg yet.’

The bottle, defying physics, made it back to the nightstand as John rolled over him, flushed and hungry, chasing the taste of this man’s whisky-soaked tongue, submerged in those hands in John’s brutally-short hair, hands on his arse as their groins brushed and John’s semi-erect prick jumped at the contact.

Blinking next, he found Christopher turning on his front, and with a bolt of adrenaline and defiance John put his mouth and tongue to something so filthy he’d only ever known it existed from the one bit of gay born he’d ever bought. And Christopher had begged. Blood on fire, John at length obliged, pressing him up onto all fours and finding him wet to the touch and just ready enough to be able to take all of him in one fell swoop, so bloody tight. It probably hurt. John waited, pulse crashing in his ears, on the edge himself but refusing to go over, murmuring endlessly how good it felt and how good Christopher was, coaxing even noise from him that could be found, because clearly this was some sort of fantasy world in which they both could be alter egos of themselves, playing along, rough and petting and gasping, and laughing even — that last bit was the most surprising. John focussed on that, on the daze of nerve-sizzling, scalp-scorching pleasure of being with someone who didn’t know anything about him, who didn’t look at him and see a lad from a slightly rough school who was smarter than his mates but always fighting like mad to keep his head above water; didn’t see someone privately terrified of being shipped off to some godforsaken corner of the world and loving every second like the jump out of an airplane; didn’t know his sexuality or his middle name or his phone number or anything about him except one night’s worth of what he could do in bed.

And Christopher managed, gone though he was, to give him a run for his money, held John there on the threshold of his climax for an aeon, so that when he finally tripped that wire it felt like it a fifty-story controlled demolition, predictable yet earth-shattering as it wrung him out completely, loosing the farthest reaches of John’s body and setting him aloft like an arrow off a bow, harder and better than he had ever climaxed in his life.

He choked a steadying breath. Another. Blinked. His mind reeled itself back in, chugging to life, to find Christopher beneath him, shaking with aftershocks, having come again, though John couldn’t even tell when.

An hour later, John snapped to wakefulness. Bleary eyed, he located Christopher beside him, tangled at the waist and snoring the rattle of the inebriated, though the back of his hand was resting against John’s ribs. He didn’t wake as John got up, dressed, and replaced the now nearly-empty bottle in the downstairs cabinet. The sheets were in a near-toxic state of disarray, and would need immediate changing. John wondered whether Christopher would have the time (and presence of mind) to wash them before his wife got home — or if, clenched John’s gut, in the time-honoured tradition of men behaving badly, he wanted to get caught.
John’s thighs were tacky and burning victorious as he walked out into the last dregs of night, across the three or so miles back through the town centre, by which time it was nearly sunrise. He might, he thought, manage to avoid the brunt of the hangover if he skipped to coffee and pastry now. When the bakery opened at half-five, he was the first and only customer, snagging three kinds of croissant for himself; he only just remembered to grab a large pecan danish for Anne. The first of his was gone before he was over the road.

When he walked in, he realised his clothes stunk of booze, and probably worse.

’S’mee, Anne,’ he called, putting his mostly finished croissant and the rest of it on the recently-cleared worktop. Then he took himself for a proper scalding shower.

Washed, dressed, and only a little worse for wear, he rejoined the sickroom at just past 8 am.

Anne was sitting in the armchair, evidently enjoying her pastry. She pointed with a pinky and a grunt at the mug of tea on the dresser. Then she set her danish down on a plate, like a civilised person, while John leaned on the furniture and drank deep. After he’d finished his (second) croissant, Anne looked at him heavily.

‘I think it might be today,’ she said, in a voice he hadn’t heard yet. Solemn. Preparing him.

She wasn’t wrong.

The funeral, the arrangements for which ought to have taken the better part of a week, was sorted almost without John knowing he’d done it. He was back to his unit with an hour to spare of his leave. He’d never told anyone about any of it.

* * *

The queue at Pret was ridiculously long. Whatever anyone said about the quality of food on a base, at least you knew… He smirked at his own rosy-tinted glasses. No — things were just as liable to hold-ups over stupid human error there as here. There just tended to be more laughs over lunch. (Well, that, or iron-barred silences.)
He thumbed around the edges of his silent mobile in his pocket.

Just as the queue started to move at last, a man in a long, posh mack and three-piece suit dodged right in front of John to lunge with his one free hand for a sandwich off the takeaway shelf, knocking into him and sending the cup of soup he was holding in his other hand straight to the floor, *SPLAT* over both their shoes with a terrific spray.

‘Oi!’ John barked —

‘Ugh,’ the man groaned, ‘*shit,*’ as a people on either side jumped back and made *hems* and *hmphms* of a very British inconvenience.

*Selfish twat,* John grumbled inwardsly. He liked these shoes, and he’d used his last pair of spare trousers changing two weeks ago when a kid had been sick all over him.

Then as now he got the brunt of it, a hot, red-orange stain setting fast to his cuffs and the leather of his brogues, so he ducked out of the queue for some spare serviettes (the flimsy miniature kind, of course — as if they expected the only people who made messes had child-sized hands?). Beginning to wipe and dab where flecks of piping creamy tomato had splattered, he held out a handful to —

‘Puh!’ huffed the auburn-haired woman in a jean jacket who’d been stood behind him. ‘What a git.’

‘Sorry?’ John asked, looking around, only to find her nod towards where the bloody *wanker* who’d spilled his lunch over several strangers was now second-in-line to the till with a fresh cup. ‘Ah. Well.’ Irritated, John didn’t think it worth facing off in public with the tosser to get him to pay for him and the other people who had to scatter from the spill: an oily, sneering city boy, the kind that never gave up their seats on the tube for pregnant women or the elderly, ignoring them while texting or worse, chatting loudly to his mates. It wasn’t fine, obviously, but John was either too recently well-shagged or too tired to bother with confronting him. So he kept the napkins in a (momentarily balled) hand and instead managed to sop up the bits over his shoes. ‘You go on, then,’ he said to the woman. ‘Got to…’ He flapped a bit, and she, the ginger, laughed. He chanced a sideways glance at her, finishing up with his cleaning. Quite attractive, it turned out.

‘No, no, that’s fine,’ she laughed, with a lovely Scottish accent, red lipstick complimenting a shortish yellow dress as she quirked a smile. *Very* attractive, on second thought. ‘Do you, er — do you need a hand with that?’
'Nah, no, it’s… I just don’t think it’s my colour.'

She snickered again.

Somewhere on the margins of his thoughts, he was aware that he stood here, a middle-aged, care-wrinkled man in the middle of a absurdly dull day at work, hems of his trousers speckled with tomato that he was trying to blot with a tongue-dampened napkin, being flirted with. That feeling of the lights coming on — that shiver of attraction, instantaneously sparked — vaguely visible in the woman’s eyes, inspired a reciprocal flare in his gut…

‘No?’ she asked, a playful lilt in her voice. ‘I dunno: it looks all right to me. A bit… messy, but.’ She smiled.

Definitely flirting with him. The universe, he decided, didn’t play fair.

‘Unfair’? an unbidden thought rang out, and the smirk on his face faltered. *Nothing* was as unfair as Sherlock in a row.

And there had been so many of those lately. Swings of enormous extremes, a ship heaving and crashing on hurricane-force swells. Part of this, John could admit in the privacy of his own thoughts, was of course his own doing: overly sensitive about their new relationship, about how much it meant to him. (Trust issues don’t solve themselves, Ella would have told him.)

And of course Sherlock lashed out when he —

‘Oh, ta, that’s lovely of you,’ he thanked the woman, when she opened up her purse, as new people ducked around her grumbling, and produced one of those stain-remover pens.

— when he was afraid. Shot the walls, stabbed the mantle, threw people out the window onto bins… —

The thought, the sudden unstoppable truth of it, barreled into him with the force of a lorry: Sherlock was afraid of him. Afraid of losing this. Afraid of allowing himself to want it, to have it, real and forever. Sabotaging it, even, something Mike Stamford had once drunkenly accused John
of doing himself, after yet another girlfriend had dumped him.

‘I’m E—’

‘Thanks,’ John interrupted, backing off a step as if scalded and with the same force, switching off the lights that had reflexively come on when they’d made eye contact, ‘thanks a lot.’ He held out the stain-remover pen. ‘Sorry you, er — you lost your spot in the queue.’

The down-turn of finality at the end of his sentence seemed to get across: she flickered a fleeting look of disappointment, then nodded, deflating a bit. ‘Ah well, no worries. I don’t normally…’ She nodded again, just once, then took the pen back. ‘Anyway — have a good one.’

‘Yeah, you too,’ he waved, actually waved a hand up, like an idiot, but at least she was walking away. With the crawling sensation of not-quite-guilt disturbing his appetite, he didn’t know if he wanted lunch any more.

He managed to smile again, awkwardly, as she — ‘E’ — walked past a few moments later, stepping gingerly over the teenage staffboy who was now mopping up the rest of the spilled mess.

Christ. It wasn’t… He forced himself to grab a sandwich this time, chicken and bacon, briskly efficient, in a sudden rush to get back to his desk.

It was reflexive. That was it. He hadn’t actually forgotten — he was still in that lingering good mood, the one that had prevented him from wanting to punch the soup git, from — what had happened this morning. What he’d been fantasising about only minutes ago. What he was hoping to get up to when he got home.

‘Next customer,’ called the woman at the till.

In the seconds between tapping his card and waiting for it to go through, as the pair of women behind him stepped up to the other register, John had time to for another realisation to percolate up to his consciousness: Sherlock *never* fought fair. He lied to weeping parents and pretended not to care if he had friends only to throw himself off building except that he hadn’t done that either, all in order to get ahead of the game; he’d been manipulating John’s personal life for years —

John blinked.
Sherlock’s face this morning. John had shown him the email to Mary, the one that had never got through, and Sherlock’s face, rather than genuinely thoughtful, had looked… shuttered. Studiedly unreadable.

‘Sir?’ repeated the blonde, name tag clarifying that she was Martine, and the manager.

‘Yeah, sorry, just…’ An unwelcome idea was burrowing into his brain, shifting his guilt over the last three mad minutes and instead prodding memories in what had seemed to be separate areas until they were forming a mildly infuriating conclusion. He fished out his wallet and grabbed the takeaway bag with his food.

The afternoon was gone before he’d even begun to untangle his thoughts.

* * *

As he unlocked the front door to 221B, he paused a moment on the other side. *Something about this foyer,* he mused, aside. Coming home from work or a date or, while Sherlock had been gone, the other side of London — listening to the grunts or soaring violin or unexpected voices of the flat upstairs, or sniffing the aroma of Mrs Hudson’s baking (or otherwise). His shoes had a place here. His coat, his keys. The kitchen was an absolute wreck but he knew where everything was, usually. The sitting room wasn’t much better, and sometimes he looked around at their television, tucked away under the cabinet between the rooms, and wished he lived the kind of life where he was more likely to find football flashing on his walls than foetid intestines or criminal Top Trumps (they really did play that).

But this was his home.

So he mounted the stairs, uncertain if he was more angry — he was angry so often recently — with Sherlock for lying about Mary (in some as-yet undefined way), disgusted with himself for very nearly picking up a woman in his lunch break like some philandering twat who was never satisfied (and, with a swoop of fear, he prayed that for once Sherlock wouldn’t deduce him from some stain or crease), or a devoted, head-over-heels idiot who in fact wouldn’t say no to putting off their row until after at least a snog.

The flat was in a bit of a state, in contrast to Sherlock artistically poised in front of their long window, but John smelled damp cardboard and that ruddy cologne Sherlock had given him and suddenly realised with buffeting sharpness, like the slap of a cold, wet wind off the ocean, that
Anger it was going to be for the moment, because Sherlock turned to look at him and was still lying. After — after everything.

‘She was an assassin, you know.’

John’s chest went very still at that: calm under fire, as he’d been trained. *Afraid*, he reminded himself. *He’s afraid of losing you.*

‘An assassin.’ He crossed his arms and shifted his weight back; managed to sound in control, at least.

‘Yes, John, you know the type: blonde hair and kevlar body suit and a silencer even you would envy.’

He snorted — no, he couldn’t keep sitting, he had to move — ‘Your sodding brother must think I’m the thickest —’

‘You don’t believe me? Ask my “sodding brother” — he’ll show you the file. She was undercover.’

‘No, she wasn’t.’ That… that wasn’t possible. He’d practically married the woman, been in her flat (in her body), gone away with her for a weekend, learned her family history and met her friends — what little there was — and by god, if she’d been lying too —

Typical, that the maddest, most gut-wrenching part of his day came not during what anyone else might think of as an ‘emergency’: Sherlock could get up to more than enough trouble for the both of them without even leaving the flat. John was angry, yes, but Sherlock was *vicious*, lashing out like John seldom witnessed.

‘Did you honestly think she was a nurse? Are you that obtuse? “Mary Morstan” wasn’t even her real name!’

_Sherlock never fought fair._
‘Brilliant,’ John concluded, insides hot and twisted with something uncharacteristically like nausea, because this wasn’t just Sherlock being a tit and pushing John’s buttons, this was clearly something else — something he’d been withholding for god knew how long. ‘Everyone… is everyone in my life determined to lie to me? It wasn’t enough to face Moriarty, for you to throw yourself off a building? Had to go and pull another trick?’

Standing now, Sherlock shook his head minutely, words careful as though he thought John was going to break, or shout. ‘John, you are addicted to a certain… lifestyle.’

‘What?!’ he shouted, unable to swallow it; felt his shoulders tense impossibly tighter, hands already balled into fists.

His pulse thudded in his ears, listening to Sherlock describe the warped, broken, inherited and utterly individual shitshow that was John Watson, addicted to adrenaline and violence, apparently — (god, the number of people he’d thought about punching just today) — a junkie waiting to break free, just like Sherlock was a junkie, deep down… what a fucking pair.

He blustered out some reply, the things he told himself when he lay awake wondering what was wrong with him. When he’d got like this. If he was better off with his gun and no one else.

Until Sherlock took a surprise turn that startled John out of his own head and his anger altogether:

‘John, I have known many people in this world, but made few friends, and I can safely say you are the bravest, and kindest, and wisest human being I have ever known.’

His heart skipped a full beat.

Never fought fair, when he was afraid.

The hard-set, searching look on Sherlock’s face, swimming in his everycolour eyes as though he was worried he’d said something awful, something worse than all the horrible things they’d been bandying back and forth these last few minutes…

No one, in his entire life, had ever fundamentally, unwaveringly believed in him the way Sherlock did. The way Sherlock had, since the beginning: since the cabbie, since the pool, at Baskerville, at Bart’s, at every other fucked-up, upside-down Russian roulette fiasco they somehow found
themselves facing, Sherlock believed in John. And yet Sherlock was afraid of losing him, just as much as John was afraid of losing Sherlock again — of driving him away.

‘We’ll get this right, y’know,’ John eventually reassured him, on the belief, if nothing else, that saying it out loud might help them get there faster.

By the time the Chinese food arrived, Sherlock was immersed in four spread-open glossy art books, muttering to himself and taking scribbled, short-hand notes. John settled in for a long night of barely keeping up with his resident genius, whose study habits were known only to himself (if that).

‘And you think it isn’t… I dunno, digital?’

The row, if not entirely dissipated from the atmosphere in the room, was at least tabled enough for Sherlock’s head perked up with a look of don’t-be-so-obtuse. John huffed a laugh and took another bite of his beef and broccoli.

‘Gruener has old-fashioned tastes,’ Sherlock intoned, with the firmness of an algebra teacher reminding a careless student that \( x \) could not possibly equal 3. ‘His house is a former abbey, converted with modern amenities of course, but he put his desk where the altar should be.’

‘Subtle,’ John remarked.

‘Precisely,’ Sherlock agreed, disappointment replaced with conspiratorial amusement. (John never got tired of that tone.) ‘Not to mention the fact that he is an article collector. What better place to house a collection of nonconsensual pornographic material than in a gallery devoted to pornography? Added to which, he has, based on these testimonies, forced his conquests to read out the records of the previous encounters. How, if the documents were entirely encrypted or, if he were clever, simply filed in his mind?’

‘Mind Palace converted to a call centre, was it?’ mused John.

Sherlock scowled and, evidently done with John’s questions, resumed reading.

They were sitting on the floor, dishes messily opened across the coffee table and wafting mouth-watering scents all through the flat. Sherlock, naturally, had eaten two fried dumplings, wiped his
hands on a cloth napkin he produced from nowhere, and then went on comparing something from the book open on his knee to the laptop settled on the floor in front of him.

He’d explained, briefly, the plan. Sherlock’s version of said plan was, for once, appropriately simple: impersonate a private wealthy (read: dirty old pervert) fan of Gruener’s work, looking to collaborate on a project around Gruener’s collection. If there was an opportunity, John would meanwhile sneak a peak at any secret books, boxes, containers, apparatuses, or anything that looked promising; if he didn’t get a chance, they’d both memorise as much as possible to relay to Mycroft the moment the interview here was over and Sherlock was safely out of his costume and back at Baker Street. (It was distantly funny to him that this counted as ‘simple’.) Had John not witnessed first-hand Sherlock’s extraordinary physical impersonation skills, he would have refused to go along with it. As it was, he planned to take his Sig.

After another few hours of skimming through the various books looking for any mentions of secret cupboards, hidden backs to antique picture frames, miniature stamps or rings or anything that could be rolled out and printed as needed, John couldn’t quite keep his focus much longer. He stood up with a embarrassingly middle-aged grunt, cracking his back and muscles as he stretched upward. As he bent back to collect the now-cooled food, he found Sherlock looking up at him.

‘Oh — were you still hungry?’

For along moment, Sherlock was silent, and John’s stomach clenched around a flare of wariness: what was there even left to upset him tonight?

‘Gruener will be hosting a pre-wedding tea tomorrow.’

John waited for the end to that thought. When none was forthcoming, he allowed himself to breathe a little easier. ‘Our invite get lost in the post?’

Without even bothering to roll his eyes, Sherlock noted, ‘It would be the perfect place to implement the plan.’

Looking up at him, seated cross-legged on the floor like a boy, Sherlock was clearly trying to follow through on his earlier promise: to keep him in the loop.

Gratitude and relief crowded his throat, he swallowed and said instead, ‘Do you want me to —’ (he couldn’t say ‘help you’ so) ‘to stay up, then? Quiz you on this stuff?’
'You have the early shift at the surgery in the morning, and — in defiance of all sane advice — that absurd lunch with your sister tomorrow.'

John chuckled. Christ, yeah, he did — fuck, it was going to be a long day, now complete with a white-tie disguise bait-and-switch, apparently.

‘I can still stay up.’ Keep you company.

After a moment of staring at him, eyes Sherlock shook his head minutely. ‘I’ll text you the details. Tomorrow.’

John nodded back, keeping eye-contact because Sherlock was half-a million miles away but had looked back from whatever wild, mad scheme had got into his head to make sure John was with right there with him. John wanted to trust him. Another moment ticked by, in which a siren blared round the corner before settling off into the distance. Eventually Sherlock’s phone buzzed, calling his attention away, and John decided he really ought to get the food put away before he went to bed.

‘Are you —’

John paused, with one hand on the bannister, to see Sherlock sitting a little straighter on the floor, hands paused over the keyboard.

‘I really don’t need the sleep —’ he began, but,

‘Yes, you do,’ Sherlock interrupted, ‘that wasn’t — I merely — Will you be sleeping upstairs, or…?’

He came back into the room, arms uncrossed this time. So much was wrapped up in that unfinished question.

‘It’s what you like,’ Sherlock had said, and John didn’t want to be that man, wanted to be good and strong and honest and faithful and… well, yes, brave. But he hadn’t told Sherlock about the woman at lunch, despite being furious with Sherlock for lying to him. Was that all he was, then —
doomed by his genetics to be an addict, doomed by his rebellion from his family to fail forever at anything like a stable relationship?

No. He refused to let it be like that. ‘You are the bravest, and kindest, and wisest human being I have ever known.’ He wasn’t, not by miles: but it was who he wanted to be.

Getting down on one knee like a sprinter, he budged up close to Sherlock, who turned under heavy eyelids to peer at him warily.

‘No,’ John pointedly stated, in an undertone, putting a hand to the base of Sherlock’s neck and sliding up into the soft curls over his ear. ‘Our bedroom. Not upstairs. All right?’

Sherlock blinked several times, evidently finding it difficult to look at him, and John guided with both hands to kiss him softly but slow, just the once. His closed lips tasted like dumpling sauce.

‘Last chance before I’m off,’ he murmured, nudging Sherlock’s cheek. ‘I really don’t mind…’

‘Go,’ Sherlock sighed, smirking just at the corners of his mouth, but pushing him playfully, and John smiled back, chest winging with hope, as he lumbered to his feet and off to bed.

* * *

Bad dreams of Mary, of drinking himself stupid in that awful bedsit, of Chinese pottery and girls kept in badly-lit backrooms being harmed in ways his psyche refused, self-protectively, to represent fully, bit at the edges of his sleep all night, chasing him, until he woke with a start Wednesday morning in a bed smelling of both of them, alone.

*
Hello, fellow escapists. Isn't the world grand?

A longer chapter -- blame John, his head's all over the place -- because I've been gone, passing exams and revising this chapter to intersect a few additional places with series 4 (though again, LOTS of this was all already here before S4 aired).

Will *try* to keep to the twice-weekly posting schedule, but now that the teaching semester has started, and considering how long both revisions and formatting take, I can't entirely promise. But remaining chapters will be coming, as scheduled or otherwise.

Original epigraph for this chapter was a long-time favourite of mine: ‘[H]e used to think that he wanted to be good, he wanted to be kind, he wanted to be brave and wise, but it was all pretty difficult. He wanted to be loved, too, if he could fit it in.” —F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*. 
Chapter Summary

‘He allegedly has other, shall we say, agents in his service, presumably not all of whom can be categorically dismissed as buffoons’ — and it clicked, while suddenly, if distantly, it occurred to him that John was going to be livid —

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10: Sherlock

‘Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.’

—Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights

Cricked neck. Constricted feet. Olfactory nerve wincing: scent of overpriced eau de cologne and shoe polish.

He groaned.

‘I suppose I should be grateful to find you dressed. Once upon a time, discovering you plastered to your own sofa at’ (he paused, no doubt to squint at his insufferable pocket-watch with its faint tinkling) ‘ten in the morning would have meant I should expect to find a list nearby.’

A low blow. Sherlock opened his eyes with a scowl to read his brother up and down: irritated, obviously (eyebrows recently brushed smooth after having been raked with frustration, seat uneasy despite John’s especially comfortable chair); had spent the morning in at least two — no, three — meetings (the stain of fine quality Assam, taken for appearances’ sake rather than an actual desire to consume such a quantity in the allotted time); exercise and sleep regimes unaltered. Mycroft
simply being his usual, tedious, hateful self.

‘Perhaps I’ve been wrong to ignore John’s desire for a dog,’ Sherlock mused aloud. ‘Might come in so handy for gnawing at the tubs of biscuit that find their way into the flat.’ He stood and stretched. ‘Pardon me — I need to piss.’

Mycroft’s pursed frown was as delightful as anticipated: coarseness always did make him sour-faced.

Sherlock took his time in the toilet and getting dressed, so that by the time he re-emerged Mycroft had relocated to the kitchen, leaning impatiently on his umbrella.

‘If you are quite finished admiring your own reflection, brother mine, you allegedly have a “case on.”’

‘Oh, have you forgotten?’ Sherlock rejoined, as it occurred to him with a flare of relish. ‘Alas: Official Secrets.’ He pretended to lock his mouth and throw away the key, before gleefully going about — oh, John hadn’t made any coffee. In a hurry. He’d be grumpy all morning. — putting the kettle on and rummaging for something vaguely edible.

‘There are important matters which —’

‘Ah, ah, ah,’ he chided, enjoying this turn of events to an extent completely proportional to its amusements. ‘What if you accidentally leaked information! A member of the upper echelons of government, no less. Perish the thought!’

‘Leaks are very much the matter at hand, little brother. You seem to have come into contact with several… undesirable witnesses to what they, falsely I’m afraid, believe to be definitive evidence against certain people. Not Gruener, I grant you —’ he added, in answer to Sherlock’s distaste, ‘but certain other parties. These people to whom I refer are not to be trifled with. It would behoove you, therefore, to avoid dragging any peripheral names unnecessarily to light. Nor would it be especially wise for you to jump in where you might much more profitably wait, and plan. Even so far your actions have not gone unnoticed, or unquestioned. I strongly suggest a lower profile. Do you understand me?’ he added, at the loudest possible volume below a shout, as Sherlock had been making sure to clatter everything — their spare salad-washing thing and the various moveable parts on the burners and appliances that could withstand a bit of noisy twiddling — within reach.
How his brother, raised in the same household, with the same parents, the same (yes the same!) intellect, could possibly belittle himself to such an extent as to stoop to the level of sweeping up other people’s messes was BEYOND him.

(Interesting, though: they hadn’t yet come across any explicit mention of anyone the likes of which had access to Mycroft’s strings, sundry and invisible though they were. So far, all Sherlock had actual proof of was the prostitution ring with the underaged minors — damning enough for Gruener himself, but… He had only scratched the surface, evidently. How were these ‘other parties’ involved? Did Gruener procure for them? Some high-level hypocrisy in the Border Control office? Was the art smuggling a front too, beyond the unseemly pieces Sherlock had already witnessed?)

‘Politics?’ he spat. ‘Hardly an incentive to turn a blind eye to the abuse of children, Mycroft.’

The kettle popped, and he was very happy to turn away from his brother’s convoluted face with its trivializing condescension aimed at him.

‘Curious,’ said Mycroft to his back. ‘I little expected you to take such a sentimental tack. And yet, he is rather the sort of puzzle you like to solve.’

Sherlock made an indifferent, ‘Hmm?’ to that, since he had zero intention of asking what the hell that meant.

‘A dragon for you to slay.’

He faced him, surprised. Mycroft was — was he? — merely contemplative, or actively concerned. Enigmatic as ever.

‘Is that what you think of me?’ he heard himself wonder. ‘A dragon-slayer?’

‘No,’ Mycroft sighed. ‘It’s what you think of yourself.’ He raised an eyebrow pointedly, then turned on his hideously under-scuffed shoes (no legwork) and made for the door. ‘Do have a care, Sherlock. Not all fences are as easily mended as those between you and Dr. Watson.’

And, right back to infuriating.
‘Gruener employs multiple security personnel —’

‘Idiotic,’ Sherlock cut in, ‘I met them — a pair, as in, *two*, not exactly a Mongol horde, of the most
imbecilic oafs one could hope to find, one more worried about his hangover than manning the
gatehouse, the other so arthritic and lumbering that even the poorest burglar would be able to hear
him coming a mile off.’

‘And this is what is become of Sherlock Holmes: the great vigilante house-breaker? the Raffles of
Scotland Yard?’

It was certainly *not* the plan — not his preferred plan, anyway — but it was none of Mycroft’s
damned business.

Unstoppably, Mycroft went on, ‘He allegedly has other, shall we say, agents in his service,
presumably not all of whom can be categorically dismissed as buffoons. You are aware of the
incidents in Paris…?’

‘Your concern is touching, Mycroft, but I am fortunately still able to say that I am if nothing else
*slightly* more competent than the police, even the *police nationale,*’ he replied impatiently, wishing
he had something staining and foul-smelling to drop at Mycroft’s pristinely-polished feet to splatter
across his trouser hems. (Which reminded him: he must ask Mrs Hudson to take John’s besmirched
pair to the good cleaners today when she went.)

‘And yet, somehow, this is insufficiently dissuasive for your current scheme of *wholly*
underestimating the situation.’

‘Utterly,’ Sherlock snapped. No one’s legs were going to be shattered in an accident, no one was
going to end up drowning, and if Gruener thought Sherlock was still tempted by the siren song of
the drugs — well, he could go on thinking it. Perhaps it would be a useful misdirection. (Must
consider that at a later date. (John wouldn’t be pleased, even if it *were* a fake relapsed drug habit.))

After a moment in which they both scowled peripherally at each other, Mycroft affected an
enormous, put-upon sigh, blessedly deciding it was time to hoist himself off to his sedentary perch.

(Mycroft, extracting him from Serbia; all his muscles on fire, his own voice grown deeper with
strain and foreign speech and the iron-clad promise to himself neither to scream nor to cry for
mercy…)

‘… Do not underestimate this, Sherlock.’

Sherlock considered kicking him down the stairs, but didn’t fancy having to clamber over the mess on his way out.

Mrs Hudson arrived some time later, tutting at Sherlock standing still for no apparent reason in the middle of the kitchen gripping the back of the bar-chair. Unconsciously she moved around him and began tidying, giving him the opportunity to re-lock those memories in the depths of his memory.

Re-emerging, he felt an unusual craving for food. (A perfectly acceptable tin of cake frosting and some of John’s ‘nutrition’ exercise bars (the things were stuffed with all sorts of sugars and preservatives: the only sense in which they were ‘nutritional’ was in the definitional sense, that any edible object had various properties which would, in a pinch, prevent a human being from starving) sufficed for a small breakfast. Fortunately these were the nice ones, with dark chocolate and cherries.)

‘That brother of yours,’ she tsked. ‘Rather a cold fish, isn’t he?’

‘An apt choice of words, Mrs Hudson,’ Sherlock agreed, mouth full as he sat down and began, with the fingers not tipped with chocolate, to re-set the necessary components on the table. ‘Scaly, virtually spineless, and inclined to follow the school rather than strike out on his own.’

‘Exactly, dear,’ she chimed, already moved on to collecting the tea towels for laundering. Few people appreciated Sherlock’s own tendency to move on from inane conversation as Mrs Hudson (who, paradoxically, was herself a keen and consummate fellow practitioner of tuning people out). Before she left, he ducked upstairs and returned promptly to hand her the offending garments: ever observant (his methods found at least one natural student), she tutted about stains whilst her laughter-creased eyes gave him a warm, knowing look. She kissed him on the cheek and patted his arm on her way out.

The flat, at last devoid of other people, fell silent.

For the first time in over a week, the encumbrances upon his mind — tangled skeins of illogical thought swamping his Mind Palace, muddling information surrounding Mary, the case, his brother, himself — fell away, leaving him an hour to follow the pleasantly linear processes of his ongoing
fingerprint/textile experiment. Like Bach’s Partita no. 6, he meditated inwardly, the proper series of escalating and descending scales, growing into multiple complementary movements towards a paradoxically simple yet variegated conclusion.

When the case was over, perhaps he could find something appropriate to play for John. He — they both, if the truth were out — struggled to get anywhere in the mire of talking quite so much, especially lately. Their actions, by contrast, allowed them to communicate nonverbally (a mode that, in most people, he found unreadable, but in his fledgling relationship with John was fast becoming far more successful than mere speech: for so many things, there simply didn’t seem to be appropriate vocabulary or syntax). John had been angry that Sherlock had withheld information: fair, he could admit, when one took into account John’s personal, familial, and professional experiences. (Sherlock counted the 797 days of his absence heavily among those experiences.) And yet John had known, with the peculiar power he possessed to know Sherlock better than anyone ever had, that Sherlock was telling the truth to say he knew no more about AGRA. More than this, John — with the resilience of the *Onopordum acanthium* (his ancestral flora) — weathered the barrage of Sherlock’s deductions, shaking off the sting of it and hearing, behind it all, Sherlock’s frantic, inarticulable message: *I know you intimately, utterly, and there is no part of you I have not embraced with my whole being.* And to this John had fitted himself dexterously and repeated, in essence, the same declaration he had made the night before the 797 days of hell they’d spent apart: *I know you for real, too.*

It had been the luckiest day of his life, the day John Watson strode into it.

Mind refreshed, body sated (chocolate, cherries; dumplings only twelve hours ago; John’s kisses last night, and one across his forehead this morning on the sofa as he dashed out this morning) but itching for proper exercise, he found his mobile.

> *Borough station: 1 hour. Wear something less… loud.* —SH

Her reply was virtually instantaneous.

> *Digging out my catsuit as we speak.* x

> *See you there.* x

Excellent. He had just enough time to select a more… average-looking ensemble.
Halfway to his wardrobe, however, he found his attention drawn to the perfectly made-up bed (military training: ever the soldier) which nevertheless failed entirely to make him forget John’s words.

‘Our bedroom.’

Ours: homonym, hours; French for bear; in English, plural possessive pronoun. (The grammar matrix: among the things he could not delete, no matter how hard he tried.)

His opened a text.

> Gruener has several properties around London. Likely at least one of these being used as front for human trafficking scheme. —SH

There. John would find that interesting, and would appreciate — yes — must be having a tea break — a flush of pleasure upon the vibration of his phone in his hand —

> Does he?

He rolled his eyes, despite the reflexive quirk of his mouth.

> Staggeringly helpful, John. —SH

The reply was instantaneous (well, as instantaneous as could be expected for John’s less-than-savvy texting speed).

> Should I come home then?

As ever, John’s mind leapt into action. (He would have made an excellent pirate.) Sherlock would, of course, far rather have John beside him for this venture than anyone else, but, for a variety of reasons he’d calculated during the night (difference in likelihood of being recognised together versus separately: considerable; John’s request for Sherlock to desist narrating to John his own feelings about such things as his fragrance preferences, his craving for danger; their rendezvous scheduled for the nuptial preparatory reception), he put his preference aside.
> Not necessary. Will be accompanied by Winter. —SH

Then, as the in-progress ellipsis undulated, he anticipated John’s next question:

> And no, before you ask, we will not be breaking or entering any properties. —SH

The dots disappeared. Then reappeared.

> Without me? You’d better not be.

(Messages were perhaps the worst conveyors of tone, but, based on years of experience attempting to gauge John’s texting habits in re his mood, this reply seemed conciliated, if not yet outright glad.)

> Wouldn’t dream of it. Preliminary observation sweep only today. Forced entry not ruled out for later, however.—SH

> Well keep me posted. And be careful, yeah?

He deleted his automatic response (Obviously.) in favour of one more suited to John’s (inferred) mood.

> You too: lunch likely to be more hazardous than surveillance. —SH

It was possible that such a comment would not be appreciated, but, well, John continued to desire ‘honesty’ from him, and it was his ‘honest’ (and therefore accurate) expectation that John would find nothing but disappointment from the ne’er-do-well, perennially absent Harriet.

Waiting for a reply (probably gone back to his office, considering when they’d begun this exchange, break over), he set his phone down and began mapping out the circuit he and Suze would take for today’s walkabout: around the Market, Camberwell, then down along the Brixton Road (pausing for side streets with relevant visibility:privacy:traffic:aesthetic ratios)…
> Ha ha. As long as I’m the only one drinking, we might all get through the day in one piece.

He sighed with a relief he hadn’t been aware he’d been hoping for. (The depth and breadth of John’s forgiveness and patience had yet to be plumbed (like so many things Sherlock was still learning about him). Added to which, Sherlock did so enjoy the slightly handsier side of a tipsy John.)

> Don’t forget: reception at 3pm. Would say ‘save your drinks until then’ but suspect you’ll want to be sober for our meeting with the Baron. —SH

As he rifled through his closet for an appropriately John-esque outfit, he lamented, not for the first time, the height disparity between them, otherwise he would simply have stolen one of John’s jumpers and revelled in the smell of him as he and Suze paraded around Lambeth and its environs posing as a couple.

His phone buzzed, and, shirt unbuttoned down the front, he paused to read it.

> Going together or meeting there? I reckon I’ll be expected to wear something smarter than my good jeans?

(Sherlock loved those jeans. Had not yet had the honour of divesting John of them.)

> Yes: jacket and tie. And, for sake of time, meet there.

— He hesitated a moment over the sentence he had almost just appended to that last. Then, feeling heartened by the rapidity of John’s replies (and spurred on by the thought of it), he added:

If you even recognise me. —SH

It was hardly steam-wallpaper-off-the-walls suggestive, but — well, if John didn’t pick up on it, no matter; it was a legible sentence without the (intended) innuendo.
Another buzz, just as he was just locating the sunglasses that were the current fashion with heterosexual urbanite men of his general age-bracket. (Suze would no doubt approve of such sartorial trendiness.) Then he smiled. John never failed to astound him.

> Role-play is all very nice, dear, but I’d rather it just be you and me.

Stomach still in something of a somersault routine, Sherlock exited the flat a quarter-hour later, headed for the tube. (He’d spritzed a bit of the cologne he’d given John last week on his average-bloke M&S jumper beneath the worn-leather jacket. One never knew.) Before attuning his mind fully to the problem at hand, and while he was still above ground, he sent one last text — wildly unnecessary but, he thought, the sort of thing John might appreciate having affirmed (however uncomfortably trite it felt coming from Sherlock’s own fingertips, bared like a teenagerish scribble of their conjoined initials in a notebook).

> As would I. At all times. —SH

* * *

The house fit in with the rest of its fellows along the road, just to their left. The windows had been replaced, though — within the last two years —, with worse quality glass, made smaller with low-end brick, plastered over, giving it the appearance of advanced grubbiness that most of the houses around the corner worked perpetually to stave off. (The fittings were new, as was the overly-innocuous CCTV camera, which rather gave it away if you were not a moron.)

This was certainly the place.

All in all, a perfectly ‘respectable’ street: the little garden whatever-you-called-it thing sticking out into the road to funnel traffic only one way at a time, thus preventing motorists speeding through as a detour; trees every few hundred yards, on alternating sides of the street; even their mark — the yellow-brick Edwardian house just here by the railway overpass — probably cost more than he could afford (even now) to pay (on his own); the flat in-set, wide, racing green door was neither chipped nor splattered (though, of course, there was the habitual accumulated exhaust and dust that coated the facades and lungs of all London. Across the street, he noticed, was a far nicer house, with bay windows just in the shadow of the elevated tracks, with lace curtains flung aide in the windows and a pretty spray of bright flowers behind the half-height iron fence. (Gruener, Sherlock would have suspected even had he not already known this to be true, would keep this place as a property for himself or for discreet guests — a luxurious residence with all the touches of the domestic that would satisfy short-term occupants. Only short-term, naturally, since the comings and goings of the three identical attached — and internally inter-connected — homes directly opposite would arouse suspicion in the curious, given enough time. (People always needed so much time to get curious! What was wrong with them all!))
‘Nice little garden, looks like,’ Suze added, pointing casually at the small — oh — the small side-entrance to the garden, between the Overground above and Numbers 43, 45, and 47 on the Square (though there wasn’t a square of municipal greenery nearer than five-sixths of a mile).

‘Perfect,’ he whispered.

The sun was shining in long, blanketing rays, but the narrow avenue that made up what Suze intuitively nominated as the ‘garden’ was almost completely in shadow at this and, judging by the similar heights of the three-storey building and the railway, most hours of the day. At night, of course, it would be entirely illuminated from within, or else nested in darkness.

Suze squeezed his hand.

Yes. The deception needed to continue.

‘I like it,’ he announced loudly, as two lads in football kit and high-vis trainers (it was broad daylight. Honestly.) walked past chatting loudly (one hated his job — skipping off today, meeting with uni friends, hoping to network with other friend’s colleagues for new job; had golden retriever; parents in/from Shropshire; frequent user of online dating apps —; the other, almost identical, but with a girlfriend and her cat).

‘Mmm, not sure I fancy it, meself,’ Suze dithered, scrutinizing the house. ‘Too… big.’

He rolled his eyes behind closed lids: she really ought to come up with something less transparently fake as an objection. (He found it difficult to continue holding hands with anyone who was not John. Nobody else’s hands fit properly.)

They marched up and down the street and the two parallel ones plus the adjacent dead-end lane, then attempted to scale the nearest overlooking yard. Unsurprisingly, most of the gardens were in states of leafy anarchy. At one point he considered scaling the rocky rise, in case the view from the tracks afforded any insight (perhaps it would provide a good elevated post from which to surveil the upper-floors when nocturnal business hours commenced). But Suze flapped about, even going so far as to yank his sleeve to pull him away, as though she feared he was about to throw himself under an oncoming train — there was none in sight! he was neither deaf nor blind! — and so he decided to put it off. At least until this evening when he and John could return: John would let him, so long as he came along to stand guard. (An unnecessary measure: John could no more stop a train than Sherlock could. Though a part of him would like to watch him try.)
Nearing on quarter-past the hour — John would be mere drinks and, presumably, stuffy appetisers into his ill-omened lunch with Harriet — he decided, in a lowered voice, ‘Time to scour the bins.’

‘The bins?’ Sure repeated, dumb-founded, trailing along behind him towards the screened alley/car park between what (he was 77% certain) was Gruener’s elite guest house (currently empty) and the incline of the elevated (over a brickwork infrastructure) tracks to their right. ‘You’re taking the piss.’

‘Where and why would I “take piss”?’ Sherlock demanded, because short of a doping scandal or an experiment on physiological response to various stimuli, the idiom was yet another turn of phrase that everyone used and yet no one bothered to wonder the meaning of.

‘No, I meant —’

‘Bins are incredibly valuable sources of evidence, precisely because most people consider them so distasteful that no one in their right mind would bother with them.’ He stopped and smiled his cat’s grin. Unsurprisingly, she faltered slightly.

‘And d’you… need me for this?’

As usual, no one could match the high bar set by a certain otherwise-occupied doctor/soldier who was probably being fleeced for cash by his sole, selfish sibling.

‘Not particularly.’ He took off the jacket (expensive to dry clean, even if it was only for costume) and handed it to her. ‘Don’t get that dirty.’ He pushed up the bottle-green faux-wool (itchy) sleeves and threw open the first of the two 140-litre wheelies.

Suze came to stand just as his elbow, rather impeding his dexterity. ‘Seriously?’

‘My wallet, darling,’ he growled, drawing on no shortage of impatience and funneling it into his character. ‘I think it might have ended up in the bin!’ People never looked twice at others doing what they considered ‘mad things’; and in any event, this was a perfect cover story, sure to elicit either sympathy or smug disapproval from passers-by. And that was if anyone even bothered to notice him, in a place so clearly intended to be used only by residents rather than passers-by, with only the pavement (or the rear windows of the next street over’s residents) exposed to traffic that might spare him any glance at all. By the time he’d had a thorough survey, the fact that they had
him on CCTV in their back garden would be too little, too late to prevent him gathering all the necessary pieces to close the noose around Gruener.


‘Help yourself,’ Sherlock replied distractedly. The first bin, so far, showed very little of interest: a pungent array of collapsed boxes of crackers or pasta, gooey heads of tomatoes, apples, lettuce, oil-stained parchment paper from pastries — ‘No grease on the coat!’ he called, as Suze just about made it to the corner —… bits of dental floss, used condoms (these gloves were, blessedly (deliberately), not his nice pair: they were destined for this very bin once his search was complete), takeaway menus and polystyrene containers, plastic packets with the residue of — he sniffed — caviar, another of smoked salmon, a third of prosciutto: rather more splendid a spread than the rest of the contents, all store-brand ravioli and the same faux-healthy bars that John bought (at the same discounted price, most likely). So: approximately two, possibly three, days ago, a posh evening affair, requiring the — yes, here it was — supplements of copious amounts of make-up (hence the multiple cotton-pads smeared with the excess rouge, lipstick, mascara, nail varnish, and other necessary trimmings (including literal trimmings)), a pair of petite, pearlescent tights (laddered), and…

‘What do you think you are doing?’

The woman, dressed in a very sensible outfit of flattering yet flexible jeans and a similarly mobile pepper-gray coat, was regarding steadily him, an unblinking (almost amused?) gaze somewhat at odds with their current positions. She was on the earlier side of middle-aged (about his own age), dyed-blonde, perfumed (though through his partial olfactory jumble it was hard to make out), cuffs rolled up above markedly multi-purpose boots. Not remotely afraid of him. In sum: definitely not one of Gruener’s ingenue victims. He didn’t recognise her.

‘My wallet, I think my girlfriend might have thrown it —’

‘I don’t think you live here?’ she breezed over him. Unruffled. Calm. Cool. ‘I’d have noticed you.’

He continued to rifle through the bin, though the focus of his deductions was now focussed on her rather than the detritus in front of him. Trained as a nurse; short-sighted; romantic; clever; liar; baker; had a cat, wore size 12, was a disillusioned Liberal Democrat (whatever that meant nowadays; he’d lost track).

‘Was here last night,’ he bluffed, indifferent if she believed him: perhaps she might threaten to call
the police. (A laughable threat, but, well, people did love a nuisance.) He was nearly finished anyway. ‘Damn. I wonder if she —’

‘You see, I’ve been telling him. There’s just no way you, bloodhound that you are, would ever give up the scent if there’s even a sliver left to follow.’ She sighed, and he slid his befouled gloves off as he turned to look at her properly. So she knew who he was (who was she?: dyed-Dark Chocolate brown [John Freida, if he wasn’t mistaken], but he had never seen her before, would not have forgotten that keen face), which meant she knew why he was here —

— ‘He allegedly has other, shall we say, agents in his service, presumably not all of whom can be categorically dismissed as buffoons’ — and it clicked, while suddenly, if distantly, it occurred to him that John was going to be livid —

‘But you’re clever, much cleverer than he is,’ Sherlock crooned. ‘Behind every great man…’

She laughed, a perfect gambol of notes that would have aroused no suspicion, not even merited a glimpse, despite the thrumming quiet of the deserted, midday street.

‘Consider this a warning, then: you can’t stop him. And you should give up trying. For real this time. Today, is my suggestion.’

The Overground tracks began to sing with the rising metallic tune of oncoming rail traffic.

A slightly pinched look to her eyes, a tightness (he’d mistaken it for solidity) in her stance, hands bunched in her pockets, a glimmer of grim humour (irony) in her overall expression… an unexpected deduction:

‘Whatever he’s got on you,’ he said, dropping his character and speaking as he did to the distressed and the desperate who came through their door, ‘whatever you’ve done — I can help you.’

Her face soured with pity, disgust, disappointment, who could tell? — a muddle of negative emotions too entangled for him to make any stick — and she took a step backwards from him.

‘Oh, Mr Holmes… you don’t know the half of it.’
Regretful, he had time to wonder, before several things happened virtually simultaneously —

— the henchwoman took a step towards him, forcing him to step back as though in a waltz —

— the ringing became a shrill shriek of a commuter (the Thameslink train to Elephant & Castle) approaching —

— a pair of arms wrapped around him from behind — he swung and elbowed, hard, made a CRACK of contact with a (big, tall, hefty man’s) cheekbone, causing him to groan, but not let go, forcing them into an awkward tussle in which his left shoulder got badly wrenched — he kicked backwards —

— a flutter of peacoat, and she had managed to unhook the rings holding the larger blue wood-slatted alley door from its pose ajar, rushing to shove it shut with a low rattle —

— the arms tugging him backward into the shadow of the brick-supported elevated track — he heaved and made to spring, heels over head, into a somersault to free himself, but got a thick and disorientating slam to the ear, and another (how many hands did the man have?!?) to the gut, bruising instantly —

— electric screech overhead mingled with the clang of metal as the woman dropped the metal chain, sparing him a glance —

— the man behind him, the beefsteak (former soldier) who’d held him breathlessly, in ordinary working clothes — scattered, not after the woman, through what was now only a lazy aperture in the gate but, heavy-footed, in the opposite direction through the alley towards the parallel street, in the same direction as —

— his abdomen felt hot, a spike of pain when he twisted to follow her; felt it pressed tight despite the lack of any apparent cause of pressure —

— the train screamed ahead, rails grating like sharp skates or knives across ice —

— knives —
— He felt the world tip, in slow motion, sideways as he staggered, confused, stunned, watching the warm spot on his green jumper turn slowly brown…

‘Shit,’ he grunted, world spinning, as his back met the brick bluntly, further jarring his shoulder, knocking his head, leaving all the parts of him shuddering like the train tracks in the wake of the train.

‘It’s not like it is in the movies,’ says a familiar voice in his ear — all medical rationality, morbid knowledge — ‘there’s not a great big spurt of blood, no choking on your own bile.’

She sounds serious. He tries to listen.

‘The impact isn’t spread over a wide area. It’s tightly focussed, so there’s little or no energy transfer,’ Molly reasons. ‘You’re falling because you were pushed, not because of your injury.’

His vision feels fuzzy. On the ground, beside where he’s ended up slumped against the wall, fallen into the dirt and weeds, there appears to be a shiny something half-stained with red — the red on his clothes —

‘Stabbed,’ he concludes aloud.

Molly nods. The morgue closes in glaringly. ’You’re very possibly going to die, so we need to focus.’

The SLAP she lands across his cheek sends him reeling, groaning, stinging with pain.

‘I said,’ she bites her lip, and SLAP! again. ‘Focus!’

He’s awake, for god’s sake! He looks at her, and she nods sternly again. The room, bright and brisk and sterile, doesn’t remind him of Molly at all, but then again, the rooms in his mind often don’t. The pressure on his abdomen is getting harder to ignore, lungs struggling to compensate —

‘It’s all well and clever having a Mind Palace, but you’ve only fifteen seconds, maximum, of full consciousness left to use it. So, come on – what’s going to kill you first?’
A body on a slab — his body — his pallid face, his bared chest — hovers between them, begging to be deduced. A gash, only two or so inches across, cleaned up here for examination but with ugly edges, depth obscured at the surface level, catches his diffuse attention.

‘Blood loss.’

‘Exactly.’

Now that she’s said it, his chest feels nauseating, wrong — the wet slide of his own blood, warm and tacky, trapped beneath his shirt and his skin and his abdominal cavity, where it ought to be — he wants to wipe it up, or hold it in, hold himself tightly, but he can’t seem to get his own arms to do it sufficiently. The edges of his vision are beginning to blur with pain, a mix of cold and burning hot that stings and seems only to be getting worse with every breath —

‘So it’s about one thing now: shout or crawl?’

‘What?’ he slurs, fighting the curtains of his vision.

Anderson stands beside her, apologetic and ever adamant about the wrong thing. ‘Shout or crawl?’

‘You have enough energy for one or the other,’ insists Molly, both her and his eyes boring into him, not unlike a gun (he thinks, though present circumstances are forcing him to rethink that simile), ‘so how are you going to find help?’

He tries to think. His body is missing, somehow, has been replaced with someone else’s — that’s quite rude, isn’t it? he thinks, disgruntled at the very least that he had to swap bodies with someone who was in such a tremendous conflagration of pain. He concentrates. The roar of the train, the scuffle, three sets of hands, Mary’s in her deep pockets, the third man unseen until after it was too late to draw data — images of various weapons (a butcher’s knife, Swiss, serrated — 9”, too large for pockets; a flip-blade, sharp-tipped but steel and smooth as velvet, quiet enough to be unheard beneath the tracks) —

‘Oh, for god’s sake, Sherlock,’ Mycroft drones, agonizedly. ‘You see, but you do not observe.’
His mind reels back, reeling already, to the data he already has — the hands, the punch, the cut on his shirt — the shiny object on the ground, where, he suddenly senses, he is himself, on his knees — the empty house — the parking gate —

‘Crawl,’ he repeats, for the rest of them, in case anyone wanted to follow his reasoning.

‘Yes,’ trills Mycroft, in that same voice he used when Sherlock couldn’t pick up chemistry quick enough, or mixed up a word puzzle and spelled something incorrectly… ‘You always were so stupid. Such a disappointment.’

‘I’m not stupid,’ he pleas, feeling eleven again, because the pain in his chest is gaining momentum, shaking the fibres of him at the epicentre and radiating outwards, hot where the rest of him is growing chilled by the second, lonely, dim… reducing him from himself to someone else, someone whose body gets found in the morning and identified in the same morgue where he’s already seen it, laid out, death-white, still.

On his hands and knees, he grits his teeth and wrenches himself forward — the pain is a lance, a breathless white-hot flaying that won’t stop, is becoming inseparable from all other sensation — he keeps going —

Creeping here, along the cliff’s edge, with the waterfall thundering around him, Mycroft’s taunts and the ghostly echo of Moriarty’s laughter rising up from the deep, it seems like there’s no point.

‘You’re going into shock,’ Molly informs him, standing a safe distance from the edge. ‘It’s the next thing that’s going to kill you.’

‘What do I do?’ he murmurs, weary like he’s never felt. An elephant could be crushing one soft-padded foot down into his ribs and it would feel more or less the same.

‘Don’t go into shock, obviously,’ drawls Mycroft.

Rain begins to pour down over him.

Mycroft looks up thoughtfully at it, squinting as large drops roll over his eyebrows and nose. ‘Must be something in this ridiculous memory palace of yours that can calm you down.’
Redbeard. Redbeard is in here somewhere, surely, running around like the joyful canine buoy Sherlock very much needs right now — the sound of his bark as a counterweight to the growing roar of water rushing in from all sides, drenching him, dragging him down so heavily…

‘Ahem.’

Sherlock, huddled on the ground by the precipice, slowly forces his shivering neck to obey him, and looks up.

John, revolver in hand and a smile to calm a hurricane on his face, looks lovingly down at him. ‘Mycroft, if you wouldn’t mind leaving us alone for a moment. I think Sherlock’s finding you a tad… unhelpful.’

‘Intriguing,’ allows Gruener, whose sudden appearance explains the necessity of the revolver currently pointed over Sherlock’s head. ‘There appear to be two of you.’

‘There’re always two of us,’ John grins, eyes not leaving Sherlock’s, present like the weight of his head on the pillow next to him. ‘Don’t you read the blog?’

Sherlock loves him desperately — wants to reach him (the road, his un-shocked mind supplies: he must reach the road if he wants to be found) before the roll of the flood overhead swept him downriver, underwater, flooding his lungs, choked —

‘John,’ he gasps, because it is important. He’s only just begun to tell him everything he needs to say.

‘Shh,’ John murmurs, setting the revolver down by his knee and crouching low (just like he had last night, comforting and close) to put a hand to caress Sherlock’s cheek. The rest of them are gone, Molly and Anderson and Mycroft and even the shadow of Redbeard. Good riddance. This is all he needs anyway. ‘Calm, love. Stay calm.’

His eyes are closing. He just wants to sleep.

‘Sherlock, listen to me. We’re losing you.’
Absurd! He can’t lose John — John is right here! He puts out a hand to find the hem of John’s coat like a rope for a drowning man — but isn’t there.

Eyes opening again, he sees, just for a moment, Suze bent low over him in the grey bright day, crying, mobile shaking in her hand, ‘Please hurry, there’s blood, oh God, there’s blood all over —’

‘Sherlock,’ says John’s voice, hardy and full of pride, calling now from above the tracks, above the waterfall, out of sight. ‘My love, you’re going to have to climb.’

*

Chapter End Notes

[The epigraph for this, over-used though it may be, was cemented by a post from *years* ago by switchlock, here. Because wow, dark and twisty OTPs can swap quotes all. day. long.]

Any remaining errors mine: do let me know if you spot any!
Chapter 11:

‘I have lost so many friends who are still alive. No one was to blame. It was they. It was myself. Events made us, brought us together, separated us. And I know that [he] said the same thing when he thought of the people who haunted, and then left his life. But he never lost me, and he had to die for me to lose him.’

—Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Merleau-Ponty vivant’ (transl. Benita Eisher)*

Missed breakfast (not that there was anything in, of course) in favour of a long shower. He’d needed one, waking up alone in their rank bed and already a Pavlovian response to Sherlock’s sheets kicked in — hence, a long, slow, dreamy shower, wondering if Sherlock could hear him, might join him, could keep him on the edge of pleasure until the hot water ran out… followed by no time left to shave, damn, damn, damn, he was very, very late. Couldn’t find the one brown tie that made this shirt (his last clean one) look somewhat decent. Hadn’t had time for coffee, and was now very late indeed for his very early shift. Only as he’d turned with his cursory survey to be sure he wasn’t leaving anything behind did he notice Sherlock, curled on the sofa, passed out in his clothes.

Late as he was, the flutter in John’s chest demanded he pause and marvel at the bittersweet image
before him. For their entire relationship — since the very beginning — Sherlock had bemoaned what he saw as John’s stubbornness keeping up his medical career (such, John often chimed, as it was). He needed the work: yes, he loved being a doctor, was good at it and did good through it, but beyond that, he needed to maintain a life outside of the Holmes & Watson Detective Agency. And yet… and yet, some mornings, he nearly caved. This was one of those mornings. How incredible, how precious, to be able to shrug off his coat, fold himself into the space between Sherlock and the edge of the sofa, and (sleep still in his eyes) slip back into a doze, this time beside the lunatic who was supposedly his permanent bedfellow?

But: well, even if he wanted that, the surgery was expecting him. Being a doctor wasn’t about the convenience. Maybe eventually they could discuss — or, realistically speaking, he could mull over and then wait to see how long it took for Sherlock to notice — whether he might want to cut back his hours. The cases brought in more money, anyway.

Brushing a quick kiss over Sherlock’s softened brow, John sighed regretfully, then (for the nth morning that week) forced himself to leave the flat.

Rushing, the door slammed behind him in the air vacuum of the draught — he winced guiltily as he marched towards the station, hoping it hadn’t woken Mrs Hudson. The peevish hope nevertheless rose in his mind that maybe Sherlock (who, for all his muttering about never needing sleep, staying up all night doing god knew what researching Ming vases or ancient porn or Austrian horse racing, had fallen asleep on the sofa instead of coming to bed, a mere forty feet away from where John lay) would be so underfoot today that he might get the brunt of Mrs H’s surprisingly daunting chiding, and be forced to eat something to appease her. He could dream, anyway.

It wasn’t raining any more, he noted absently as he walked, just gusting with the promise of changeable autumn storms. The sun had barely had time to come out and, overcast, it wasn’t likely to, which meant his jacket was clinging clammy to his neck. His feet carried him quickly down Baker Street as he mentally rehearsed an excuse for Dr. Punde, while simultaneously considering how much of any excuse he’d need if he went back now and finished making up with Sherlock after last night’s quasi-row (make up properly, maybe even a little roughly).

Too long, he reasoned with himself. Still, the thought was tempting. Very tempting.

Even after the dust had more or less settled after their argument, the rest of the evening had buzzed with the kind of contrite intimacy they sometimes achieved after a fight in which they’d both gone further than they intended. John still rankled at the bits that had got swept half-way under the rug (namely, that Sherlock had once again withheld something — a Mary-shaped something — from him) by the need to reassure Sherlock, again, that John was in this for real.
Not to mention, he didn’t like the picture Sherlock presented of him: a trigger-happy danger addict? He didn’t want to be like that — not completely, not forever. What if someday he looked back and wished for the kinds of things normal people wanted: a house in a village, a dog, some stroppy kids to make you really feel your age, a proper job and a proper bedtime? Was this life with Sherlock (was he, really) wholly incompatible with those things? Did he have to choose, and if so, when was the deadline? He already felt, with some self-disgust, as if he was too old not to know, and yet —

The sudden lurch off the kerb shocked him. The sudden heavy slosh as his socks and trouser-hems soaked by the splash of the puddle he had landed in — not so shocking, in retrospect.

Perfect. Served him right for navel-gazing before he’d had the necessary early-start jolt of coffee. Whatever his tentatively good mood upon waking, the rest of his day was apparently going to struggle to measure up.

Naturally the clinic was over-booked and, as expected when the weather was less than sultry, packed to the gills with people suffering from start-of-term colds and early flus and dreary moods as they came in out of the damp, sneezing and wheezing their way into the surgery in half-hearted attempts to get days off sick. Every young woman — hell, every female person aged two to ninety that he saw all day seemed to call to mind all the girls in Gruener’s backrooms and seedy hotels and basements and god knew where, all fleeing something terrible and running into worse. Every minute he was sat here, they were still imprisoned.

(John itched to text Sherlock. Wondered what he was doing. After several hours of radio silence, the nagging voice at the back of his mind began to whisper several suggestions of how Sherlock might be spending these long, tempting hours before the descent on Gruener’s party this afternoon — the kinds of trouble he might get in, alone. What he got up to whenever they weren’t together, and if John really had any clue when he should be worried and when things were all right.)

Just as he was about to finish his cuppa at mid-morning, his phone buzzed sharply. No one was in the break room to comment on the fact that he was already holding his mobile before it lit up.

> Gruener has several properties around London. Likely at least one of these being used as front for human trafficking scheme. —SH

Er. He set down his mug so he could type with both fingers: > Does he?

It wasn’t so surprising to John, which almost certainly meant it was zero percent surprising to Sherlock. The question of what to do with that information brought the wary, murky thoughts back to the front of his mind: he refused to be stuck in a situation in which Sherlock would be tempted to
waltz off on his own, without John’s recon experience and good aim to cover him.

> Staggeringly helpful, John. —SH

He brushed that off with a ghost of a smile, because Sherlock was a genius but also very much a git.

> Should I come home then?

They wouldn’t like it, but he was only about an hour ahead of his scheduled shift ending, so it would be possible to be — well, anywhere in London, really — in about half an hour.

With characteristic lightning speed, Sherlock replied,

> Not necessary. Will be accompanied by Winter. —SH

and then, before John had even had time to ask,

> And no, before you ask, we will not be breaking or entering any properties. —SH

He exhaled, a loosening of his jaw and lungs followed by a stab of guilt. Sherlock had anticipated his apprehension (and hadn’t made him ask, hadn’t made him articulate the niggling, unfair mistrust that sometimes crept into John’s head when he least wanted it there).

> Without me? You’d better not be.

Many a true word said in jest, his Nan had intoned more than once throughout his childhood. Even so, he went back to his desk with a freshened cup of tea, chest a little lighter with the feeling that, if he couldn’t be with Sherlock for this one venture (and dear Christ, they spent an ungodly amount of their time together as it was!), at least he didn’t have to sit around pretending not to wonder what Sherlock was up to.

They carried on trading messages in snatches when John waited for his next patient to return from
the loo. Only when he peered down at his screen mid-sentence at handing over the paperwork they needed signed by the droning middle-aged insurance salesman who had done a number on his elbow by smacking it on a roulette table over the weekend (which also went a ways to explaining his gaunt face and edginess about paying for pain medication), did he see something that surprised him.

> Yes: jacket and tie. And, for sake of time, meet there. If you even recognise me. —SH

Was… was that a come-on?

He waited until the insurance bloke had left the room before considering it seriously. But… well, in Sherlock’s head (as best John could tell, anyway), disguises were part of the mysterious fun side of the casework. Sherlock hadn’t — John shifted in his seat — he hadn’t seemed to want anything more… role-play-y in the bedroom: he was mostly nonverbal and entirely, adorably serious throughout all the sex they’d had so far. And John, though he’d tried a bit of it in the past, allowed himself out on the limb of assuming he had read Sherlock’s timid innuendo correctly:

> Role-play is all very nice, dear, but I’d rather it just be you and me.

Not for another fifteen minutes did he receive a reply, in which time he had ample opportunity to frown, berate himself for flirting so cavalierly with a man who quite obviously didn’t do anything sexual without nine kinds of forewarning. At long last, as he wheeled round in his chair to have a too-little-too-late STI chat with a wide-eyed uni student, his phone lit up in the peeking-open drawer of his desk.

> As would I. At all times. —SH

By early afternoon when he clocked off, he was roaring to go invade whatever bunker they had to find and help those young women, then go back to bed (to Sherlock).

Instead, he set off ten minutes late for lunch with Harry.

Why his sister insisted on meeting him at some posh French place, where the head waiter glared the smattering of rain on his favourite, admittedly re-seamed coat (which was perfectly fine, thanks very much) and his years-old shoes like they were better suited to a drowned mutt, he didn’t actually care to know. Instead, with as much grace as he could muster on what would probably be another instalment in the series of typically difficult meals with his sibling, he set his back straight
and made for the table.

‘Hiya, Harry,’ he came forward, leaning to kiss her offered cheek when she decided to drum her bright black nails on the thick white tablecloth rather than get up to hug him. ‘Sorry I’m late.’

‘Yeah well, it’s not as if it hasn’t happened every other time we’ve got lunch, so why break the tradition, eh?’ she replied, smile as brassy as her newly-dyed copper hair.

He genuinely considered not sitting. With a stifled sigh, he sat.

The restaurant itself, on the ground floor of a very up-market hotel, at least offered high-ceilings, so they wouldn’t be completely overheard in their less-than-warm conversation; the bar, thankfully, was vacant of both customers and a bartender, despite looking for all the world like a gold-and-brass piece of a film set, carefully lit beneath an ostentatious double-winged balcony. (As he had told Sherlock, he suspected the only way through this lunch was forward, drink in his — and only his — hand.) Around them, other people appeared to be having perfectly lovely lunches. Such things were, it seemed, still possible, even on grey windy Wednesdays after uncertain domestic rows and more certain everyday madness.

‘Everything’s delicious, apparently,’ Harry offered loudly, and he started and remembered to pick up his menu. It was short, French, and expensive. He tried not to read it all at once, in grim expectation of the moment when they ran out of civil, neutral things to say, approximately four minutes from now. (An echo of Sherlock’s ridiculously sexy French accent resonated in him with a pang like a caffeine headache. He also, he realised dully, possibly had a caffeine headache: those two cups out of the tin of bulk Tetley’s they kept at the surgery was very clearly not going to get him through this day.)

‘So,’ he tried, because they had been sitting in silence for more than a solid minute now and he supposed it was his turn. ‘This is a pretty decent step up from my usual takeaway sandwich.’

‘Doctors make the worst patients,’ she chided in a carrying voice, knowing it was one of his least favourite expressions of all time, and he smiled indulgently and prayed for patience. Or a text. Or a waiter.

‘How’s work?’ Harry asked shortly, in a tone full of accusation that he hadn’t asked first, since he’d been late, and was apparently meant to spend the rest of their time apologising in word and deed.
‘Fine. Just finished a case last week, and had a shift at the surgery this morning. How’s yours?’

‘Chaos!’ marvelled his sister. ‘New clients all with more money than sense, but at least that means we keep things interesting, even if there are all these changes ‘round the place… Well, you know how it is, new boss who knows somebody who knows somebody. Office politics are always ugly, aren’t they. Sandra got laid off to make room for some son-of-a-nobody who invested a million quid in goats. Ha! I said, I’d do whatever they asked me to with the goat if I could have a million quid!’ She cackled merrily. John tried to look amused. ‘But any of us who actually have any of the fun around the place, we’re all bored out of our skulls with all these new “impact initiatives” and extra training and pay cuts… it’s a nightmare sometimes, I can tell you. Not even sure I’m interested in staying.’

He didn’t want to read between the lines, he really didn’t, but something about her practiced, dismissive attitude drew attention to itself.

‘What about your boss, you know… Val Something, right? She’s looked out for you, hasn’t she?’

‘As if she wasn’t looking out for her own skinny arse the whole time,’ muttered Harry into her glass. ‘Anyway, I’m looking for other jobs. On the quiet, you know, sniffing out my options.’ (He highly doubted Harry could do anything ‘on the quiet’. He really did need a cup of coffee, even more than the booze. Black, preferably.) ‘Bout time I really get my own thing going, I think! Development this time, maybe — it’s just a fancy name for going to massive parties and getting a bunch of billionaires to write checks they won’t even remember in the morning. Brilliant. Or entertainment. You know me,’ she gave him a 100-watt smile, ‘always said I should’ve had my own chat show. More qualified than the lot of them together — and nowadays all you need is one good tweet to go viral and BAM! You’ve made it! Just look at your blog. It pays the rent, doesn’t it!’

He looked instead at her manicured hands, her bag-drawn eyes, her flashy clothing, what he could see of her knee, bouncing distractedly, reflected in the wall-sized, downward-angled Art Deco mirror behind her. (Years sober, he reminded himself, picturing the chips on the mantle in her modern, over-decorated, squished flat.)

‘Harry.’

She huffed, bright and bubbly performance faltering for the first time since she started down this path. ‘Johnny, if you utter one bloody word —’

‘Just to get you by for a bit, though, I could loan you as much—’
'Yeah, ‘cos who doesn’t love taking pity money from their baby brother,’ she spat crossly. ‘No, absolutely not, I’m not fishing for a hand-out here! I was just letting off a bit of steam! Besides, I’m not a complete twat, I have some savings.’

‘I didn’t,’ he admitted candidly. ‘Next to nothing, for ages. And what there is now is really only because I just send cheques off to cover my debts. Plus I haven’t seen an accurate rent statement in about six months, and that’s sharing. But I could swing whatever —’

‘Stuff it, Johnny,’ she cut across, and her smile and eyes seemed to sparkled with jesting, but her jaw sawed back and forth with its false grin. ‘Just… For fuck’s sake, we haven’t even ordered.’

She was right, too. He didn’t really have money to give her. (He would find it, if he had to. Though he was absolutely not, never, going to borrow money from certain flatmates/lovers.) But when he was around his sister he couldn’t help it.

He and Harry weren’t close, really, in exactly the opposite way to how Mycroft and Sherlock weren’t close: the Holmes brothers were, in many ways, made of the same fundamental building blocks — pride, for one; intellect, they would both stress; distaste for letting outsiders in on their special, warped view of the world; drama queens, the pair of them… But however differently those parts were arranged, however much they were genuinely very different in what they wanted from their lives, from other people, from themselves, they were mostly on the same page, speaking the same (almost certainly coded, or Scandinavian) language. Listening to Harry always made him feel more than a bit guilty, and a little at sea, for not being able to tell when they had drifted from a same page. Whether they had ever been on one in the first place — if they were made of the same stuff at all?

Thankfully, she was looking around (nearly standing up) trying to catch the eye of a waiter, with the genial confidence of some flagging down a friend at an airport arrivals gate. Ten seconds later a smartly-dressed, tan young bloke in a crisp apron appeared. As Harry ordered a starter, John wondered about the young man’s age, his sweet face and naturally strong jaw, his long, muscular legs. Probably an aspiring actor, dreaming of playing James Bond someday, if he could survive that long on tips and overtime…

‘And for you, sir?’

John blinked. *Fuck.* ‘Just… just salad for me, thanks.’
‘The beet-and-arugula starter, sir, or —’

‘Sounds great,’ John interrupted, not caring, smiling uncomfortably. ‘No drinks, thanks.’

‘My lemonade, though,’ Harry piped up, frowning at John.

‘Of course, madam,’ said the boy-007, disappearing, and John really, really wished he could start this whole episode over, from the morning, or earlier, any way so he wouldn’t end up late and just about hating his sister while ogling the probably teenaged male waiter (or the Scotswoman yesterday, Christ, what was wrong with him) like he was some randy bugger, no better than the paedo Austrian bastard he was scheduled to be spying on in only a few hours’ time.

‘Lemonade’s not a crime, is it?’ she hissed at him.

‘At this price, it should be,’ he replied on a laugh, hearing himself say the words and wincing the instant they left his mouth, thus fully prepared when Harry bristled furiously and said, with her peculiar knack for emphasising multiple words per sentence as if jabbing a pointer finger into his chest.

‘You don’t decide what I can afford, Johnny.’ She took a pointed gulp of her water.

John clenched and released his hand on his thigh, just once wishing Sherlock would ignore his directions and interrupt, would deliver him from this hell — a hell Sherlock had all-too-infuriatingly anticipated. (Watson stubbornness, damning them all to fates they made for themselves.)

Determined not to let either of them, or anyone, derail his attempt at a functional sibling interaction, he inhaled through his nose and counted to ten. ‘How’s… that, erm — your book club thing?’

She snorted. The waiter brought her the fizzy lemonade, which she unconsciously grasped quite tightly. ‘God, I left that bunch of old cows ages ago. All just there to get away from their sorry excuses for husbands or to try to push some jewellery scam on you. Couldn’t breathe for all the overpriced mothball perfume they wore.’

He nodded sympathetically, feeling no sympathy whatsoever for Harry’s characteristic sour
attitude. He tried to remember what else she had mentioned lately on the phone, but could only think of the subjects he didn’t want to bring up. He read his menu: something duck, some other sort of beef, chicken with oranges, god dammit Sherlock, the one time I wish you’d barge in—

‘And how’s Mary?’

He contemplated the chicken option for a moment longer, then set it down and met Harry’s critical stare evenly. Her grey-blue eyes dared him to lie. ‘I wouldn’t know,’ he replied honestly, feeling a tiny twist of guilt in his stomach. ‘We… split up.’

Sherlock would never have let that answer go, would have stared him down, but Harry waited only a heartbeat before she made a tiny noise of disbelief, took another aggressive sip of her water-with-lime, and looked away.

‘Ah well. Too bad,’ she simpered. (There was no other word for it, for the way she smirked, coddled, and haughtily disapproved all at once.) ‘Still… can’t blame her, really. No one in their right mind would hang around after, would they? Not with the way you fall into step behind him, spend every bloody moment with him — honestly, it’s kind of amazing how much time you spend with him. Even after everything he put you through… So when’d she leave, then? Got tired just after you moved back in with the mad scientist, I’ll bet.’

He tried to let the slights roll off his back, ignoring as best he could the discomfort of hearing someone outside himself judging the way his life with Sherlock worked. ‘Before, actually.’ Right about the time she was still working as some kind of undercover agent. Oh and by the way, did you know her name wasn’t Mary? But Harry didn’t need to know any of that, least of all about the row he and Sherlock had had about Mary (or the rest of it) only last night. ‘And she didn’t leave, we just… went separate our ways, is all.’ He cleared his throat and straightened his serviette. ‘It hadn’t been working out for a while.’

Their fit aspiring-actor server appeared, placed an entirely unappetizing, probably stupidly expensive salad in front of him and a three-cheese-and-cracker board in front of Harry. His stomach churned — but again, his own fault; he hadn’t been paying attention. (Christ, it wasn’t like he was going to shove the kid in the meat freezer and have his way with him!, he told himself. He wasn’t some dirty old man. And anyway he was very, very much otherwise occupied on that front. He couldn’t help being attracted to people, but he’d be damned if he let the same reflexive flirting of yesterday happen again.) He tried to eat.

‘Right,’ Harry agreed, nodding sympathetically at whatever horrible unending nightmare of a conversation she was managing to carry on by herself. ‘And — I mean, I wasn’t going to say this if you’d stuck together, Johnny — but, well. She wasn’t exactly the nicest woman you’ve ever dated. There’s no way she was a natural blonde.’ (She was nearly finished with her starter, thank god —
maybe he could beg off with a sandwich and fake a text halfway through?) ‘Always made you feel like she was about to… I dunno, snap on you, or kick your dog or something. Not exactly a dream woman.’ She was drumming her fingernails inanely in a way that made John want to kick her under the table as he had done as a kid during their (few) family dinners. ‘Though I suppose if you were looking for someone to fill the shoes of a certain “psychopathic mastermind”, you probably couldn’t have found better.’

Little did she know, of course, that ‘snap’, in Mary’s case, apparently meant ‘shoot you in cold blood.’

Blithely unaware that her instinctive dislike of Mary — everyone’s dislike? Was John actually that messed up that he was the only one who’d not only not seen it but been attracted to it? — had been more perceptive than she knew, Harry lapped up the last salted gourmet toast. He pushed away his slightly-dented salad. ‘Ta. Do you know what you’re getting?’

He didn’t especially want to go through more of this, hadn’t even really wanted to come to this sodding lunch, it was always a bad idea, he should have let Sherlock talk him out of it… But no, Harry had baited him. That’s what she did. He could handle it. Shoulders back. Dredging up some composure, once more into the breach, he nodded once to the hovering waiter across the dining room to speed things along.

After placing orders for their mains — John jumped in first, which of course meant Harry, giving him a look, followed and stubbornly ordered some hotpot thing that would take ages — she eyed him accusingly.

‘I thought you had the afternoon off?’

Why did he tell her things, he wondered to himself. ‘I’m off at the clinic, but Sherlock and I have a case on.’

‘Ooh!’ she thrilled, suddenly swinging into her reality telly mode. ‘Well! Go on then! Murder? Cheating husbands? Lost pearls or lockets or something like that? I never hear about the good ones until well after they’re over — go on, give us the skinny! You know you love to tell them!’

At any other lunch, this might have been a lifeline, something to cling to. Because yeah, if he was honest with himself, he did love to put together a good story, and Harry — for all her faults and rough edges — did, in fact, make a good audience once the case got rolling. But today, when he had left Sherlock at home, when right now he was out with a woman probably snapping secretive photos of Gruener’s numerous dens of iniquity on some gadget the size of a pen, plotting some
imperfect plan to go after him in the middle of the champagne toasts, John wasn’t sure he could plausibly make this story end any way other than horribly.

‘It’s… it’s early days, Haz,’ he deferred. ‘But the second it’s wrapped up, I’ll send you my draft. First peek. Promise.’

She smiled wanly, but the spark went out of her stormy eyes, and he felt even more shit than a moment before. Didn’t seem like he was going to end the day on especially good terms with anyone. God, he needed to leave.

Remembering suddenly, he cleared his throat to tell her about the publishing contract — the meeting he supposed he’d find time for next week — when she sniffed,

‘How is Sherlock, anyway?’

‘He’s good, yeah,’ he said appreciatively, trying to relax. ‘Working hard.’

‘Well, ‘course he’s “good” when he can duck under any proper police tape he wants and swan off again as he likes.’ She raised her well-groomed eyebrows at him. ‘I still don’t get how you stand it, someone that intrusive and self-centred.’

He frowned. ‘He’s not intrusive, not like that —’

‘Bollocks. Unless your blog is a massive sham, Johnny, I’d have to say the “evidence” doesn’t agree with you. When was the last time you went out for a pint with your mates without being dragged away? And what about Mary? I mean, I’m a miserable bugger, but, for god’s sake, John, he makes me look like flipping Joan of Arc!’ She laughed.

He shifted in his seat, cursing the damned waiter for now cleverly hiding in the kitchen rather than trying to cut short what was clearly a rant Harry had been stocking up for a while.

‘You going somewhere with this?’ he inquired stiffly. ‘Or can it wait until we’re not eating?’

‘We’re not eating.’ She scowled, crossing her arms again in front of the cleared table. He scowled
back. He could do this all day. A sibling stand-off. They’d be here ’til last call. But, ‘Yeah, all
right,’ she sighed, with a shrug of one shoulder, ‘never mind.’

He nodded in thanks, trying to think of any earthly topic that might steer them back to calm waters. What was on telly lately? — An intake of breath was all the warning he got as the dam broke:

‘But for fuck’s sake, he’s terrible, John. Terrible just, you know, as a human being or even a self-destructive robot for that matter, and one hundred percent terrible for you as a friend. He’s such a narcissist –’

‘Right, he is incredibly smug, won’t bother to deny that, but he’s not totally –’

‘And what do you get out of it, hmm? A little attention? Little laugh? I know you feel like all us normal people aren’t clever enough for you, but, come on, John. If I’ve learned anything, it’s that they’re never worth it, those types. We all saw how bad you took it when he was gone, didn’t we?’

‘Did you though, Harry?’ he cut in tightly, temper boiling, though his voice stayed in control. ‘Because I seem to remember a grand total of one actual visit in those two years in which you bothered to ask how I was –’

‘HA!’ she half-shrieked, and an older woman at the table next to them glared. No wonder their waiter had disappeared. ‘I texted! I phoned! Just because your cocky soldier ego wouldn’t let you ask for help doesn’t mean I didn’t offer! And he left you, not me! Because he got bored with ordinary life, with the likes of ordinary you and me, and because he’s a complete git, and that kind of git – let me tell you this for nothing, little brother – never sticks around forever. So you should really get ou–’

‘We’re a couple,’ John burst out, bluntly. His face was nearly twitching with rage. He hadn’t even meant to say anything, to anybody, because he wanted what they had for himself just a bit longer, for a million reasons half-romantic and half-defensive, and yet here he was, gripping Chez Francine’s thick cream tablecloth with enough force to tear it in half, suddenly wanting nothing more than to tell everyone within earshot that Sherlock was absolutely infuriating, surprisingly good at blowjobs, and probably in love with him.

For a second, he dared hope that this news would shock Harry into politeness. (He hated that it didn’t even register as possible that she might be happy for him, even though saying it out loud, for this first time, sent butterflies loose in his chest and a tingle up the back of his neck. ‘A couple’ had just slipped out, one of those convenient insinuating phrases people had been using on them for years.)
Harry blinked. ‘You what?’ she breathed.

‘We’re a couple. Sherlock and me. We’re… together. So lay off, alright.’

For another moment she stared, frozen with appalled surprise, as if he had sneezed in her drink. Then she sat back and tossed her short copper hair and grinned at him with such venom he was the one momentarily speechless.

‘That’s so bloody typical,’ she half-chuckled, a sickening sound. ‘I mean, fuck me, isn’t that just bloody sodding typical. I thought everyone was mental to say that stuff about you two but hey! Why did I expect any different? You always have to one-up everyone else. Got to manipulate everyone in your life into being dependent on you somehow, and all the better if you can be a martyr in the process.’

He swallowed sharply. Gripped his knee so tight he could feel the sting radiate up into his shoulder. ‘What,’ he demanded, low and measured, ‘the hell do you think gives you the right –’

But Harry was on a roll now: ‘Brilliant of you to wait, though, ‘til mum and dad had died, I guess,’ she sneered, her face drawn into a look he’d seen on her before, both sober and drunk, always vicious. ‘How horrible for them to have one queer in the family, but TWO? Oh, god, the shame – couldn’t bear it – not their precious baby boy –’

‘Right: first of all, you know how much I supported you when you told them,’ – Harry scoffed loftily and John felt his fury double at this noise, at the unbelievable hypocrisy of what he was hearing, of what she was laying at his door, now of all fucking times – ‘but, second, yeah, I’m with Sherlock, I’m not announcing myself as leader for the Gay Pride Parade.’

She loosed another cruel snicker, one that again made their neighbour eye them gloweringly, but he was too furious to let this slide as a tiny sibling spat, no matter how public it got.

‘Of course not!’ Harry was chiming sarcastically. ‘Not you! It’s not like it’s a lifestyle, a part of who you are! Sure, why not pick and choose! Easier to get by if you’re only gay when you’re so far in the closet you’re in bloody Narnia! Denial, John, that’s what they call it when your flatmate’s got you bent over the sofa –’

His hand hit the table so hard his unused butter knife sprung up and clattered to the tiled floor like a
colonel’s whistle in a barracks. A radius of silence mushroomed out from their table. He held his breath, counted — The sheer proximity of his balled fist to the water glass, shuddering as the ice sloshed the sides, at least made him grateful he had not collided with it. He didn’t fancy having to deal with stitches, his own or anyone else’s, on top of restraining himself from slapping his sister in a hotel bistro in Piccadilly where everyone was staring, shocked, at the lunatic who had interrupted their lunch.

A moment and he was on his feet. He didn’t bother to look at her again: simply released a heavy, furious breath and marched out of the restaurant without another word.

He ignored Harry’s bark of disbelief that he would storm off, ignored the head server who muttered something as he marched past about whether ‘sir needed a taxi?’.

Just as he hit the pavement outside, another voice called after him, shouting, ‘Sir! SIR!’ He rounded on whoever it was, very, very ready to tell them in no uncertain terms that he was not staying, not paying, and not interested in anger management courses or family counselling, when he saw their tall, underage waiter, holding out his well-worn coat.

Curtly, John nodded.

When next he blinked and could actually see the pavement (five blocks away, where he’d ended up standing in the middle of the path, fists balled and jaw tight, in a park square), he could at least that he hadn’t punched the waiter simply for existing.

* * *

He couldn’t — his thoughts stung like alcohol in a cut every time he remembered another word that had spewed from Harry’s mouth —

How dare she, he thundered inwardly, how fucking dare she, after everything — his hand was clenched so tight as he walked that shockwaves of pain were still shooting up his left arm, but he physically could not release his fists, not until he found something to punch that was not guaranteed to break his hand. Or land him in handcuffs. He wanted a drink.

After pacing around the square, which, as ever, afforded him space and breeze-refreshed air and anonymity, he decided to walk it off in the direction of home. The more he thought about it — thank god he didn’t have to go back to work because, yes, much better: he was going to go to the
ridiculous farce of the pre-wedding cocktail party, watch Sherlock waltz about in whatever disastrous idea had gripped him this time, and then — when the moment arrived — take the great privilege of getting Gruener in a headlock while Mycroft’s team swarmed the place. And then, when that was all sorted, he was going to take Sherlock home and fuck him senseless — never mind through their bed, through the carpet — slowly touching every single centimetre of him until he couldn’t bear it, he wanted Sherlock come from that alone, shouting so loud they’d both get ASBOs, and then John would chin the judge just to punctuate their triumph.

With a stab in his gut he suddenly wanted everything — ‘some’ was nowhere near enough, he didn’t know where he’d been drawing his restraint from, but it was well and truly gone now. He had felt shameful and ill at Harry’s words, not just because they were so unbelievably unfair from her above all, but because she had no idea how much it meant to him for Sherlock to allow himself to be human and unguarded and keening for him. He had said ‘I love you’ accidentally but it blindsided him now with the force of a tank that he hadn’t really said it, despite everything he’d been saying reassuringly and meaning so intensely. Until today — soon, in fact, the absolute second they got home (he blinked again from his fog, judged he was marching on Baker Street, ETA under ten minutes) — and then he was going to tell Sherlock — with poetry and wine and kisses and his own cautiously optimistic mouth — in a way that Sherlock would finally believe. They were terrible at being gentle with each other, they still somehow tried to hold each other at arms’ length — but he didn’t want that. He couldn’t stand the thought of, of not being able to gather Sherlock up and just hold him, gangly limbs and surprising heaviness and birthmarks and scars and curls. He didn’t treat Sherlock like any of his previous partners because this thing they had was so much more raw, so much more dangerous — but there were a few things Sherlock still had to learn from Capt. John Watson, Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, and one of them was that seduction was his specialist subject, that he’d been waiting his whole life to have someone so —

He’d taken out his ringing mobile before he really knew what he’d done; his head was still smarting with thoughts of how not good it was and how unashamed he was about what he wanted from Sherlock, this minute, here at this street crossing, in the alley against the brick if that had been most convenient…

‘John?’

He stopped walking. Why that tone…? His heart slid coldly into his gut, still hammering.

‘Greg? What’s happened?’

The long — too long — pause before Greg spoke, more than the braced tension of his voice, settled over John’s riotous blood like frost sinking in to stone.

‘John, where are you? You need to get to Guy’s. They’re taking him —’
No, no, no, he heard himself thinking, water rushing in his ears that he had to ignore, push through, in order to get the important, the very very important information Greg was telling him through the cacophonous drowning of his dread.

‘—I can send a car, where —’

‘What happened?’

‘Call came in twenty minutes ago.’ Greg’s voice, stained with concern that John could not afford right now, seemed to be calling from a million miles away. ‘Chest wound, he must have got in a fight — I’m not sure exactly what…’

John ignored everything but the ‘TAXI!’ at the next corner and hurtled towards it because he could not stop moving when he had to get to Guy’s, not when (‘twenty minutes ago’) a nick from a bullet or a knife to the major arteries or the abdomen could bleed out in under ten minutes, which meant it might have been a whole ten minutes since the worst thing that had ever happened to him had happened again and he didn’t even know it yet.

‘I’m coming,’ he told Greg clearly, then to the cabbie sharply, ‘Guy’s Hospital, now!’ with as much authority as he could muster, because he wanted to believe that he would know, somehow, if Sherlock had already stopped breathing: he was, as Sherlock had accused him too many times, a romantic. But he was also a doctor and a soldier and romance hadn’t saved anyone before.

(One more miracle, he prayed, defiantly, for me, but he’d already had one more. Several more. Eventually they were going to run out.)

*  

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine’s Day! Apologies that this chapter can't be the romantic fluff we all
deserve today. Later, perhaps...

*edited 8 Apr 2017: edited epigraph. [Originally:

‘But the effort, even if she could endure the pain of it, would be treachery until she had known and seen without reservations the whole meaning of the immovable fact.’

—Dorothy Richardson, *Deadlock* (1921)]

FWIW, this was one of the earliest chapters I wrote, and was for a long time the kernel around which the rest of the story grew.

And oof: the next chapter is also going to be a belter.
Twelve (John)

Chapter Summary

He had almost asked, for the first time in his life, for them to turn the volume of the EKG monitor on.

Chapter Notes

[*It's worth noting that this chapter's epigraph comes from a harrowing, deeply personal account by academic Claire Jarvis about her mental health following her pregnancy and birth of her child. I urge you, if you feel even mostly up to it, to go read her incredible reflection on this stuff, here : n+1.]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 12: *John*

‘I saw something that was not there. My mind’s not right. I’m still inside this. I’m writing to you from inside this little patch of madness, slowly working my way back.’

—Claire Jarvis, “Woman Problems”*

He had almost asked, for the first time in his life, for them to turn the volume of the EKG monitor on.

He had sat, that first night — after they’d got him out of surgery (coded, twice, before he’d stabilised at just past 1700) and finally sent him back to the ICU — and watched the same old dives and jumps of systole and diastole until they were burned into his retinas, the harsh light of the screen blaring plenty loud in the near-darkness. (Hospital rooms were never completely dark, of course. He was long since resigned to that.) He hadn’t wanted to look at his face, so he’d watched the monitor, only interrupted when various people came to check his vitals, all on schedule (it was
a good hospital), and he was forced to stand up and move away and release his hand. Once they were gone, John smartened the terrible knit blanket (it was a good hospital, it wasn’t the Savoy) and stowed himself in the mass-produced faded blue leather-and-metal chair by the bed. If he spoke to anyone, he couldn’t remember having done it later.

What he did remember, though, was the expression he’d first heard, though not quite believed, when his mum had died: *Grief is like a millstone round your neck. It doesn’t get lighter; you just get better at carrying it.*

For 797 days after the fall (the jump — the circus leap) from Bart’s, John had discovered, beyond anything he’d ever known before, exactly how true that proverb was. More than true: it was real. It was realer than work, than taste, than people laughing, than the time on the clock, than the news, than danger. For the first few days after Sherlock had died, John felt like his body, even when he was standing upright in the shower or sitting calmly on the tube (or most often in his chair in the flat, staring), was really somehow being pulled to the floor. His neck ached uncannily like he was really wearing one: a large, impossibly heavy stone wheel on a chain. (In his mind, it was the same material, the same age and weight and vast primeval incomprehensibility, as the blocks of Stonehenge.) His movements — going to the toilet, helping arrange the funeral, waking in the middle of the night to force down some food so that when he was sick there would at least be something to expel… — all this was a holograph, a false double-image. In reality he was lying pinned on the pavement beside Sherlock’s body on the pavement, and he was pretty well convinced he would never manage to get up again, which was fine, since where else did he want to go?

The notion had first struck him a few weeks later, when he visited Sherlock’s grave, the millstone tripping up his feet like a meddlesome cat, whether he could stretch himself out on the no-longer-freshly turned earth and simply sink down through it like mud. Whether that would feel like rest. Restart reality.

(He hadn’t meant to tell Sherlock that one.)

After six months or so, the chain on which the stone hung seemed to be shorter, stuck at a length just around his middle. When he walked, every step swung a deep bruising *thump!* of a punch to his gut, a bruise that was never allowed to heal. It rearranged his internal organs to make room for the constant battering of grief that flew away only to soar back, like the sway of an old grandfather clock. Like she — his mother Liz’s oldest sister, hands lifting a shaking cigarette to her mouth, numbed by the loss of her last remaining sibling at the age of 47 to ovarian cancer — had muttered, it didn’t get lighter: your body just got used to it. Her name had been Mary, too.

Now, the staff at the hospital were professional, answering his questions but stopping short of friendly with him: a professional distance they had to maintain in case things went south. They didn’t ask him to leave, though, which John chalked up to the best the British government could do
by way of apology.

Greg, who had been out working on his own case, came by after he clocked off (or, John realised much later, possibly before he was meant to be off-duty) and sat with John in the receiving area outside the operating theatres. He’d handed John a coffee — the coffee he’d been craving at the lunch with Harry that he hadn’t eaten — and hadn’t spoken again, just squeezed John’s shoulder once, until hours and hours later they told John he ‘could go into to sit with him’. Greg breathed, ‘Thank god.’ John thought of the gods of destiny and luck and Sherlock’s artichoke-coloured worn-soft rumpled dirty sheets, and didn’t know if he thanked them or damned them all to hell.

The hospital blanket was a shade of faded pink a bit like calamine lotion. Sherlock had got a burning skin rash just before he died by crawling through a suspect’s hedge searching for a paintbrush. He’d found it, eventually, of course, in a swath of nettles.

Under his thumb, the dry skin of Sherlock’s hand now had none of the angry blisters he’d had that day. And yet it was — he was — so, so real.

John’s stomach lurched at the wrongness of Sherlock lying, propped up, on his back, eyes shut: he slept at odd angles, nose and mouth squished as he drooled directly onto the mattress or pillow, knees bumping John’s in the night. Recently, anyway. From now on.

Then again, last night he’d been working and had eventually curled up (on his side, drooling, inward facing the cushion) on the sofa, while John had optimistically left his space free on the right side of the bed.

And then John had left him, while Sherlock was still asleep. Now John was sitting, hunched and nearly dragged back to the floor by that familiar, detested weight around his neck, clinging to the lifeline that was Sherlock’s just-barely-warm hand.

I’m not losing you, he thought furiously, eyes caressing every inch of Sherlock’s waxen face, including his unnaturally closed eyes, including where the oxygen mask was strapped over his beautiful mouth. I love you, you tosser. I’m not leaving, not ever, because I love you. Now wake up and say it back.

John sat, silent, waiting for him to say anything at all.
His chest felt ringingly hollow, a house bombed out and empty, walls still reverberating from the blast. He was fairly sure he would crumple to the ground if he tried to get to his feet, and the last thing they needed was for him to get a knock on the head and need stitches. Even so, it didn’t seem fair that the one battle scar on his body from a wound that had nearly killed him was from a bullet on dusty road and not from the echoing, gaping agony of loving a man who refused to take seriously John’s desperate pronouncement that losing Sherlock again would actually kill him. Sherlock’s freshly-hewn tissue under a mat of cotton wool and padding and surgical sutures would, of course, leave a permanent mark. The fact that, at least this time, John knew where the scar had come from was like sea water in his lungs.

There was a poem he hadn’t known he knew — though the title, the author had become detached from it along the way somewhere. He didn’t even know when or how he’d come to absorb even this much, whether he was remembering it rightly, in the right order with all the original words — but his own thoughts drifted far away, replaced with two lines on something like an endless, toneless repeat: ‘Although you sit in a room that is grey, / I know how furiously your heart is beating.’

When, about half past four, he found himself jerked back to wakefulness, he became aware, with sharp clarity, of his full bladder at the same moment as realising he had fallen into a doze. He stood slowly, muscles seized, cold-stiff. His joints popped. The loo was just across the corridor.

He looked at Sherlock’s face properly for the first time in almost eleven hours, since they’d wheeled him out of the operating theatre and on a trolley-bed down the corridor past John, insisting (while preventing him from following) that he could see him once he was settled in a room. One lock of hair was stuck to his forehead, an inky 8 gone matted with sweat. John immediately turned round and adjusted the fan they’d been supplied, switching it up one notch to a steady thrumming breeze that sent his own flesh shivering with goose pimples. Then he leaned over and thoughtlessly brushed the curl back, flattened it into the rest, with the easy familiarity of having done so a lot recently — so often he’d lost count. Once upon a time, he could count on one hand the number of times he’d allowed himself to take the liberty of touching Sherlock in that way, a betrayal of intimacy that he had, subconsciously, labelled dangerous and therefore out of bounds.
It’s what you like, Sherlock had said. John’s stomach cramped on nothing and he frowned miserably down at Sherlock (system drifting off the anaesthesia and towards the morphine drip, unlikely to be fully conscious for another few hours) and John worried at his back teeth with his tongue, because he couldn’t cry with his jaw like that, he had learned from years of losing people, losing people he loved and people he barely knew, and because crying didn’t help. God help him, he did like it: he loved the life they led, dangerous — nothing by halves — and nothing out of bounds any more, but like Mrs. Hudson said, you couldn’t have everything you wanted in this life, and apparently he was destined to have Sherlock tear at the heart of him, a little bit at a time.

He stayed there, fingers gently twirling the sweat-damp curls of Sherlock’s too-long hair.

Dawn crept in silently and kept him company.

It was easier, in the morning, to be angry.

* * *

The trouble with stab wounds was that you not only had to worry about what the blade actually hit — the big slice it took on the way in, and then again on the way out, usually leaving smaller, sometimes invisible cuts that critically undermined the structural integrity of veins and arteries, organ walls, muscle groups — but also, often worse, about the infection of a bad knife stirring up bacteria with a whole soup of fluids and tissues that were not meant to mix.

‘We’re not out of the woods yet,’ concluded the attending physician in the morning, clacking closed his chart and replacing it at the foot of the bed. He smiled. It was meant to be encouraging. ‘But I’d say, once he’s awake, the worst thing you have to worry about is him pulling those stitches before he can start physical therapy.’

‘Right,’ John agreed without agreeing, because that was not the worst thing he had to worry about.
After the man had left — assuring John that they would do their best to move Sherlock off the morphine (and opiates generally) and onto a long-term regimen of non-narcotic pain relievers as soon as it was safe to do so — John went to look out the window. Sure enough, several storeys down on the pavement, a gaggle of reporters and camerapeople were chatting and smoking merrily, lenses and booms fixed in his general direction.

‘Bloody cockroaches,’ he spat under his breath.

‘I quite agree. And yet, far more easily exterminated.’

John whirled around, mostly out of annoyance that Mycroft Holmes could still sneak up on him. Beside him with a practiced air, Mycroft’s aide was recognisable as such for wearing a black wrap dress that looked like it was made of some combination of crepe and spandex, the sort of thing a cabinet secretary would wear to an evening banquet, here at not-quite-9 o’clock in the morning. She placed a tall crystal vase filled with purple lilies on the sideboard, then brushed the yellow pollen off her clothes. John suspected it was the kind of fabric that would absorb blood without a visible stain. She left without a word.

(‘Where is he?’ John had demanded into the phone, standing on the unilluminated landing of the stairwell on Sherlock’s floor.

‘We do not know —’

‘Where. is he. Mycroft.’

A pause. ‘You can hardly think —’

‘It doesn’t matter what I think. You’re going to tell me where he is and then I will phone you if and when I need help moving the body.’

*Chuff* of a laugh. ‘Which is precisely why —’

‘Go fuck yourself.’ John rang off.
Twenty minutes later, standing in Sherlock’s room with his arms crossed, composed once more, he’d stared out at the city and remembered what he’d been planning to say. When he could trust that his hands would obey him rather than simply type more threats, he sent Mycroft some instructions.

> It will be taken care of. But you must know that I cannot tell you who was actually responsible for this, much though I would like to do so. —MH

> Can’t or won’t? Either way: I don’t care. I’m going to find them, and when I find them, I don’t care who they are, no one is going to be able to stop me.

was all John sent back, before shutting his phone off and planting himself in to the chair by the bed. He rubbed his face and wished there was somewhere he could go to scream.)

Mycroft was poised there in the self-important patient way he did, but John didn’t fancy an edgy smirking/staring contest, so he decided to delegate a few tasks that Big Brother could handle for him.

‘Suze Winter,’ John told him, in a clipped, directive tone he’d learned from being pointman on more than one op in his life. ‘You said last night on the phone that she —’

‘Miss Winter was unharmed, and has been removed to a discreet location.’

John frowned approvingly. He — wasn’t sure what he had expected. Maybe he’d been in command positions too many times to trust that things always got done right just because he said they should. ‘And you’ve spoken to her about the prostitution ring? She probably doesn’t know anything more specific but…’

‘She will be thoroughly debriefed,’ Mycroft assured him. ‘Though I am, I confess, sceptical that any of her information will be sufficient even to touch upon Gruener. Such investigations take time, you understand.’

Excellent. No wonder Sherlock enjoyed arguing with his brother so much: the man made it too satisfying, too necessary. Cathartic.
'They’re *kids*, Mycroft. Teenagers and probably younger.'

'The maiden tribute of modern Babylon,’ mused Mycroft grandly.

Whatever the hell that meant. ‘I want proof, Mycroft, by tomorrow, that your lot are working to find those girls and get them into safehouses or new identities or whatever you’ve got to. Actual proof that you have done *something* more than strategise, or I’ll be very happy to go take a walk downstairs and find one of those microphones and start them on the story of how a retired colonel aristocrat came asking us to hush up the scandal of his drug-addicted god-daughter and her upcoming marriage to a child rapist.’

Mycroft’s smile soured deeper than usual, his eyes narrowed. ‘Charming that you think such a story would see the light of day simply because you choose to make a spectacle of yourself.’

John grinned back. ‘A spectacle? I’d be happy to give you the preview here, if you’d prefer. And then I can recommend the resident who does the cleanest stitches.’

He really didn’t give a shit whether Mycroft’s scanning gaze attributed his tone to his night’s lack-of-sleep and the kink in his neck and bags under his eyes, or to the fact that he hadn’t properly heard Sherlock’s voice utter more than a muffled groan in going on thirty-six hours, which was the longest stretch since the period when he was never going to hear Sherlock’s voice in person ever again, or to the dust-up with his sister, or to the gnawing fear in his gut that said he couldn’t live like this, under this Damoclean sword, or to the first time they’d met in a warehouse south of the river. John’s hands weren’t tremoring now either.

‘Someone will be in touch with you, soon,’ he conceded, primly, so John knew to expect another of Mycroft’s aides-de-camp sometime around 11:59pm tomorrow night, handing him a file of horrific images he’d want to incinerate immediately.

‘Ta. Now, was there anything else?’

Mycroft shifted. ‘I can’t imagine there would be. Can you, brother dear?’

John whipped around this time without remembering to guard his expression. Sherlock’s eyes, woozy rather than sharp, met his in an immediate conversation.
You’re awake, John tried to say.

An excellent deduction. Heavily, Sherlock’s eyes crinkled up at the corners, and John wanted to climb onto the bed and cradle all of Sherlock’s limbs carefully and gratefully against himself and wonder at those soft crow’s feet for years until they were deep and wrinkled and softer still. Instead he held his position, breath suddenly trapped in his chest, while Sherlock looked beyond him, then answered, in a voice frayed at the edges but so familiar,

‘Cigarettes, Mycroft?’ Though his words were the typical bandying of brotherly crossfire, something in Sherlock’s weary, rasped tone carried a note of surprise, as though Mycroft’s lapse back into nicotine usage was highly out of character. ‘Low tar. Still smoking like a beginner.’

‘How fortunate, then, that you are still with us to lead by example.’

Angry though this made him, not least for the swipe at Sherlock’s past (no doubt also alluding to the morphine levels John had guided), John looked to Sherlock’s strained eyes, which widened slightly at this reply; turned to see Mycroft’s incompletely-stifled embarrassment. Sometimes with Holmeses he forgot how to read between the lines, but… possibly this was the closest they could get to expressions of sentiment.

Thankfully for all of them, a nurse — the stocky, dragonish woman, of the sort that still had five years before she could retire with a pension but was already counting the days — turned up with a tray and, looking sternly at Mycroft in his three-piece pinstripe suit, tutted.

‘By all means, madam, don’t let me keep you,’ he gloated, back to his normal, punchable self. ‘A shame to miss breakfast, I see, but I’m afraid I have an appointment. Good morning, brother mine. John.’

Even lying naked from the waist up, almost flat on his back, Sherlock managed to roll his eyes dramatically at his brother’s departing back.

‘Is he always like that, pet?’ the nurse asked Sherlock, taking a fresh saline drip off the tray along with a foil-covered cup of apple juice.

‘Worse,’ Sherlock admitted, claggy-voiced, closing his eyes now. ‘I dread to think what’s come over him.’
John shouted inwardly. His eyes took in Sherlock’s face, his hands, his rising and falling and rising chest. You’re the thing that happens to all of us. The only difference was, some people had the sense to run in the other direction.

* * *

After the first few tabloid stories broke, John started sending the flowers to other rooms — the NICU, some of the long-term physical therapy patients, the oncology wing, and of course the nurses who were on their floor (an apology as much as a gift). He didn’t read the cards, just stuck them in a drawer for Sherlock to look at later.

‘That’s so good of you, John,’ cooed Mrs Hudson approvingly. ‘What a lovely thought. That’s just like you. Isn’t it, Sherlock?’

Sherlock was currently reading the stack of newspapers all celebrating or reporting his ‘scrape with death’ after the ‘vicious attack’ from, apparently, a ‘jealous lover’ who was a ‘furious ex-wife of client’ and somehow also ‘criminal mastermind Moriarty’s henchman’ all rolled into one.

‘Always that damn ear-hat.’ He squinted, gingerly bringing the page right to the end of his nose. ‘Maybe it’s miniaturised newsprint that he shrinks down…’

It had only been three days since Sherlock had woken up to full consciousness and John was completely unsure whether he was overjoyed or heartsick at the fact that Sherlock had restarted reality with such ruthless efficiency; that he was so determined to continue with the case, as soon as possible, even from his hospital bed. (In the spirit of giving Sherlock the necessary time to rest and heal, John had temporarily put to one side the million-and-one thoughts that had crept in between getting Lestrade’s call and meeting Sherlock’s eyes again for the first time this side of surgery. As such, he’d insisted that Sherlock take it easy — they were only just out of the window for round-the-clock observation for a pneumothorax or worse. So far, Sherlock was keeping to the letter of the law, but not the spirit.)

‘Doubt it,’ replied John, both because, well, he did, and because his scepticism sometimes was enough to dissuade Sherlock from a dead-end. ‘It’d always be getting ripped or greasy from fingers. And anyway, he doesn’t seem like the type that would want to have newspaper ink all over him.’

Sherlock looked up, slightly mystified. ‘You’re right,’ he observed, sounding slightly awed, as though this opened whole new continents of unlikely phenomena.
John smiled. ‘In which case, maybe you’ll also listen to me when I say you’ve got to stop leaking things to reporters about how you’re at death’s door.’

Poleaxed, Sherlock blinked unnaturally rapidly for a second before (almost visibly across his face) a deduction resolved itself.

‘Gruener is more likely to relax if he believes I am no longer a liability. Otherwise, he might insist they move up the wedding, which logically speaking he ought to have done ages ago. Fortunately Miss De Merville has more backbone than her successor.’

John winced inwardly, trying not to think about Violet or Suze or the way the words ‘no longer a liability’ rang in his ears like a concussion.

‘I only wish you would relax,’ chided Mrs. Hudson, getting to her feet, ‘that way you can come home. Oh, but it’s strange to have the whole quiet house to myself. Keep making extra tea in the mornings before I remember you’re not around to drink it.’

‘That was you?’

‘Well, where did you think it came from!’ she laughed.

‘I thought it just… sort of… happened.’

Mrs. Hudson laughed again and looked at John with indulgent disbelief, then back at Sherlock. ‘Your mother has a lot to answer for.’

‘I know,’ Sherlock sighed, deliberately missing the point. ‘I have a list. Mycroft has a file.’

She went over to the bed and leaned down to kiss him, patting him softly on the other cheek, and John had to look away. So many people giving in, spoiling the man rotten, trying to care for him in any way possible… John wondered for how long after Sherlock’s death Mrs. Hudson had continued taking him his morning tea — whether she’d drunk it, or left it for his ghost. If she’d ever blinked and found the cup smashed, milky tea sloshed all over the broken china at her feet, and wondered how it got there.
Force of habit: John walked her to the lift (a little ridiculous since the room, big enough since they had it to themselves, was only a few steps away).

‘You alright for the cab fare home?’ he asked, once they were out of earshot.

‘Don’t be silly! Need I remind you that I’ve lived in this city longer than you’ve been alive.’

He didn’t mention the years she’d been in Florida married to a murdering drug lord, though Sherlock would have.

‘But what about you, dear?’ she asked, peering into his eyes with concern. ‘Won’t you come home and sleep — just for a bit? And I wouldn’t mind staying so you wouldn’t worry. Or Molly could do it! That girl keeps odd hours, I’m sure she could pop by for the night. You look done in. It’s not good for you to sleep in a chair, John. Terrible for your back.’

He was hard-pressed to give a single fuck about his back, no matter how knotted it was.

‘Must be losing my youthful good looks,’ he hedged, aiming for levity. ‘Kipped in far worse places in Afghanistan, and even then didn’t hear any complaints.’

‘Really! John!’ Her eyes darted back at the room for a moment. ‘He’s doing much better. You mustn’t forget yourself, you know.’

Objectively, it was true: Sherlock’d managed to get down a bit of solid food today, and even stood up just after lunch. But his pallor after going round the room fully once, the dark rings under his eyes, the hour-long nap he’d succumbed to once they’d got him back into bed (I know how furiously your heart is beating)…

‘I’m fine,’ he protested, even managing to make it sound light. ‘They’ve found me a spare roll-away bed: living in the lap of luxury here.’ But she clearly wasn’t about to budge without a better reason. He lowered his voice. ‘I just… I have to stay to make sure he doesn’t trick one of the interns into giving him the good stuff.’

She seemed no happier with this excuse than he was, but she nodded with pursed lips, and then got
into the arriving lift with a sombre wave.

When he got back to the room, Sherlock was lying, eyes shut, shoulders sunk into the pillows with fatigue. John shuffled the papers into a haphazard stack and put them with the rest on the bedside table. Probably they’d need to keep at least a few clippings —

‘She’s concerned that you’re not sleeping.’

John found Sherlock considering him through the haze of his long eyelashes.

‘Which is why I reminded her that I slept about half this much in Afghanistan and even less during my second year of med school. Not to mention during about half the cases.’ He shrugged. ‘Are you cold?’

‘You should go home, John.’

What was wrong with everyone? He was fine — he didn’t need to go anywhere. ‘Piss off. Which reminds me — do you need to use the loo? I’m sure you could walk to the proper one, if you wanted.’

They’d been through the teeth-gritting, embarrassing frustration of the catheter and then the discomfort of having the sponge bath, but John was sure a private toilet visit was climbing high on Sherlock’s unspoken list of desires.

‘I’m not going to escape from the hospital, if that’s what you’ve been imagining. No matter what morons my brother has stationed around the exits.’

He barked a laugh. ‘I’d like to see you get past Nurse Glasher.’

The small eyeroll of annoyance that belied a smile was the most encouraging thing John’d seen all day. Instead he came close, fingers absent-mindedly picking at a frayed thread.

‘If you don’t need the loo, though, you really ought to try and rest for a bit,’ he told Sherlock. ‘They’ll be around when the next shift comes on and they’ll be wanting to run through the whole
Unsurprisingly, this earned him another groaning eyeroll. ‘It’s the evening. It’s still daylight out.’

John considered this, then went to the exterior window, followed by the floor-length glass barrier to the corridor, and the door, shutting all the blinds and closing them off, before hitting the light switch.

‘Better?’ he asked the dark.

Sherlock looked at him flatly. ‘Hardly black-out blinds, John.’

‘Yeah, well, I left your boutique sleep visor at the flat, so you’ll just have to make do.’

He found his way to his chair, eyes adjusting to a low-level lighting roughly comparable to that of Baker Street in the late evening, before they’d turned on a lamp — the sort of semi-darkness that sometimes (a few winters ago, anyway) had prompted Sherlock to suggest they build a fire. By the time they got home, a week or so from now, the weather might have turned enough to suggest it again.

He settled in, prepared to get a bit of sleep himself (had to get it in snatches here as much as in the desert: never knew what was coming over the next hill).

‘Well this is tedious.’

John snorted, tucking his hands across his chest. ‘Sorry, sleep isn’t meant to be exciting. Although saying that, I’m starting to think I understand why you get so little sleep generally.’

Without acknowledging this, Sherlock mused, ‘Was your gunshot wound recovery boring too?’

The darkness hid the smirk slipping from his face.

‘Not so much,’ he replied eventually, continuing to address the whole room rather than peer at
Sherlock in the half-light. ‘But the surgery was more complicated — the bullet nicked my shoulder, whereas you, fortunately, didn’t have it hit anything. And the sepsis was my main problem. That was why they didn’t move me to a bigger hospital: worried the trip would make the fever worse.’

A brush of skin on industrial-strength cotton prickled his ears as Sherlock’s head on the pillow turned to look at him.

‘Were you frightened?’

His throat tightened to hear the quiet, careful (no doubt drug-loosened) question emerge so gently from Sherlock. Years ago, he thought inwardly, Sherlock would have kept that question to himself, tagged it as ‘inappropriate curiosity’ and stowed it for a later date. Now, though, it was obviously coloured by his own experiences… Had he contracted a fever from any of the scars on his back? Infections were all too common in insanitary environments, and John doubted torturers and criminals were overly-fastidious about cleaning their tools. John’s neck ached. He didn’t know much about it, still. He longed to know, almost as much as he longed to know whether Sherlock wanted him to hold his hand.

‘I don’t remember really, but… yeah.’ He hadn’t understood it as such at the time, but: ‘Some nights I thought I was losing my mind.’

It hadn’t really stopped — the aimless disorientation, the maddened fear of being rendered completely useless and incapable of happiness, of interest in anything, the nightmares of course —, had followed him until the world had righted itself around a lab in St. Bart’s one January afternoon. And then, of course, he’d found vast new, deeper oceans of loneliness he could drown in after walking away from Bart’s two years after that, the millstone round his neck dragging him down. Sure, he got better at carrying it. But it was just possible, he could admit to himself with the sound of Sherlock’s slowing, medicated breathing filling the room, that the danger of carrying that unrelenting grief for so long was that it got too familiar: that you stopped trying to fight it.

But, in the here and now, Sherlock was breathing — even talking in his sleep about pirates and dogs and moustaches —, and thus John was free to fight like hell. He just hoped he wouldn’t have to keep fighting Sherlock.
Chapter End Notes

John is, perhaps obviously, slightly misremembering the breathtaking 1917 Wallace Stevens poem, ‘Gray Room’ (here).

In other news: sorry this chapter is nearly late. It's another one that's been mostly written in this form since the beginning. But I had jury service today (during which, among other stray thoughts, it occurred to me that Mycroft would consider it the HEIGHT of divertissement to send John or Sherlock on jury service. Because this is what this fandom has done to my brain: colonized it).

Oh! And -- in my capacity as actual professional Victorianist -- it behooves me to mention that Mycroft's off-hand remark about 'the maiden tribute of modern Babylon' refers in fact a series of salacious 1885 exposés about the selling of virgins into prostitution, written (and scandalously under-cover discovered) by W.T. Stead, famed odd Victorian journalist, who then went on to die on the Titanic. The Maiden Tribute pieces are incredibly disturbing reading, even now (see in full here), including first-person accounts of the acquiring of unconsenting girls for sex work, and led not only to much rehashing when, in the summer and autumn of 1888, Jack the Ripper started preying on similarly working-class women and highlighting the sexual nature of their class position as attractive for sexualized violence; but also led to the infamous pieces of legislation to which the even more infamous Labouchere Amendment was added -- this, aka 'the blackmailer's charter', was to become the legal grounds of 'gross indecency' on which Oscar Wilde was convicted in 1895. And thus the 'great slamming shut of the closet door' (to which Watson, maaaaaaaaaybe is referring in the honest-to-god ACD canon story 'The Adventures of the Three Students' (pub. 1904), when he opens with: 'It was in the year '95 that a combination of events, into which I need not enter, caused Mr. Sherlock Holmes and myself to spend some weeks in one of our great University towns…'). FACTS!
Chapter Summary

‘You’ve made a historical study of gun laws in European cities in previous decades, have you?’

Not as such, no. ‘I was thinking about composing a blogpost about it.’

John snickered. ‘“Coco Chanel’s Handgun”? “Let Them Eat Bullets”? ’

‘John.’

Chapter Notes

A few references here to Sherlock’s prior relationships, from the timeline of this story - and now canon-noncompliant (post-series 4). It's not much so if you haven't read the previous two parts of this series, you should be fine, but if it doesn't make sense, that may be why. [I hope that's why.]

{ playlist for this fic, especially this chapter and the one before it, would include chiefly Olafur Arnalds’ Another Happy Day and Living Room Songs. Quiet, ruminative, intimate... lovely. }

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 13: Sherlock

‘Before either of us knew it, we belonged to each other.’

—Friedrich Hölderlin, Hyperion

Of the period between sustaining the injury and at last returning from the labyrinthine fortress of his Mind Palace, there was discouragingly little data. Pain saturated every isolated fragment of memory — the whirl of a fan slicing midnight orange from black silhouettes; the sickening-sweet, cloying perfume of lilies and roses as they died in the burst of full-bloom; the murmuring voices of innumerable (truly, he did not know how many, and wanted to scream at this simple statement) nurses and doctors as they craned over him like beasts in a nightmare; snippets of actual
nightmares, cells filled with Moriarty, chained and crooning sinister lullabies; the hateful piercing torture (this was closer to Serbia, surely) on his nerves by the various monitors and measuring apparatuses… everything seemed stitched together with the same alien-skin thread (more akin to fishing wire this time, it seemed, than any occasion when John had needed to sew him back together), constantly yanking at the seams. He learned not to move much.

Of the injury itself, there was — distressingly — nothing.

‘What, nothing “nothing”?’ bleated Hopkins vacuously.

He shut his eyes (rolling them still made the bed seem to spin vertiginously at an incline that decoupled the floor from the walls). ‘What I mean to say, Detective Hopkins, is that I have no recollection of the incident itself. I can tell you where I was and whom I was with; but until you provide me with the weapon I cannot provide you with a substantive information towards catching my attacker.’

Hopkins, who was sitting in John’s chair — he seemed to mould everyday things into his things wherever he went — while John stood at the foot of the bed (standing guard: the vigilant protector), looked between the two of them as if expecting one of them to give away a lie.

‘That’s not terribly surprising, is it?’ John asked in his impatient, surely-you-are-not-so-dense-as-to-contradict-the-reasonable-thing-I’ve-just-said voice. ‘Lots of patients lose their memory of a traumatic injury.’

‘Yeah, but… I dunno.’ Hopkins closed his notebook on his knee. ‘I just… I reckoned you’d have some trick or something to… to, you know, bring it back.’

The man was intolerable. His childish disappointment at failing to discover an easy lead was matched in its inanity only by the agonising implication that Sherlock had, in falling down on a knife, also fallen in his primary post. His legs felt like there were insects crawling just under the surface; his chest set aflame every time he took too deep a breath.

A low, powerful snarl was useful not only for intimidation but pain-management. He siphoned his tedious corporeal distractions into reinforcing his fatigued vocal chords with an icy tone. ‘Bring me the knife and I’ll do whatever “tricks” you like.’

Fortunately, it was his second full day of consciousness, so he was able to perceive the minute
'For god’s SAKE!' he groaned, ignoring the pain of shouting — was the entire blasted world composed of idiots? ‘HOW did no one —’

‘We sent two lads round there only an hour later!’ Hopkins wailed pleadingly. ‘There wasn’t anything. We got crime scene photos, of course, and the CCTV round the corner, but SOCO found no trace of a knife —’

‘Apart from the massive hole in his chest,’ John snapped, index finger gesturing helpfully towards the very puncture.

Hopkins took a deep breath (show-off; Sherlock could have killed him for doing so; maybe they had some of that execrable ‘soup’ for him to use as a weapon) and got easily to his feet (absolutely, the soup: he’d even withhold the crackers, lest the punishment not be adequate to the crime).

‘Well… Sorry to have disturbed you, anyway. Let us know if you have anything further to report, eh?’

‘Send me those photos,’ Sherlock instructed bitterly.

Waving a white hand in defeat, Hopkins shuffled off to report his and the Yard’s rampant incompetence. A weekly meeting, no doubt.

John shook his head faux-sadly at Hopkins’s back. ‘Talk about adding insult to injury.’

Sherlock’s eyes shot (damn the dizziness) to look at his profile and (unshaven) right cheek: stern, tense, faded and lines from two nights of terrible sleep in these appallingly tasteless concrete slabs they let pass for wood chairs — yet even through this, he was making a joke.

‘If Scotland Yard ever needed a more accurate slogan…’ he offered, and John laughed, which was worth the answering spike of pain when he laughed himself.

As the fire in his chest abated once more to a dull ache, John’s mobile rang.
Mid-afternoon, weekday (judging by the slightly reduced number of passers-by on the stairs and all right he had glanced at the newspaper), early enough for a tea break — and phoning John —

John reached down, looked at the screen, and silenced the call before tucking the phone quietly in his pocket and immediately busying himself with the television remote.

‘Let’s see what crap telly we can bore you to sleep with today?’ he murmured invitingly, flipping past children’s afterschool programmes and endless (and potentially but probably un-interesting) red-alert bulletins on the news.

‘You’ll have to speak to your sister eventually,’ he pointed out.

For a fraction of a second John froze, then looked at him. The lightning flash of hurt on his face made Sherlock reel with confusion: was that crumpled look in relation to Sherlock’s question, or Harry herself? He had advised John not to go to such a hollow gesture of an occasion (— they were the inverse of proverbial siblings, whose blood-ties were thinner than water; Harriet was entirely selfish, small-minded, loud and careless, incompetent, deluded, mercurial, ordinary: everything John was not. The wonder of genetics!). But now it occurred to him that perhaps the lunch had exceeded even his own expectations for distress and residual, guilty self-questioning.

‘Then again, maybe it would be best if you didn’t speak to your sister.’

John’s eyes fluttered in gratitude, but he still (uncharacteristically) struggled to speak, looking now at his hands.

‘For that matter,’ Sherlock went on, to spare him, ‘we could cut off both our siblings. Better to simply rely on Mrs. Hudson and Gordon for our Christmas gifts in future.’

(It was always important to reinforce to Captain John Hamish Watson, MD, that everyone else’s names and other miscellaneous information were immaterial.)

‘Greg, and I might take you up on that this year. Though really Molly is the one who gives the best presents.’
The fact that John, who had always considered (misguidedly) his duty to ‘family’ to be among his most fundamental responsibilities, would accept, even with a jesting tone, the suggestion that he abandon such a tie, was certainly food for thought.

Rather than advance into a fight without more data, Sherlock said,

‘So long as none of them thinks they now will be expected to join us in our home for punch and charades.’

John huffed, sighing more than laughing, and Sherlock wished he could touch him — wished this were the universe where John stroked Sherlock’s palm with his thumb not only as a prelude to sexual activity but simply as a means of… well, non-verbal communication, of whatever sort.

A minute of fiddling with the television landed on — oh, lord. The corner of the screen (the strain on his eyes, another unwelcome consequence of the drugs and this absurd fiasco generally) proclaimed another terrible James Bond film was playing — good grief, were the masses so anxious about imperilled masculinity that they sought, in every way, to idolise a constantly-renewingly virile monolith of heterosexual promiscuity and poor gun handling? The damned films didn’t even have the decency to make logical sense! And they seemed to be broadcast on some channel or other at all times — and yet John made a noise of approval and set down the remote.

‘Have you seen this one?’ asked John, though clearly he was eager to watch it. ‘I don’t think we got this far when we were doing our marathon.’

None of the people, settings, or mind-bogglingly farcical dialogue was familiar, but he had not been paying as much attention to the films they’d been watching as to John’s expressive face while Sherlock hurled occasional insults at the production value and believability. (They’d both been on their phones, anyway, so surely it wasn’t quite the sacrosanct ritual along the lines of a funeral or marriage that barred his (logical) interruptions.)

‘Is this meant to be present-day Paris?’ he asked instead, which was ludicrous as that was indeed the Eiffel Tower’s foot glimpsed in the corner of the shot.

‘Well, this one’s from the 70s.’

‘Surely no one in their right mind would have considered that an inconspicuous gun, even in the 1970s?’
'You’ve made a historical study of gun laws in European cities in previous decades, have you?'

_Not as such, no. ‘I was thinking about composing a blogpost about it.’_

John snickered. ‘“Coco Chanel’s Handgun”? “Let Them Eat Bullets”?’

‘_John._’ Ever the imaginist.

They went on criticising the film until, unfortunately, he couldn’t hold back from sleep any longer.

* * *

John stayed by his side for the whole ten days. When he left the room, it was either to give Sherlock privacy for a sponge-bath (nonsense: John had seen him naked; yet Sherlock could not help but appreciate it) or to collect food from the (miserably bland) cantine (though Molly had, true to form, been far more successful at sneaking several kinds of takeaway into their room under the aromal misdirection of more flowers). New clothes appeared for him (Mrs. Hudson, Mycroft) regularly; he used the en-suite, despite the fact that a proper nurse’s station shower was offered to him (only after-hours, so none of the other patients would request such a suspension of normal procedure; Sherlock, when John finally helped him — having removed his bandages — into the shower on the eighth day, was not even given another option); John repeatedly ignored calls from his sister, but took them from Lestrade, his supervisor at the surgery (to say he’d ‘had a personal emergency’: Sherlock’s lip-reading was perpetually crucial), and even from the publisher for whom he was now contracted to write his book. This last was a call extending more than ten minutes, going over the reasons John would not be making his first editorial meeting and the ways he could get his manuscript into a viable form before the now-delayed next appointment. Their laptops appeared shortly after this conversation (Mycroft).

Most of the time, though, John sat with him. Spoke to him (almost exclusively about inconsequential or impersonal subjects). This made proceedings on the plan to destroy Gruener congeal to a viscid crawl.

‘Maybe it’ll sort itself out,’ John continued to insist. ‘Lestrade’s had a big break with this child prostitution syndicate. Good of your brother to get me those files while a Yard DI was sitting right next to me.’
Sherlock ignored this. (Mycroft was never anything less than shrewd, lazy, and smug.)

‘Gruener is not directly implicated in any of those crimes, any more than he is in this—’ (he waved over to his abdomen, muscles protesting less than yesterday) ‘— or any other of his prior offenses.’

(In his semi-lucid state, he’d aired theories for several (admittedly unappealing) scenarios to explain the as-yet still-tangled enigma of Gruener’s ‘book’. Perhaps he had a confidant (either a PA or, in an extreme case, Violet De Merville herself — who was party to the Baron’s episodes but willing, for one reason or another, to cover his tracks); or possibly Gruener was projecting or otherwise exposing his ‘book’ to light on a circumstantial basis, which left the problem of catching him in the act…

He had, under the influence of the last round of narcotics, suggested to John his dream-inspired consideration that Gruener in fact carried some sort of digestible, unappetising though it sounded.

‘They are pretty juicy documents,’ John had allowed, mock-frowning, ‘though they leave a bad taste in my mouth. But’s that just me.’

‘John.’

‘Not like swallowing legal papers,’ he had gone on, looking anything but solemn. ‘Bloody dry enough to make anyone choke.’

Sherlock had depressed the button and lowered his bed from sitting to lying flat to escape such foolishness. John had snorted.)

Now, John shrugged. ‘Maybe I will just shoot him.’

(Visions of Dewer’s Hollow and John’s jacket with leather elbowpatches; of him ordering corporals around Baskerville completely on a bluff and smirking as he saluted; of him pulling rank during that Bloody Guardsman case… John’s charms were often best displayed when taking charge.) ‘Tempting though that might be, I’d err towards no.’

‘Yes, yes,’ John droned, standing up and collecting the emptied (plastic) water pitcher. ‘Takes away from the victory of solving the riddle.’
'To say nothing of the undesirability of your spending the rest of your life in prison,’ he added.

Suddenly stilling by the door, John looked back at him. After a moment during which Sherlock’s mind echoed and resonated with jarring, contradictory attempts to read John’s frown, John spoke. ‘Let’s leave off worrying about the rest of my life until we can make firm plans for next week, shall we.’

*Infuriating*, it was so infuriating, that the short distance between the door and the bed was inaccessible only as a result of Sherlock’s unsteadiness on his feet and a tangle of cords and wires. At times like this, John needed to have his boundaries pushed, to be seduced (usually in the less prurient sense, although now, probably literally too) into remembering that he didn’t enjoy playing by the rules or being a ‘good person’: he was a romantic, exceptional man, one for whom Sherlock had now defied death twice. For such a man to be fearful of the future was entirely anathema to his nature.

‘That isn’t how you would spend the rest of your life,’ Sherlock informed him. He was aware, hyper-aware, that his matter-of-fact tone with respect to John’s feelings and actions had more than once recently gotten him into dangerous waters. Nevertheless, he felt strongly that this time they were pushing each other in the same direction.

‘No?’ John asked, eyebrows raised. (This single word was too polysemous, too difficult to parse.)

Whether it was his recent experiences or a side-effect of the medications, or simply a long overdue arrival at a critical mass, Sherlock heard himself say, casually, ‘Not unless you would prefer it, of course. Though, now you mention it, this might be an appropriate moment to state your preference, should you have one.’

John blinked at him, which seemed eminently reasonable, since somehow Sherlock’s mouth and lungs and voice had just articulated, albeit somewhat circuitously and with no hint of ‘romance’, the question of how John wanted to spend the rest of his life — asked him this *now*, when John was meant to be on his way to the ice-chips machine and Sherlock was still not allowed to wear more than a hospital gown done up in bows at the back.

(*Dangerous… said another Sherlock to another John.*)

‘Well…’ John equivocated, and for a moment Sherlock’s stomach plummeted with the idea that *now*, for perhaps the first time, John Watson would fall back in a retreat. ‘We have got a while to
work out the specifics. I’m not exactly in a rush.’

A gambler, a doctor, a soldier, a writer, a younger brother, a self-denying sexually-masterful idealist with a penchant for the dark, the morbid, the difficult, the abnormal, and the chaotic: how little any of these epithets managed to say about the man standing before him, apparently vowing to spend not only his death but his life with a notoriously-unsociable recovering-drug addict with a habit of setting things on fire (including, to name only the most recent, an eyestalk with the eyeball still attached).

He’d been staring at John in wonderment for far too long, the world rushing by around his ears like a wind tunnel in a storm, but he only had one coherent thought in his head, tumbling out before he could stop himself, ‘Come here.’

John instantly came there, setting the pitcher down on his chair (he would likely sit on it later and then be annoyed with himself for forgetting) as he strode briskly forward, smile warping his face into a mash of emotions that was nearly ugly but was so, so dear that Sherlock wondered if people spoke of having their hearts broken with joy. Mind flooding with relief, his arms (pain be damned) tilted up to take hold of John’s elbows — they hadn’t kissed, hadn’t embraced, had barely touched in nearly a week and he struggled to locate any frame of reference for how bereft it had felt, even with John so close by, to be forcibly thrown back into the untouchable unspeakable vacant uncertain realm of the 800 days when he’d had nothing but a ghost of John conjured in his imagination, so much less perfect than reality. But he reached now and John, rather than sitting on the edge of the bed, used his stance to his advantage and hovered close to Sherlock with restless, bright eyes. Their fingers intertwined, in spite of the hideousness of tubes and monitors and cables.

‘You’ve been here the whole time, but,’ Sherlock croaked, eyes transfixed with looking at their entwined limbs, ‘it’s not — it is irrational to feel that —’

‘I know,’ John murmured, ‘I know, it’s okay. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.’ He sat firmly on the patch of mattress by Sherlock’s hip, and his forehead brushed against Sherlock’s temple as they leaned towards each other. Both of their breathing was thick and close, but the psychosomatic effects on Sherlock’s chest were manifold.

Eventually, vocal chords gummy with lachrymosal mucous, Sherlock pulled back and sniffed, ‘I hate this ridiculous bed.’

‘Yeah, because you’ve been spoiled by my £200 mattress of clouds and angel foam.’

‘Your mattress is a plinth of stale bread, we are destroying it the moment we get home.’
'I will definitely enjoy watching you do *that,*' John countered.

The safe territory of deflection allowed them both to breathe normally again.

Except after a moment John impulsively dragged Sherlock’s fingers to his lips and firmly, reverently, kissed his left knuckles. Then his right. Hugging them with his whole hand around Sherlock’s, gentle around the intravenous lines.

*I'm sorry I scared you,* Sherlock wanted to say, so that John wouldn’t have to admit it. He was aware of how often he made John unhappy — how even sitting here healing was painful to John. But John continued to say ‘we’ and ‘our’ and ‘us’, and Sherlock was too selfish to tell him to stop.

‘I’m pretty furious, you know,’ John murmured, confirming Sherlock’s own thoughts.

‘Naturally.’ Sherlock did know, after a fashion: knew that John and Mycroft had exchanged multiple brusque conversations that exceeded John’s customary levels of rudeness, a transgression almost exclusive to moments of anger; knew that John had been holding back these past few days — had been more frustrated than his words made it seem — that Sherlock had been tweeting, in his few seconds of privacy, to contacts outside the hospital to exaggerate the severity and nature of his injuries; saw, in the lingering side-long glances at how much food Sherlock was consuming versus how much work he had already taken up on this case (inconvenient though it continued to be from his hospital bed), John’s concern that somehow this case was taking on the shape and unstoppability of the days after the initial Reichenbach painting affair.

‘And you don’t remember anything?’ John pressed gently, looking him in the eyes searching for reassurance. ‘I know you said, the other day, but —’

It was not entirely pleasant to recount, convoluted as it had become in his memory with the surgery and his own Mind Palace and the tumult of other information connected to his attack, but:

‘There were two of them. Approached me on the street — or, well, I believe in a sort of private drive near the train tracks.’

John was watching him attentively now, brow drawn down over his face as he listened. The warmth from their still-tangled arms prevented a shiver that threatened to break under his skin.
‘Neither of them was Gruener, of that I’m certain,’ Sherlock added, because it had been excruciatingly obvious even in his inhibited state that every time the Austrian’s name had come up for the first day or so after Sherlock regained consciousness that John believed him personally, unreservedly responsible for the assault. Part of him had been braced to learn in the morning’s newspaper that Gruener had been mysteriously shot through an open window in the middle of the night, to scent the powder burns on John’s finger tips when he helped prop up Sherlock’s pillow.

‘Anything else?’ John’s hands were still holding his, thumb brushing over the site where the IV entered his body, and the odd comforting/uncomfortable sensation was distracting enough from the rising tide of adrenalin that he felt lurking in the wings of his consciousness. It’s over, he reminded himself sternly. And this is… fine. Better than fine. He hasn’t left yet. He doesn’t think you’re mad. You’re not mad. He doesn’t resent this (you) (much) and it’s fine.

‘One of them,’ Sherlock said, with careful, clear enunciated consonants, because the picture in his head was fuzzy but, between themselves, he knew what he saw, even if the data was being unforgivably slow and garbled, a corrupted file with only a few frames untarnished, ‘was a woman.’

For a moment John’s expression didn’t change. ‘A woman.’

‘Obviously the other one was a man,’ Sherlock supplied, lest he have misjudged John’s threshold of credulity. ‘I didn’t hallucinate the entire episode as some sort of female ninja cult attack.’

John exhaled a shell of a laugh, as though distantly amused but primarily still processing. ‘Do — did you know her? What kind of woman?’

‘No. I don’t know — my memory of the event is…’ He ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation, leaving John’s hands behind on the blanket, but this was important and his mind was not cooperating. ‘She knew me.’

John’s eyebrows shot up. ‘She knew you? What, as… as more than just the guy in the hat, you mean?’

Eyes closed, Sherlock dug desperately through the dishevelled mess in his Mind Palace foyer, papers and mental images and soundbites from that day, all strewn about, sodden wet, as though a pipe had burst and torn through flooring and walls alike, mixing files and even furniture that were supposed to remain separate.
A clumped, torn sliver of a photographic memory — a smirk of a smile, that woman’s — floated up out of the morass.

‘She didn’t want to stab me. But she… didn’t shy away from doing it. Wet work: very probably a familiar province.’

Emerging from his inward reflection, he found John was grimacing more deeply now. ‘Would you know her again, if you saw her?’

That was an excellent question. ‘I’m… not certain. More likely if she smiled.’

For some reason, this — this one detail — suddenly set John’s face into a riot of twitching anger, until he could no longer restrict the reaction to his face — had to be on his feet —

‘She smiled,’ John nodded, to himself, mouth almost duck-shaped as he pretended to consider this neutrally. A sure sign, if ever there was one, that John was incensed. ‘She smiled because she was a little iffy about it, and then she stabbed you anyway. Terrific. More psychopaths.’

‘Not necessarily,’ Sherlock cut in, because that word was not even partially vestigial in his mnemonic data of that day. ‘Another high-functioning sociopath, possibly, but —’

‘You are not a high-functioning sociopath,’ John declared, with sweeping, certain decisiveness. The air in the room changed, shifted like the breeze before a storm, the scented gust of fumes and heat before a tube rushed blazingly onto a platform. As though the entire conversation hinged on this and this alone…

— He’d stumbled across the diagnosis (a disorder: a condition) years ago, possibly when he was in the final stages of dissolving his ties with Victor, wondering dimly if this confirmed what he had always implicitly assumed: that he didn’t feel things the same way as other people; that their cues were impenetrable to him, and their insistence on social patterns of behaviour when so clearly that was an obstacle to proper, expedient functioning of both mind and society, was not at all a compunction he felt bound to obey. He was, he knew, mercurial, impulsive, and domineering — all useful traits, it emerged and continued to prove in his years with Alec, with the Met, outsmarting his brother, outsmarting the drug dealers, outsmarting nearly every idiotic person who entered his sphere of notice. —
And yet John had marched unevenly into a lab in Bart’s Hospital and Sherlock had, within seconds, begun devising the plan to rid of him that abhorrent cane. Not only because it was unseemly (though it did nothing to flatter the too-young man who had no sound need for it), but because John — clearly — hated it. And John had loved the run from Angelo’s after the cab, even the wrong cab; had laughed against the wall until Angelo himself had appeared and delivered the punchline to the night’s best joke.

In spite of all subsequent efforts of Sherlock’s to undo this one shining act of generosity, John stood here, on two healthy feet, breathing like a bull facing off against a red flag (and the moron who was waving it), hating to the depths of his being the person who had relished, even for a moment, the opportunity to take the wind out of Sherlock’s insensitive, selfish ego.

‘Many would disagree with you,’ Sherlock muttered.

‘Yeah, well, sod them, all right, because —’

‘I love you,’ said Sherlock.

Had he said it purely to watch the incredibly plasticity of John’s face change arrangements at the speed of lightning, he would not have been in the least disappointed; equally, had he blurted it out in order to test the fortitude of his still-recovering bowels, it would have been a compelling experiment.

John was still standing there, watching him, stranded amidst a sea of tile and sterilised furniture, but some of the warmth in his expression seemed to be receding.

‘Is that meant to be a joke?’ John began, stiffly, eyes scanning Sherlock’s face.

There was no clear grammatical way to refute what John said whilst reasserting Sherlock’s statement, but nor was there any plausibility to blaming the thudding in his chest on his recent cardiac history.

‘Don’t deliberately misunderstand me,’ he flustered, suddenly furious that if John decided to leave the room quickly, there was virtually no way Sherlock could catch up to him without compromising his injuries. ‘You know what I meant.’
‘Yeah, but… sorry, I just wasn’t expecting to hear you say it. Like… like this. Here.’

Why not? Was it unnecessary — uncomfortable? Was it in fact a faux pas to deliver such an important message in the daylight? in a hospital bed? in the middle of someone else’s sentence? Or was Sherlock so emotionally stilted that John had convinced himself that such a declaration was not to be hoped for?

‘Need I remind you, you already said it, and under less-than-clinical conditions.’

An incredulous shock broke across John’s face. ‘You heard that?’ John wondered. ‘During sex doesn’t usually count, Sherlock.’

Grim embarrassment slid down his spine like cold sputum. ‘I apologise if I misunderstood the meaning of that phrase.’ He clenched his hands. ‘I was unaware that the circumstances —’

‘Now who’s being deliberately obtuse,’ John butted in.

Sherlock stopped talking.

John was looking at him unguardedly, his mouth a small flat line, his eyebrows bowed upwards — almost sad. After a moment of staring at each other, John came back, leaned forward, gathering both of Sherlock’s hands flat to his own sternum before placing his other hand along Sherlock’s jaw. (John’s touch: always stable, sure, grounding.)

With a murmur low and suddenly, uncharacteristically shaky, John enunciated every word with deliberate force: ‘I love you — so damn much — it’s nearly killing me.’ It was a pledge, wrested de profun
dis, almost a confession, as though he was baring the single fact of his being. ‘I am going to spend the rest of my life having you slowly tear me apart, inside and out. And the maddest part is: nothing would make me happier.’

This was — there was something awful, enormous and terrifying, in this statement — it echoed in his ears like thunder shaking a small aircraft as it flew through a storm. Every terrible thing he’d ever seen reflected on the faces of Victor and Alec and Sally Donovan and his parents and his teachers and the shrieking little girl whom Moriarty had nearly poisoned with sweets, all of that irreconcilable, inconsolable darkness they feared in Sherlock was at the heart of John’s words: and yet, somehow, John was throwing himself into the darkness willingly.
You shouldn’t! Sherlock wanted to shout, as though he were watching John stride into a funeral pyre meant for himself. What kind of life was that? How can you? I’m horrible — I’m the worst person I know! (Annoying, selfish, deceitful, unpleasant, rude, ignorant, just all-round obnoxious — dismissive, unaware, uncomprehending — for someone who staked their reputation on knowing things, he knew so vanishingly little, so absolutely miniscule a portion of how the world worked or how people behaved or how John could possibly be real. Even Sally Donovan had seen it, spotted it from the beginning, had been right to moan, when he’d launched, high as a main topgallant sail, into his first-ever Yard monologue describing the facts of the case, when she’d muttered in a pained voice, ‘Oh my god, do you even listen to the shit you’re talking?’ She’d seen right through him, as anyone who bothered to might: he misread signs and got even the most elementary facts wrong, blundering around in the dark as much as every other sorry idiot — worse (a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing; an active imagination is the devil’s playground), really, considering how many things he might have done with his life to make it better for others rather than simply passed the time so destructively for himself. I’m not the boy, I’m the East Wind — I’ll wear you down to salt and ash, and they won’t even be able to identify what’s left. I’m going to be your murderer just by being myself, and you’re giving me permission…)’

‘You have terrible taste,’ was the only thought that made it out of his mouth, choked thought it was.

‘Mmm,’ John nodded, leaning even closer, until he took up all of Sherlock’s field of vision. ‘It’s what I’m like, I’ve heard.’

* * *

Four more (deplorable, stupefying) days in the hospital had nearly rotted his brains until they dribbled like putrefied bile from his ears.

‘Oh, Sherlock!’ tsked Mrs Hudson disapprovingly in reply, fluffing a pillow on the settee as he settled (teeth-gritted and minimising movement so that fiery jagged spears would not rip every remaining muscle he possessed).

‘Don’t mind him, Mrs Hudson,’ John called, mounting their seventeen steps with two armfuls of Sainsbury’s biscuits (the good ones: excellent) and a full restock of his medical supplies (less tempting, but no doubt necessary). ‘He’s out of practice with someone who actually listens to him complain.’

Sherlock scowled. The nurses had been infuriatingly unforthcoming in response to his requests for reading material, case files, their own histories, or anything of even the remotest shred of interest.
(‘It would be surprisingly easy to murder someone in a hospital,’ Sherlock had mentioned to several of the staff, eyes keenly tuned to their reactions. Several were shocked (please, as if it hadn’t occurred to them); three — including the draconian Nurse Glasher — gave him variations of laughter which suggested that, yes, it had occurred to them, and that he had been among those patients to bring the fact to their attention. ‘Corruptio optimi pessimaplay, and all that.’

‘Doctors and nurses — and midwives — are always the first ones accused, historically speaking,’ John had piped up from behind a newspaper.

‘I didn’t specify “doctors”,’ Sherlock had corrected; he’d been thinking of family members, visitors, anyone with any access, really, and a moment of privacy… Then — he frowned at the nurse (one of the ‘shocked’ ones) who handed him a miniscule paper cup, purely as a vehicle for his midday pills: surely there was a less wasteful way to administer medication! — he had swallowed then looked at John. ‘Do they teach you about this in medical school?’

‘Yep,’ John had divulged serenely, peeking from behind The Guardian, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. ‘“Famous Doctor Deaths, and How You Can Too”: required right before you start seeing patients as a junior doctor for the first time.’

Sherlock had rolled his eyes.)

‘Well,’ Mrs Hudson pronounced, a little uncertainly to John as Sherlock (rejoining the present) settled back into the cushions. ‘I’m very glad to have you boys home at last. Even after all this nonsense — I nearly lost track of the days!’

He quite agreed. (But why was she uncertain? Which ‘nonsense’ precisely? They were quite plainly present, and for the most part accounted for. Was she… disappointed in him for getting injured? (He was unimpressed with his own combat skills, so quickly atrophied after over two years honing them in more dire circumstances than a bright but overcast alley off Camberwell.) Was she… The strain of trying to interpret the infinity of uncertainties that might plague his affectionate but currently hovering and therefore unwelcome housekeeper was already exhausting him.) He shut his eyes.

Some murmuring from the kitchen and answering coddling murmurs of affirmation grated on his already taxed nerves, so he retreated further into his Mind Palace.

Now that he was home, it was vital to recommence the plan. Being stabbed, it transpired, was extraordinarily inconvenient. Among its other inconveniences, the incident had set them back ten whole days — ten precious days of legwork, the whole reason anyone bothered to come to them
rather than the idiot, clock-on-clock-off, workday hours morons at the Yard or, worse, the Kevlar-happy fools at the Security Services. Gruener’s wedding was only four days away. More to the point, if he was honest with himself, he was hardly back up to fully functional (though nowhere near as fragile as John seemed determined to diagnose him). (Which related to several of the contemptible conditions of his release, namely that he was not to exercise any ‘sudden or strenuous movement’ for — John had gripped his hand like a vice, not out of comfort, but to catch and hold his attention (surely violating his ethical code in the process! Sherlock was sure he had bruises! thankfully it wasn’t his bow hand) — for two sodding weeks. None. Of any kind.)

He opened his eyes.

John was sitting in his chair, unconsciously at work in his mission to wear the fabric beneath his thumbs away at a rate disproportionate to the rest of the upholstery. He was also regarding Sherlock watchfully.

It was surely a sign of the mind-addling effects of prolonged exposure to fools, and four kinds of medication, that made his stomach lurch at the sight, sound, smell, (phantom taste and touch) of John, the beautiful fractious heavy-eyed buttoned-up coiled spring of a man that couldn’t admit anything of importance without being pushed out of his comfort zone and then a bit farther. The longer the silence pooled between them, the worse grew the queasiness swamping the back of Sherlock’s throat. Because eventually John would decide that Sherlock had pushed too far. That the next time John opened his mouth, it would be to announce the impossibility of continuing like this. That he no longer felt or believed the hair-raising storm of things he had sworn by Sherlock’s hospital bed (no doubt adding that such declarations didn’t count, anyway, and that Sherlock was himself a fool for believing, even for a moment, otherwise).

John opened his mouth; Sherlock braced himself.

‘You’re already thinking about the case again, aren’t you.’

Yes and no: he had never stopped thinking about the case, at least during the period in which he rebuilt (far more shakily than he ever imagined possible of himself) his concentration and attention. He could pretend, though, that it was the only thing on his mind.

‘The window is closing,’ he urged. Time was indeed running out. ‘This is our last, best opportunity to take down one of the most impressive…’ John’s scowl pulled him up short, so he dropped it in favour of a different line. ‘I know my brother brought you the file.’

Lashes flickering minutely over rolled eyes in I-knew-that-git-couldn’t-manage-a-subterfuge
resignation, John licked his lips. (A tableau of gesture: a dumb-show that even Sherlock could interpret as vexation.)

‘You need rest,’ stressed John, in a strained undertone, ‘rest, and recovery. And dear GOD ABOVE, I will have no problem whatsoever with telling your brother to take over this case if it means you will actually give yourself time to get well!’

‘I’m not an infant,’ Sherlock insisted, swinging into sitting, furious that even this was difficult (pain that refused to let him go, preferring instead to replicate slicing him open afresh from the inside until he longed to sink into a shuddering heap, except even that would hurt: stabbing was very swiftly sinking in his estimation of interestingness) —

‘This? THIS is what I’m worried about,’ John cut in, scowling at the spasm of fury that shot from Sherlock’s midsection through his lungs. ‘Do I need to show you again what pulled stitches look like when they get infec—’

‘For god’s sake, John, I’m not going to do cartwheels through the man’s window!’

‘— because if you think the scars on your back were painful, you’ve got another thing coming.’

Sherlock stopped moving. They didn’t discuss — John had tiptoed around the evidence of Sherlock’s time in Serbia (though almost certainly he didn’t know that was their country of origin) ever since he’d first seen them, by accident, in the fluorescent kitchen lamplight one midnight in June. After (a month after) that, he’d traced slow, blunt fingertips over each one in the middle of another night when’d he’d thought Sherlock was asleep, only the fourth time they’d been in bed together as sexual partners. The gooseflesh, naturally, had told John before long that Sherlock was patently not sleeping, but they both maintained the fiction and, after John’s unhurried exploration, he had settled back down, closer, at Sherlock’s side, lips shakily pressing to Sherlock’s skin, until Sherlock had feigned waking and allowed John to roll him up and over him until they got lost in each other in quaking, worshipful relief. The nightmares, unlike John’s, were silent, and did not merit mentioning.

‘You cannot — you cannot — get Gruener. Not in this state.’

‘No,’ Sherlock agreed.

John, who had gathered enough breath for a rant, was almost comically pulled up by this. ‘Er.
Right. Okay. Well, that’s…’

‘Even if, as I shall continue to deny, I were not fine—’ (John made a sound very nearly like a growl, but said nothing else) ‘—it would be moot: they plainly know who I am, what I look like. Not just Gruener, either.’

‘You did visit the man’s house,’ John observed in an unamused voice that spoke volumes about what he thought of that decision.

‘Even in a disguise, I believe it would end… badly.’ (Most of his disguises required full mobility and lung capacity, neither of which he had entirely regained just yet, to say nothing of what John would say about allowing Sherlock to impersonate a character fully eight inches shorter. No: a disguise was, regrettably, not currently possible.

‘Then I should do it,’ John acknowledged, with every fibre of his body tautened in readiness, once more unto the breach, bravely daring Sherlock to nay-say it.

‘John, the likelihood of these people recognising you, if they recognise me, is approaching ninety-five per cent.’

‘I could do the disguise. A… a moustache, I dunno, dye my hair — we could figure something out —’

‘Short of actual reconstructive surgery, John, you would still fundamentally look like yourself, in which case the problem persists.’

With a sigh of impatience, John licked his lips, clearly wishing he could say more. His fingers dug in to the tartan-clad stuffing. ‘All right, then, what do you suggest, Dupin?’

‘Obviously: someone else will have to go with me,’ Sherlock spelled out.

‘With me, Sherlock, for god’s sake, were you even listening to me just now?’

Sherlock groaned and ducked his head into his hands, tousling his hair beneath his fingers since he
couldn’t flounce out of the room entirely without significant energy loss. Which perhaps affirmed John’s nannyish, but evidently not incorrect, point.

‘Fine,’ he moaned, through gritted teeth. ‘With you, then. Someone else: someone completely unknown to Gruener, or Miss De Merville, or conceivably any of their security staff. Someone with a strong enough moral centre to agree to do this on short notice—’

‘Somebody who’s going to learn all the crap you had to memorise about morbid pornography?’ John conjectured, tone laced with sarcasm.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock intoned, dragging it out. He had in fact selected just the person. It was more a matter now of making John see the wisdom of his choice. ‘Someone often underestimated in their work, but who is entirely capable of defending herself —’

‘Hang on,’ John cut in, ‘herself? Who the hell…’ And then it dawned on him, his expression shifting tectonically. ‘Oh, god. I know, don’t I.’

‘I admit, it will involve some… extra work.’ Namely in the realms of clothes and comportment — Gruener would hardly believe she was the private face of one of his chief competitors for macabre erotic art if she turned up in a striped jumper covered in cat hair. Although, a double-bluff… ‘But that is exactly the reason why she is an ideal candidate for the role.’

Head hanging low with exhausted, long-suffering resignation, he could not pretend not to be (at least partially) convinced. ‘Christ, we’re such bastards.’

At just that moment, John’s mobile began to buzz in his coat pocket. Meeting Sherlock’s eyes from beneath lowered eyelids, he stared. Didn’t budge for two full rings before at last leaning in the opposite direction, never breaking eye contact, as he went about digging out his phone.

Glaring at Sherlock (who felt a sudden wave, rather than the usual case elation or surge of energy, of fatigue), John faced into the room as if carrying on their conversation, despite speaking into the microphone with the other end pressed firmly to his ear, ‘Molly — thanks for calling.’
Chapter End Notes

[I have many and various *strong* feelings about Molly’s role in series 4 vs. in series 3. Even had I not reacted so strongly (and contradictorily), though, I think she's an absolutely brilliant character and thus... prepare to revel in her glory in the next chapter(s).]

We are nearing the end, though, chums. Won't say how close but... we're zeroing in.
'Mmm,’ Molly allowed. ‘And it’s not, well… not microscope slides or anything fragile like that: not exactly sexy to make the person you’re trying to sleep with stare into a microscope.’ (John took a moment to admit to himself that the image of Sherlock hunched over a microscope, dexterous hands wheeling the lenses about, absurd skin illuminated by the light underneath the platform, did plenty for him. But he took her point.)

Chapter Notes

As ever, the tags note the crimes this fic's baddie has perpetrated. All occurred in past and will *never* be shown in this fic, but just to be safe, the tags are there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 14: John

‘If nothing could save us, not money, not a male body, and not even studying, we might as well destroy everything immediately.’

—Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name*

Could she do this, or couldn’t she? Would they have enough time — less than 24 hours — to prepare? Was she doing this just to please Sherlock? Most important of all, did she really understand what Sherlock — what they both — were asking of her?

From the moment she arrived in the flat, outfit complete with pink-and-black striped scarf and matching socks peeking from the tops of her trainers, John was plagued with a doubt that, for all Sherlock’s bizarre confidence, Molly Hooper was just not cut out to pose as a notorious yet private millionairess with a penchant for dirty antique pictures.
Sherlock had explained, in his somehow simultaneously blunt and roundabout way, the basics of the plan, and John had mentioned (because, he felt, it was irresponsible not to) the probable toll this would have on her — and them all, to some extent — down the line.

Molly was staring at them wide-eyed. ‘So you. You think I should… should…’

‘Go undercover, yes,’ Sherlock supplied, a little impatiently.

John frowned and sent him a quick, sharp glance. She’s doing us a favour.

Sherlock pursed his lips and shifted to uncross and recross his legs. FINE. ‘We need you for this operation to be successful, Molly. More than anything, more than any information we might be able to pack into John’s or, realistically, your head in the next twenty-four hours’ (John rolled his eyes) ‘will be far less important than the presentation you deliver to Gruener in person.’

‘Yes, well, exactly,’ she piped up, looking as much bemused as wary. ‘I don’t — I’m not, well, like you.’

‘You won’t be being me. You’ll be being yourself.’ His mouth swerved and he gave the half-smile he saved for moments he deemed he should aim for ‘reassuring’. ‘Well, yourself as a society misanthrope with a pornography addiction.’

She pursed her lips into the sort of tight mousy line it often made when Sherlock was pressing her to do something.

‘And how much time do we have? I might need to go home, get some things —’

‘I already have the appropriate dress selected,’ Sherlock boasted. ‘It’s in your size.’

John could have kicked him; would have, too, had the man not also been on painkillers and blood thinners and less than a full night’s sleep in about a fortnight. (That last very nearly applied to John too, but… who was counting?)

Shaking her head, Molly frowned. ‘That’s not what I mean. I’ve just got… well, a date.’
John prevented his own eyebrows from going into his forehead (much), but he couldn’t speak for Sherlock. ‘With that Tim bloke?’ That was good: Molly was, in spite of all of John’s doubts right now, definitely a lovely woman, albeit one who seemed to be unsure how to do overtly social things, like dating.

‘Tom,’ Molly corrected, with a funny look her face. ‘No, not — not him. A new man.’

‘Molly, we’re tracking down an internationally infamous serial killer and probable paedophile! Surely that takes precedent!’

‘Sherlock,’ John groaned, low, but Molly was already speaking,

‘It’s my weekend, Sherlock. I work long hours so that I have time to myself, to — to do what I like. Obviously I want to help you — I’m going to help you, that’s not what I’m saying. I just… I need to…’ She started fumbling with her bag and gathering up her notebook, on which she’d been jotting things down as Sherlock laid out the basics.

Well, he supposed that answered his questions. And, really, despite a ripple of resentment, he couldn’t actually blame her: this was, objectively, a foolish thing they were trying to do. It was just as likely to succeed as blow up in their faces. And Molly didn’t do this — hadn’t chosen this life, in a way altogether different to how John felt, in his bones, that he hadn’t chosen this life either: this life had chosen him.

Of course Sherlock had sprung to his feet, no doubt aching from doing so but too stubborn show it, and was glaring, backlit by the front window in its waning grey light. ‘We need you for this, Molly. You are not a substitute, or a back-up, or a replacement of any kind. You are ideally suited to this precise case. And John will be there to do or remember anything you don’t.’

Years of his life had gone by in which John had wondered, really painfully wondered, if he could tell when Sherlock cared and when he was shamming — when he was speaking from the heart and when he just sounded like it. This, John knew, looking at Sherlock illuminated by the lowest angle of daylight, just as cars were beginning to think of headlamps and traffic and their tea waiting at home — this was the real kind. Sherlock trusted Molly; had trusted her (and John had to swallow the thick air in his throat as he thought of it) when he had trusted almost no one else, not even John. (What had gone on between them? John thought of Molly like a co-worker, or a middling cousin, the sort of person he’d always stop to check on if he saw them in the street, but might not remember to text or see for months together. But Molly and Sherlock shared something: treated each other differently, since Moriarty.)
Sherlock crossed the room to stand at its epicentre, hands in his pockets. ‘This is important —’

‘Don’t pressure me,’ Molly warned, in a voice half-harassed and half-sharp, turning around with her bag and all the chaotic layers of her clothing tugging on each other like a gaggle of unruly children. ‘I’m going back to my place, I’ll get a few things I need, and I will be back as soon as I can.’

She waited for Sherlock to say something, and when he didn’t, she nodded, looked at John with a slightly less terse expression, then departed.

‘What kinds of things could she need?’ Sherlock demanded in a rapid undertone.

‘Feed her cat?’

‘She doesn’t actually have a cat, John,’ Sherlock retorted, as though John had been duped by the trick of pulling a coin from behind someone’s ear.

There were infinite alternative answers to that question, but he hazarded, ‘Tampons?’ knowing it would derail Sherlock’s incredulous train of thought.

Nose wrinkling in distaste, Sherlock went to the window to stare down at the street. ‘No, it’s not that, she isn’t —’

John put up a hand, ‘No, for Christ’s sake, STOP. I draw the line at deducing when our friends are menstruating.’

Sherlock stood still for a moment. ‘Useful, though,’ he argued, to himself.

He refused to dignify that with a reply.

John spent the better part of the next hour bracing himself for Molly’s phone call to tell them that, in fact, she was begging off, that she couldn’t do it, couldn’t bear it, that she’d see them around. An
hour later almost on the dot, then, John was more than a little impressed to hear and then see Molly reclimbing the stairs, this time carrying a bulkier, dizzingly-patterned overnight bag in one hand and a laptop bag in the other.

‘Hi,’ she announced brightly, as though this were any ordinary afternoon. Putting her bigger duffle down on the landing, tucked out of the way of foot traffic, she came into the kitchen, bringing the laptop into the room with her. ‘I, er — I ran into my neighbour’s daughter on the way out of my building.’

Sherlock didn’t look up from his computer screen, so it fell to John (for the millionth time) to do the work of being a conversant, polite human being: ‘Oh?’

‘She’s very interested in Sherlock and you. Saw you once when — do you remember the time you stopped round for my birthday, a few years ago?’

‘Course, yeah,’ said John, remembering not much more than being furious with Sherlock for chasing away his date, and getting shitfaced in order to be stop looking at Sherlock all evening with a simmering, itching fury. (In retrospect, the drinking had also come after John, finding himself tuning out of a conversation with one of Molly’s fellow lab techs, a perfectly decent (if geeky) lad, had happened to look away and be bowled over with the sudden curious thought — clear and fully-formed, as though someone stood beside him had muttered the suggestion in his ear — of how Sherlock would look if John had shoved him into a corner and bitten at his neck until his knees buckled.) (Turned out: he looked, tasted, sounded, felt impossibly better than John would ever have been able to imagine then.)

‘—tweeted how scared she is and how she’s going to get all her friends to send you their good wishes.’

John had lost the thread for a moment there, so when Sherlock spoke with something like awe in his voice, John was a step behind.

‘That’s excellent! John,’ he beamed, turning to look at John with his face shining with glee, ‘I need a twitter persona.’

‘Oh, god,’ John groaned, messaging his temples: that was the last thing he needed, Sherlock getting sucked into a vortex of internet trolls. ‘Maybe later, love, when we’re not busy planning to corner a murderer.’
The words were out of his mouth — Molly giggled and went on with setting up her laptop, so he assumed she hadn't really thought anything of it, or anything more than a sarcastic turn of phrase — but Sherlock’s cheeks had gone very, very faintly pink, as had the dip of his jugular notch.

Still wearing her teenagerish scarf, Molly bit her lip and visibly swallowed. ‘Right. Well. I suppose I’d better…’ She turned her gaze to the mountain of books and papers currently stacked on the partners’ desk. ‘Dive right in?’

John smiled at her, more warmly, he hoped, than Sherlock had managed. ‘But, really, Molly, it’s… it’s not nice stuff. Pretty bloody awful, even when it isn’t a surprise.’

She gave a sort of gentle nod, shrugging. ‘I’m not especially squeamish. Well. I don’t especially like cockroaches, but that’s, that’s it, I think. Hard to work in a morgue if you’re iffy around body parts or… you know, death.’

‘Fair,’ John conceded. Sherlock was eyeing them both watchfully, but John pointedly ignored him. He didn’t know Molly’s views — hell, her personal history — about sexual things. It was a bit hard to imagine that a woman who spent half her life smelling of formaldehyde and was sat in their front room, thin, elegant hands on her knees, wearing in a hand-knitted electric-coloured striped jumper over a clashing primary-coloured blouse, as someone who inclined to the darker side of sex. But, then again, you never knew. She’s fancied Sherlock, who — John found he could attest now from actual experience — was not exactly a laugh-riot in the bedroom. He cleared his throat. ‘Even so, though. If you need some air, or a break or anything, just — go ahead and take it, yeah?’

She nodded, muttered a small, ‘Okay, thanks,’ and, never losing the fiercely-straight posture that smacked to John of a childhood of piano lessons (and everything that kind of childhood carried along with it), pulled the cross-body purse she’d brought over her head. Dive right in, indeed.

After a few minutes, Sherlock made a familiar sound of impatience in the back of his throat, furiously typing on his laptop while scrunched — not curled, as he normally would, but evidently couldn’t without pain — into his chair before the sputtering fire.

‘What’s… Is something wrong?’

John looked up instantly. So, out of the corner of his eye, did Sherlock. ‘What?’

Molly was looking at Sherlock with concern. ‘Did you have — I mean — if you’d rather sit on the
sofa, I can use the desk.’

Sherlock was regarding at her as though she was blathering in tongues.

But John had shaken himself out of the reading about international art commissions law to work backwards. ‘Don’t mind him,’ he told her. ‘He makes noises all the time. You get used to it.’

‘I do not,’ Sherlock swore indignantly.

Snorting, John went back to his profoundly uninteresting homework. ‘You really do.’

‘You do,’ Sherlock muttered, low enough that possibly Molly didn’t hear. John wished, just for a second, that they were indeed alone, in front of the fire, at home, at last, on the first evening after sleeping cramped near-but-not-too-near each other in the hospital for over a week. Even to run his fingers through Sherlock’s hair would have done wonders for his peace of mind. Instead, he turned the page and moved on to a section on — joy of joys — paperwork.

* * *

The air in the flat transformed to resemble a nothing quite so much as a stake-out. With preoccupied voices, they traded information from documents spread over every available surface, buoyed up by constant fillings and fillings of mugs of tea.

‘Do you ever work with music on?’ Molly wondered, only about ten minutes after everything had faded but the crackling of the fire and the hum of the refrigerator and the occasional sloosh of tyres streaming down Baker Street.

‘Er,’ said John. When had he stopped listening to music during cases? He loved music, though his eclectic lack of pickiness had set Sherlock off more times than John liked to recall. Cooking, tidying, or just sitting around reading or blogging between cases, yeah, a bit of Thelonious Monk, Bowie, Adam and the Ants, (on a really nostalgic day) Bananarama, even once in a while — with the silver lining that it’d please Sherlock — some Beethoven. But the problem was, of course, that it so often didn’t please Sherlock, so John either took his mobile and some earphones or, more and more often, just sat back and enjoyed the quiet of Baker Street. Added to which was the fact that Sherlock, with his consistently uncanny ability to know some things, often treated John to some of the most breath-taking music he’d ever witnessed in person, the sort of pieces that made a shiver run up your arms and prickle the back of your neck, made you grateful, in the most sentimental
way, to have been present for something so unabashedly beautiful. ‘We, er… we don’t usually, as it happens,’ John replied eventually, aiming for diplomatic.

‘Do you mind if I plug in my own?’ she asked, already popping the jack into her laptop, one bud in an ear.

‘As long as you don’t hum,’ Sherlock grunted, not looking up.

Molly shrugged nervously, as though in self-defence, so John gave an eye roll in Sherlock’s direction, then went back to trying, for the fourth time, to figure out the difference between engraving and etching.

Then, sometime roughly four hours in, Molly made a bit more rustling than she had done for a while, then finally cleared her throat. ‘Do we… er, eat, at all?’

Cracking his back and stretching from having been slumped in the same position for he’d-lost-track-how-long, John groaned, ‘God, yes. Finally, someone who actually remembers about food.’

Sherlock hmphed but didn’t look up. It was nearly half-eight — definitely time for Sherlock to be needing some painkillers.

‘Yes, tea: definitely,’ he repeated emphatically. ‘What d’you fancy, then, Molly?’

‘Oh, anything,’ she replied. (Women did this a lot, John reflected with annoyance: tried to be accommodating when in fact what they needed was a bloody decision.) How could she trick Gruener into believing she was a match for his cunning and underhandedness when, to the best of John’s knowledge, the biggest deception Molly had ever pulled off was —

Well. In fact, she’d managed a fairly enormous one, hadn’t she? Perhaps, he went on inwardly, getting to his feet on the pretence of hunting for his wallet, it explained something towards John’s reluctance to spending much time with Molly lately. It was hard to put it out of his mind, especially now, with the margins of his thoughts taken up with dosages and listening for changes in Sherlock’s breathing. Not red alert, not by a long chalk, but nowhere near situation normal.

‘I’ll pop out and get something, then, yeah?’ he offered, hearing the forceful tension in his voice and resenting his own tangled feelings. *Millstones and bruises*. A chance to get a bit of air, if
nothing else.

A few minutes later, untucking the trapped collar of his jacket, he looked at the pair of them, quietly retreated already into their own worlds — Molly with her feet tucked under her, a notepad on her lap and two large books sprawled open around her; Sherlock, eyes shut and mouth thin, hands steepled in front of him as though deep into his Mind Palace. Except…

‘Sherlock? Can you come in the kitchen for a minute?’ His tone left no room for argument unless Sherlock had invisibly slid into a full strop, which didn’t seem the case just yet.

Eyeing him warily, Sherlock got up and moved with John into the kitchen, joining him by the kettle.

‘Tea emergency?’ Sherlock guessed sardonically.

’If it’ll help you take your meds,’ John replied flatly, in a lowered voice. Sherlock usually didn’t need it to take pills (a fact John refused to consider too closely until the case was over), but he hadn’t exactly been getting the doctor-recommended fluid intake today. ‘All the evening and dinner-time ones: actually. We have to keep on the schedule, like we discussed. And, as a matter of fact, you might as well go while the shower’s free —’

‘It’s not as though you take aeons to wash, John.’

‘No, but Molly might want to, and if you want to get the smell of hospital off you before you eat, now seems like the moment.’

He had halfway given in to the reflex to lean forward and kiss Sherlock before he realized, with a pang, that Molly could see them and stopped himself. Does it matter? John wondered, mind jangling.

Things were still tentative and delicate enough that instead John merely looked away, looked back at Sherlock’s frown, nodded impatiently (at himself, at Sherlock, at this case) and stepped out towards the door. No kiss.

Idiot, he thought inwardly. But he kept walking, and, greeted by a brisk gust of early October chill, shut the door firmly behind him.
'Oh! Lovely,' Molly sighed with gratitude, putting down the enormous book she had been balancing on her knees and getting up. ‘Dish up in here, or…?’

‘We can be adults,’ John called, excavating each hot plastic container from deeper and deeper in the paper bags. ‘Kitchen table’s safe, I think.’ (Mostly because they hadn’t been home in ten days, so any germinating experiments had gone into the bin days ago.) ‘Red curry, sweet-and-sour chicken, pad thai, and rolls. Oh, and soup. S’all good, so help yourself.’

The walk had definitely helped, but the persistent questions about what they were doing hadn’t dissipated — had, if anything, gotten stronger during his brief venture.

As he went to the draining board for clean plates, he peeked into the front room again. ‘Where’s Sherlock? Shower?’

‘He did, I think — at least I heard the water go,’ she added. ‘But that was a little while ago now. Figured he might like some, you know… privacy.’

Something in the way she said it made him wonder if she really thought Sherlock was upset with her, if when John hadn’t been around to be the buffer Sherlock’d snapped at her for ‘thinking too loudly’ or for sharing an interesting piece of information with an acidic, ‘No, no, do not do that: this is not show-and-tell.’ More likely that — he told himself, ignoring the phantom ache around his neck — than that he’d found some way to get into trouble without leaving the flat.

(For a stab of a second, it occurred to him that Sherlock leaving the flat was precisely the kind of thing the mad idiot would do.)

‘I’ll go and get him,’ John explained. ‘Help yourself to whatever you like, don’t wait,’ distractedly handing Molly the plates and making for the bedroom, because he hadn’t heard the water against tile, nor even the muted thuds of footfalls on Sherlock’s rug over the slightly creaky floor.

John would kill him, he would bloody murder him, if Sherlock had snuck out in the not even half-hour John had taken as a moment for himself, exhausted and sore and head spinning with pictures of horrible things that most people never even saw by accident, let alone were forcing themselves to know by heart; if amidst this smokescreen Sherlock —
'Sherlock?' He rapped on the door, but pushed it fractionally open without waiting.

On the bed, in a fresh dress shirt and clean, straight-off-the-dry-cleaner’s hanger trousers, Sherlock was lying, asleep.

Careful to mind the door, John came in as silently as he could, shut the door behind him, and all but fell back against it.

Us against the rest of the world.

There was something unnameable, something more precious than John was prepared to handle just now, about a Sherlock, curls still wet and cashmere socks but no shoes on his feet, passed out from sheer, natural tiredness. He’d managed, consciously or unconsciously, to lie flat, avoiding the possibility of doing damage to his still-healing abdomen; at the moment, the taut, olive green shirt rising and falling minutely concealed everything but the crest of his collarbone and the hollows of his wrists.

The rest of my life, John vowed, to whatever gods were listening. I am going to spend the rest of my life looking for you, finding you, and even then having you steal my breath when I least expect it. He hadn’t expected any of this: not just the recent stint in the recovery unit, but this — everything. It was stupid to plan, stupid to think about all the years he’d gone to bed (sometimes alone and sometimes very much not so) and wondered, Is this it? Finally, this? This person, who will slowly get absorbed into my life, until I wake up every morning expecting them to be there? Can I stop worrying that I’ll become that sad old man, that lonely old geezer who wakes up, aged sixty, and knows that he’ll never get the moment of peace of Day One of the Rest of My Life?

He was never going to — well, alright, he was probably going to spend lots of mornings (hell, lots of nights too) waking up to an otherwise empty bed. But the thing that was making him want to crawl on top of the duvet beside Sherlock, leave the food and the case and the world outside to Molly and everyone else, was the sense that this, of all ridiculous times and places, was that moment for him. He wasn’t going to be alone. Sherlock wasn’t going to be alone. They were going to get up, every single god damned day for the rest of their lives, and the day wouldn’t begin until they’d touched, brushed hands or noses or lips or toes, or murmured, ‘Morning,’ ‘Morning,’ and restarted the universe all over again.

Sherlock would probably wake if he tried to throw a blanket over him and, since tonight’s portion of the little pill sorter on the dresser was empty beside a 2/3 full cup of water (the glass they usually kept by the loo sink), there was no reason to wake him.
And… the case was still on.

He went out into the kitchen, appreciating with refreshed ears that Molly even *ate* quietly.

She looked up at him, mouth full, and started to speak, but he broke in in an undertone, ‘No, go on, it’s — it’s just us for dinner, apparently. He’s…’ — for some reason the word caught momentarily in his throat, but he pushed past it and sat on his usual chair opposite the bench — ‘he’s sleeping.’

‘That’s good!’ Molly mumbled encouragingly — or as encouragingly as one could with a mouth full of curry.

‘Yeah, so. Anyway…’

They chatted for the rest of the meal, in hushed voices with carefully wielded cutlery, about the most recent information they found — Molly had made up a helpful mnemonic for keeping etchings and engravings straight —, about the change in weather as autumn arrived in earnest, about spicy food and how Sherlock had appreciated her bringing it when he’d been in hospital, and about what, exactly, the hell they planned to do tomorrow.

She wasn’t wearing make-up, he noticed more clearly under the fluorescent light. But her hair was in its usual iron-straight ponytail. (How she kept it so tidy, he’d never know. Harry’s hair had tended to tangle ferociously when they were kids, leading to an immensely unfortunate phase of perms and hair spray that made her look more like candy floss than a person.)

‘How do you think he’s doing it?’

‘Hm?’ John asked, coming back to Earth. Molly was considering him, twirling her fork on a forgotten wide rice noodle. ‘Sorry, gathering wool: what’d you say?’

‘Do you have a theory about how Gruener keeps these pictures?’ she repeated patiently. ‘It’s just, I’ve looked at lots of the history of it now — the material stuff, I mean: the brittleness of the paper, and the chemical make-up of the inks — and I can’t see how he could be *folding it*, or anything like that.’
'No, I know,’ John huffed. ‘The house has its own art studio, though: that’s got to be part of it, surely?’

‘Yes, I think so, too. But… even then, it’s not as though you’d want to spend a lot of timemaking these sorts of things, even for yourself.’

‘You wouldn’t,’ John pointed out.

She smiled. ‘Yes, I suppose.’ Biting her lip, she stared into the middle distance for a bit. Then: ‘So, we’re reasonably sure of a few things: first, that he does have some hard-copy, something tangible, that he uses as… as proof, or something, that he’s assaulted each of these girls.’

He admired her choice of words, but merely nodded. ‘Second, it’s not been in anything like his wallet, his diary, his… anything, any of the things they could get off him —’

‘Who did that?’ Molly interrupted.

‘Mycroft’s people, I think. Probably got him to go through a special high-res CCTV security gate at the Grand National or something, scanned everything they could without him noticing.’ Sherlock had mentioned something like this toward the beginning, when the possibility of digital or even imaginary records was striking John as more and more likely.

‘Mmm,’ Molly allowed. ‘And it’s not, well… not microscope slides or anything fragile like that: not exactly sexy to make the person you’re trying to sleep with stare into a microscope.’ (John took a moment to admit to himself that the image of Sherlock hunched over a microscope, dexterous hands wheeling the lenses about, absurd skin illuminated by the light underneath the platform, did plenty for him. But he took her point.) ‘And not pixels hidden in larger images, like some sort of…’

‘Pervy mosaic?’ John offered.

She laughed. ‘DIY for the rapist with a budget.’

Surprised, this time John laughed with her, a proper giggling enjoyment. When he’d regained his poker face, he shook his head. ‘The, er, DIY idea is a no-go: Sherlock ruled it out.’
'Oh. Well…' She tucked her hair back, then shrugged, smile fading. ‘I’ll keep thinking, anyway.’

They sat there for a moment. John didn’t know if she was waiting for him to get up first, or just wanted to work in the kitchen for a bit. On balance, he hedged, 'Time to get back to work, I guess. If you’re finished.'

Definitely, now that they’d unwound enough to be breaking out the dark humour.

‘Oh, yes, thanks, that was lovely.’ And — yes — really, was Molly actually secretly from an incredibly posh (or twee, aspiring) family? So much so that even here, in the midst of a kitchen at its cleanest when only the sugar, the formaldehyde, and the lens cleaner were in labelled tubes — in this madness, Molly had apparently waited to be excused?

Pitching the dirty dishes into the sink — ‘Don’t worry, we’ll get them later, just… just leave them anywhere’ — and packing the leftovers into closed containers on the worktop (Sherlock almost certainly wouldn’t eat when he woke up, even if John did leave a threatening note, but he’d do it anyway, on the off-chance), John finally threw the tap for a few seconds to run hot water over the plates and utensils.

Queuing up behind him, Molly nearly bumped into him when he turned around, holding out her hands before jumping as though he’d trod on her toes.

‘Sorry, I er — ‘

‘Sorry!’ she blustered, ‘Was just going to wash my hands.’

‘Oh, yeah, course, sorry, go ahead.’

He moved away and dried his own on a tea towel. (Him and Sherlock, forever: no sweet-and-awkward manoeuvring around the kitchen like, well, like couples did, at least in the early days of living together. No light hand on his stomach, the signal, claiming him, when they went out to parties and stood close. No dates at the cinema or the —)

‘Your date?’ he suddenly wondered aloud, turning to Molly as she gestured mutely if she should
put the kettle on. ‘Yeah, please. But — you’re not seeing that Tom bloke anymore, then, you said?’

‘No,’ she frowned, a perfect upside-down smile that made her look, again, like a character out of a children’s book. ‘I, er — I ended it, actually.’

‘Right. Well then I won’t say I’m sorry to hear it,’ he ventured with an attempt at humour. ‘Well, if this new bloke is any trouble, we’d be happy to frighten some sense into him.’

‘Arash,’ Molly nodded, even though he hadn’t quite asked. ‘He’s nice. He’s a hospitalist at Bart’s so, it’s, you know, easier. Lots of it, anyway. So far.’

‘Nothing like trying to explain the smell in your hair to someone who isn’t used to the hospital scent following you home.’

‘Exactly,’ she exhaled, wearily going to the kettle that had just popped. Then, meeting his eyes again for a second as she reached to grab the box of Yorkshire sachets — ‘Oh thanks,’ she added reflexively when he ducked over and got the milk —, she went about pouring the steaming water with the look of a woman who is absolutely bursting with questions.

He braced himself. They hadn’t — he hadn’t — really decided how, or what even he wanted to tell people. It was going to get out eventually: he hadn’t even made it fifty minutes without hurling it at his sister, never mind the next fifty years. But things were just beginning to settle down. They hadn’t had a row (unless you counted the small ones in the hospital about deducing the medical staff, or complaining about the machine noise) in… well, since before the hospital. And as much as John’s gut twisted with the fear, mixed with a kind of grim familiarity, that this latest attempt was going to end very, very badly, some absurd part of him couldn’t stop replaying Sherlock blurtling out, ‘I love you,’ ‘the rest of your life,’ the vulnerable look on Sherlock’s face right after they’d had sex (that morning, god, almost a fortnight ago), all of it. He was going to get them both through this, come hell or high water.

But he wasn’t up to explaining all that just now, to Molly, to… to anyone, if he could help it.

Just at that moment, thankfully, Sherlock re-joined the world of the waking, and the glaring question on Molly’s face subsided, like so many things, in the whirlwind of Sherlock’s presence.

* * *
'Er, where —'

John looked up. His eyes ached from the strain of skimming pages, writing notes, and scrutinising high-res images on his laptop. In the thorough darkness of the sitting room, he found Molly staring a little unfocussed at him and Sherlock.

'Sorry. I’m — I won’t be long, but — I think I need —'

Sherlock apparently was thinking more clearly than John. ‘The second bedroom is upstairs — only room on that floor. Loo is down here but I trust you can find that in the night, if you need it?’

John prevented himself — just barely — from gaping at Sherlock at this deceptively banal pronouncement.

Molly, John itched to see, was not deceived. ‘Oh, but —’ She looked at him. ‘John, won’t you — I don’t want to take your bed, I could just go back to my flat. Obviously we’ll leave all the’ — she glanced around at the bomb site that had exploded in the sitting room and into the kitchen — ‘stuff where it is, for now. And come back in the morning. It wouldn’t have to be long, I’d be back as early as possible.’

‘Nonsense,’ Sherlock declared in a rumble, before John had more than opened his mouth. ‘The sheets are clean’ (John felt a stab of guilt that he was by no means certain of that fact, but he could tell himself that Mrs Hudson probably had tidied before they’d come home) ‘and John or I will be perfectly prepared to sleep on the sofa, as needed.’

Only… John continued to stare at the coffee table in front of him, not at Molly, who — despite it being at very least one o’clock in the morning, and having spent more hours than any normal person would have absorbing filth and committing it to memory — was also almost palpably reasoning to herself that, in fact, the rumours had been true all along: they didn’t need two bedrooms in Baker Street.

The quiet fell and grated.

‘Oh,’ Molly said, after something like a century of strained silence. ‘All right, well, that’s — I brought my nightie — sorry, yes, okay, never mind, that’s not important. Okay…’ She stood, scrambling now a little awkwardly, and John didn’t know if it was at the fact that she’d informed them that she slept in what a normal bloke might fantasize as a slinky sheer gown, or because she
working out how to stuff the scarf-matching socks she’d worn into her ears to avoid the deafening sex that apparently rocked 221b seven times a night. (Hardly.) ‘Goodnight, then!’

With a haphazard dash for her bag, then, back again for her mobile that she’d left on the settee, she smiled/grimaced, waved a hand, and very nearly bolted for the stairs. John wondered if she’d find a way to brush her teeth without coming back downstairs, to avoid hearing things through the glass loo door.

He sighed. John was knackered, if he was honest, too knackered to worry about anything more than the time, Sherlock’s pill regimen, and the day they had coming tomorrow — well, today. He yawned. Shameful. Ordinarily he could go days without it. But then again he hadn’t had a proper full night’s rest in god knew how long, and neither — despite his less-than-an-hour long kip during dinner — had Sherlock. Maybe in an hour or so he could talk Sherlock into letting them lie down, just for a bit, just to rest their eyes…

‘John.’ Sherlock was suddenly stood him, plucking a book out of his hands.

‘What?’ John wondered, dazed. He wanted to sink his face into Sherlock’s middle and breathe warm, slow, healing breaths into the still-recovering skin. Run his fingers up Sherlock’s sides, maybe while sitting side-by-side on the sofa. He would force himself to stay awake for that, if nothing else.

‘Time to sleep.’

He gaped. ‘It’s not even half-one.’

‘Scintillating, John, that time-telling is really coming along.’ And, prodding John in the armpits until he lumbered stiffly to his feet, Sherlock shepherded him towards the bedroom.

‘Since when do you believe in sleep?’ he asked over his shoulder.

‘You look awful and you need to be well-rested and fresh in order to pull this plan off. So: sleep. Then we’ll deal with the matter of your deception.’

John’s eyes weren’t too heavy to roll, but Sherlock was steering him towards the bed, so it went mostly to waste. He sat heavily on the edge of the mattress and allowed the yawn he’d been stifling
since six AM, when they’d been woken by a nurse at the hospital — god, had that been today? — to surface.

‘Bed,’ Sherlock instructed, flipping off the light switch and looking down at him in the dark with all the looming silhouette of a massive heron glaring down at a fish.

‘Yeah, I’m on it, Sherlock, give us a second, all right.’ He toed off his socks first, then, since his actual pyjamas were all upstairs, stole a pair of flannel tartan bottoms from the familiar stack of folded laundry on Sherlock’s dresser (more evidence of Mrs Hudson’s magic behind the scenes while they’d been gone), and curled up on his side of the bed. All the while, the prickle on the back of his neck and the still-lurking shadow informed that Sherlock, fully dressed, hadn’t left the room.

‘I can’t fall asleep with you just hovering there,’ he noted, faintly amused, without opening his eyes.

‘Of course you can,’ Sherlock argued stubbornly. ‘You’ve slept in active warzones.’

‘Well thanks for that little bedtime reminder. For future reference, “sweet dreams” will cover it.’

‘You’ll have plenty of time to enter REM sleep.’

‘Not if we keep talking,’ John said pointedly. ‘And you should sleep too. Forty minutes is not enough for someone still on a long-term physical therapy schedule. But,’ he interrupted, because Sherlock had started to protest, ‘whatever, do what you want: just… either lie down, or go finish sorting out my backstory.’ He settled more deeply into his pillow, tucking one hand underneath and wiggling his toes to warm the cold sheets up a bit. Yawning again, he started to work on slowing his heart rate and breathing, exhaling, evenly measuring each inhale and each —

The bed dipped, the covers lifted, and he opened his eyes to find Sherlock, grimacing, but lying beside him, eyes coming to stop perfectly level with his across the next pillow. On his own side of the bed.

‘You should lie on your back,’ he informed him. *Like earlier.*

Though, in the darkness, he couldn’t quite read Sherlock’s expression, he waited long enough until, in a small victory, Sherlock gingerly rolled onto his back. ‘Goodnight, John,’ Sherlock murmured,
now feigning exasperation. (At least he was probably feigning it.)

*I love you,* Sherlock had blurted out in the hospital, and then he’d looked at John as though he was furious, desperately clinging to him, with a face morphing into thunder when John had said it back.

John scooted forward, putting his left hand gently on Sherlock’s lower belly and curling up against his side. He felt Sherlock turn his head slightly so that his forehead met John’s. Their knees met through their respective clothes, huddled together like kids running away from home, gravitated towards the warmth of each other without intent or momentum. Maybe because he hadn’t slept since Thursday night — and, even then, he’d been kipping pretty uncomfortably at the hospital for days— or maybe because the tiny glow of light that crept under the door, around the blinds, gave the darkness a golden halo. He felt like time was slowing to a halt. Giving them a moment together, in a dream-spun version of reality inhabited by just them.

‘Can you sleep?’ Sherlock asked, voice brushing across John’s skin.

He made an affirmative noise. ‘Wake me in the morning, if you’re up first.’

‘I’m always awake first.’

‘Course you are.’

The last thing he consciously thought of was the rise and fall of Sherlock’s chest beneath his fingers, over Sherlock’s newest scar.

* * *

John jumped straight into waking to discover several things: first, that it was dawn; second, that (miraculously) Sherlock was still in bed with him, tucked forcefully into John’s armpit; and third, that the light in the loo was on, while faintly the sound of someone brushing their teeth *quietly* (god, she was too sweet for her own good) slid under the door.

The light went off and a minute later he could just hear the pat of bare feet into the kitchen. So Day One of the Rest of His Life did, as it happened, include a woman. And Sherlock. Somehow, he wasn’t even surprised. Sighing, he shut his eyes and held on, indulging for the smallest moment in the floating, dreamy sensation that the world beyond what he could feel right here, right now, didn’t exist.
Then, with a stifled stretch so as not to wake the faintly snoring man beside him — Sherlock must have gotten up at some point and then (John smiled) come back to bed, considering he was wearing his rattiest pyjamas, exposed infinitesimally to the new day as John brushed a finger along a single curl — John forced himself out of bed. Time to face the day.

At which point it occurred to him that he was either going to have to venture into the kitchen in his pants and vest, do the walk of shame in his own flat, or…

The thickest of Sherlock’s dressing gowns — the camel-coloured one, tucked into the standing wardrobe — was much too long for him (even Sherlock had to roll up the sleeves to avoid looking like a kid in his dad’s robe), but the silkier, stupidly posh ones were easier to pass off as dishevelled and… well, his. He picked the burgundy — at least it wasn’t see-through — wrapping it tightly around himself and fought off the feeling that he was simply copying Irene, stealing Sherlock’s clothes in a blatant attempt to seduce him.

Instead, he left Sherlock snuffling into the pillow and went to use the lav before helping Molly find something safe for breakfast.

‘Sorry if I woke you,’ grumbled Molly in a surprisingly gruff voice, where she was leaning heavily against the worktop with eyes half-shut.

‘Not a morning person then?’ he grinned.

‘No, never have been. But I couldn’t fall back to sleep, so I reckoned I might as well get back to work…’

The kettle went. John took over, and Molly nodded gratefully and went to sit down with a thunk.

His lizard brain, still one-foot in bed, was crawling with too much information, the kind of information you were supposed not to notice about your friends, but… well, it wasn’t every morning he went into his kitchen to find a good-looking woman in a long white old-fashioned nightgown, bare legs and arms, smelling of floral washing powder and mint toothpaste, very, very obviously not wearing a bra in the brisk chill of Baker Street. Because women didn’t wear bras to sleep: that in itself was not news. Nevertheless, he possibly over-compensated by staring intensely as he scrubbed the now-soaked dishes from last night to within an inch of their lives, then, that accomplished, arranging the tea, toast, cereal, and beans on the only clear space left in front of him. Eyes front, Watson.
(At some point, he was going to have to inform Sherlock that sex in the morning was a particularly
effective way to make sure John didn’t waste the entire day keyed up and hyper-alert to every
ruddy thing he encountered. Or else he should make a habit of having a shower directly after
leaving Sherlock in bed.)

Eventually he went about stirring the beans on the hob while informing Molly, ‘Help yourself to
any of this lot, obviously. Or if you’d prefer to play it safe, the cafe downstairs opens at seven.’

She walked — evidently balancing on the balls of her feet, maybe to avoid unwanted noise — and
made the most subdued bowl of Weetabix he’d ever witnessed being made in his life.

‘Feels like the day of an exam,’ she muttered, resuming her seat.

Spooning beans onto his toast, John huffed a laugh. ‘Yeah, well, I was always revising until right
before it began.’ He sat.

‘Me too,’ she nodded.

‘No? Really? You?’

She sighed. ‘Yes. I’m a terrible procrastinator.’

He found that even more unbelievable, not least because of the tremendous work ethic she’d
shown in the last day. And just her, well, overall… self.

With a glazed look, she mused, ‘I had a friend, though, Lorna. Her parents — well, her dad —
made her and her sister do all of their schoolwork ahead of time, not after he went to bed or before
he was awake, and always in another room. From him.’

John frowned, disliking the man immediately. ‘Why?’

‘Said he couldn’t stand the sound of the pages turning.’
‘The pages turning? For fuck’s sake. I hope Lorna ran away to a commune or something.’

‘She’s in a polygamous queer open marriage, so I think she’s fine, in the end.’

John laughed openly. ‘God, I feel so old, when people say stuff like that. I mean, it’s fine — as long as they know what they’re talking about, it’s none of my business. But I just keep thinking, my sister being gay was the biggest shock for the family in… I dunno, decades. And that was the only kind of “alternative lifestyle” anybody seemed to know about then, really. Definitely for my parents.’

He didn’t know why he was telling her this.

Scooping up milk and sloshing it over her cereal bits, Molly nodded. ‘But hopefully they at least let you read when you liked?’

‘I’m not sure anybody thought about it. They weren’t especially… booky.’

That was an understatement, but he felt like there was enough ahead in their day to bring down the mood: he didn’t need to subject her to his own private therapy session before seven in the morning. Or ever.

They both went on chewing their food in companionable silence, and John thought about all of it. His parents, Harry… Molly’s life, or what he knew of it (which was, really, vanishingly little), was kind, good, neat and tidy… boring. She was possibly the most interesting member of her family. It wouldn’t surprise him. Bunched up on the bench opposite, she looked small, but sturdy, like things that flattened other people rolled off her. (She’d managed to get through hours of Sherlock’s increasingly tetchy behaviour last night without visibly taking it personally, which was more impressive than it might sound to someone who hadn’t witnessed it.)

Did she want kids? She dated. Was dating. She worked loads, but as she’d pointed out in crystal clear tones last night, she kept a barrier between work and home life. Maybe she wanted to travel instead? It was all too easy to picture her volunteering in some clinic in South Sudan or Thailand or somewhere, making do with the resources on hand. Come to that, she could probably have hacked the army, if she’d had a bit of training. He hadn’t yet seen her fazed by anything except… well, Sherlock.
Molly, and himself. He’d resisted the idea that they were at all similar for so long, uncomfortable and — if he was honest now — afraid of what such a comparison would ultimately say about him. But maybe the reason they were here, at 6:22 on a blue-and-grey Sunday morning with the lights off, eating breakfast without clinking their cutlery to avoid waking anyone in earshot, was something strangely unique to themselves. For longer than he’d known her, Molly had… the only word for it was _pined_ for Sherlock. Whereas John had, from his arrival, taken vicious pleasure in the fact that he, and no one else, got to be the one standing beside Sherlock at crime scenes, press conferences; was the one who got to tell the stories of their adventures, and receive Sherlock’s mockery for the telling. He’d never consciously enjoyed having what Molly didn’t — he hadn’t even thought of himself as ‘having’ Sherlock in a way that Molly could, at least straightforwardly, resent or envy. And yet here he was, the one wearing a burgundy-coloured dressing gown that wasn’t his own, and Molly had cancelled a date with someone she was more or less indifferent to.

Whatever life was, fairness didn’t come into it.

‘Any…’ He hadn’t really thought of how that sentence was going to finish, only that he felt guilty that she was their friend — his friend — and he seldom treated her like one. ‘Anything interesting in the morgue lately?’

She raised her eyebrows politely. At least she’d finished chewing.

‘Er… well,’ she considered.

‘Nah, never mind, stupid question. Still asleep. And, well, living here, I’ve forgotten how to carry on a normal conversation.’

‘No, it’s all right.’ She chomped on a crunchy bit of cereal, absent-mindedly stirring the milk with a faint _tinkling_ sound of metal against porcelain. ‘There was an interesting one: man, fifty-six years old, cardiac failure, died in hospital overnight. But as I was reviewing the body before we sent it to the undertakers, I noticed patch of… of discoloured skin. Oddly discoloured, I thought. On his hip.’

‘Melanoma?’

‘I thought it might be a removed tattoo.’

‘Why?’
‘It was in, I swear on my life, the perfect shape of a cock and balls.’

He stared— then burst out laughing.

‘What?!’ He couldn’t help it, even though it was too loud for the hour and for the sleep of certain people nearby — positively lost it and kept going, wiping his eyes and just imagining Molly having to explain to the assistants and the doctors and the family what she’d found, asking whether it was relevant, whether anyone had noticed it before.

‘Turned out,’ Molly continued, a knowing smile in her voice, ‘it was a birthmark. His wife had to identify it.’

Guffawing, he shook his head.

She shrugged, smirking too. ‘I haven’t got any birthmarks, but I think if I had one that looked even a bit like that…’

That set him off again, and this time she gulped down an unattractive sound that was most definitely an involuntary laugh. Which only made the giggles worse.

‘Christ,’ he said, several minutes later, wiping his eyes with wine-silk sleeves. ‘Brilliant.’

She sipped her tea diplomatically, but the more-than-usual amount of blinking she was doing and the choice of words were probably as close as she got to outright knob jokes.

‘Well. I’ll have to ask for a constellation reading of my freckles next time I go to the GP. Not as good as birthmarks, but…’

Striding out, fully dressed for the day, Sherlock breezed past without missing a beat: ‘I don’t have any birthmarks either.’

‘Yes you do.’
For the second time in as many days, John found himself having just uttered words of what felt like incriminating, deceptive intimacy. Molly had gone still.

‘No, I d—’ Sherlock began to scoff, turning around from where he was disposing — the single act of communal cleanliness he ever performed — the old coffee filter and dregs, but he stopped midway and goggled at… ah. The dressing gown. He’d forgotten.

After a moment, Sherlock resolved or muted whatever cacophony of deductions were reverberating inside his head.

‘I do not have any natural skin aberrations.’

John resisted for a moment, because it would be easy to pretend — for now, or forever, even — that he’d been winding Sherlock up. The whole reason John refused to speak to reporters, didn’t discuss Sherlock and him with his mates, bristled and, all right, lashed out a bit when people assumed things was because, honestly, they had no sodding idea how things really were, and no right to know until informed otherwise. But… Fuck it, Molly had seen the dressing gown, seen that Sherlock had come out of the bedroom only minutes after John, heard him say already, ‘He makes noises all the time,’ had been paying attention. She was polite, but she wasn’t an idiot or a blabbermouth.

‘You do though,’ John informed him, at last meeting his eyes, with heat. It sent a shiver down his spine as their eyes met, knowing this information that somehow Sherlock — Sherlock bloody Holmes — didn’t know about his own body. He loved that birthmark: had admired it in the golden glow of that brilliant morning not so long again, had been thinking about it even since he’d caught a glimpse of it, of all things, in sharp contrast to the fiercer pink scars below. And yet, the kind of thought he tended to have as he slipped between waking and dreaming — that, of Sherlock’s previous partners, no one had made enough (made anything) of the terrain of Sherlock’s unfairly beautiful skin.

‘Is this a joke the two of you have agreed on?’ Sherlock squinted, no doubt deducing their morning activities without him.

Trust Sherlock to imagine a conspiracy among friends before breakfast.

‘Nope. But you do have a birthmark. On the back of — on your spine, below your shirt-collar.’ He knew what that sounded like, the image that conjured. Christ. (People might talk. They definitely
bloody would if they heard this, which they very definitely *would never do.*) ‘Difficult spot for you to see, granted. And it’s faint, too. I’m not surprised you haven’t noticed. But it is there.’

Sherlock scowled at him, and John squared his own shoulders. Either Sherlock was about to strip to the waist and make either him or Molly confirm what John was saying, or he would disappear into the loo and contort himself into a knot in an attempt to do the argumentative equivalent of licking his elbow. If Sherlock thought John was going to back down from either scenario, he was sorely mistaken.

‘I’ll just go get dressed,’ Molly informed the widening silence.

As she disappeared upstairs, Sherlock took two steps forward and leaned over, splaying a hand across the table to peer directly into John’s face, to glower some more.

‘Well, that’s one way to tell people,’ John muttered to himself.

‘I am prepared to phone my *mother,* who will quite happily spend an hour informing you in excruciatingly distracted detail of your misapprehension.’

John snickered. ‘Sherlock, if you phone your mother, she’ll talk your ear off about being *stabbed* and not telling her, because I can guarantee your brother will have by now, and if he hasn’t, I will. Besides, if you do…’ He licked his lips, and leaned dangerously closer to Sherlock, *that’s one way to tell people.* ‘Prepare to start answering questions about grandchildren.’

With ten times more nonchalance he felt internally, he wiggled out from underneath Sherlock (*eyes front, Watson*) and… went to have a shower.

*
As a Women's Day/year/lifetime resolution, I'm trying to replace 'sorry' with 'thanks', so... thanks for everyone's patience as I missed my usual deadline posting. Busy week. And, as you can see this, chapter is significantly longer than some of the others, so the fiddling bit also took ages.

To stave off any comments in this direction: please remember that John's views, opinions, thoughts, etc. are *separate* from mine. He's a bit of a prick sometimes, because he just is.

Lastly, I reiterate for the 9000th time that there are some absolutely gorgeous fics going on on this site. Sometimes I read a chapter and someone's got an idea for a character's backstory or thoughts or mannerisms that I've also written; other times, they cotton on to something brilliant, something that seems canon-friendly to me, and so I weave it into my headcanon without precisely writing it into my fics. If/when I ever fully refer to something found in one source that changes my work, I'll try to cite it. So far, it's the diffusive culture of fandom works its diffusive influence...
'Speak now or forever hold your peace,' recited John.

[Showdown.]

Chapter Notes

[Content warnings for ACD/Rathbone/BBC-typical violence, mentions of past abuse, blood. As you probably already expect from case fics (and this fic in particular: see tags) but, you know, fair warning.]


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 15: Sherlock

‘And strange it was to see him pass
    With a step so light and gay,
And strange it was to see him look
    So wistfully at the day,
And strange it was to think that he
    Had such a debt to pay.’

–Oscar Wilde, ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’

‘Maybe…’ He considered the tools available, the time left, the likelihood that she would agree to cut her hair. (Surely this constituted a ‘good cause’!) ‘Perhaps if she went incognito as a man.’
John was sitting back in one of the partners’ chairs, arms across his chest. His belly jumped as he snorted. ‘He’d notice, Sherlock.’

‘Not necessarily, he wouldn’t – not if –’

‘You wouldn’t necessarily, but yeah, a normal bloke? He’d notice.’

(He ignored the superficial slight.)

‘I feel like the Bride of Frankenstein,’ Molly muttered breathlessly, uncomfortably shifting her weight from one (£217.50) black patent-leather Ferragamo court to the other.

Again John snorted, but this time sat up more rigidly, pursing his mouth with contempt (for what? The reference itself was somewhat lost on Sherlock, who had, if memory served [it did] read the story as a boy and fallen rapturously in love with the bewildered, powerful, misguided scientist and his similarly bewildered, powerful, and misguided Creature). ‘Well isn’t that a flattering reflection on us all.’

Rather than coax an explanation out of either of them (time!), he considered Molly’s disguise again. The dress – a ribbed cerulean-and-black dress that wrapped not especially closely around her body, but cut in a V over her collar, a moderate exposure of skin in contradistinction to the slightly-extra-long sleeves that hugged vice-like from her elbows to her wrists – was complemented by translucent tights of the sort that, he was reliably informed, hinted to men familiar with the intimate workings of women’s hosiery of braces, garters, and so on.

‘Are you certain you’re wearing it properly?’ Sherlock repeated for the third time, unclear as to why the dress – custom chosen to suit Molly’s body shape, colouring, and purpose this evening – was… falling flat. And if it was falling flat to Sherlock –

‘You can’t wear a dress wrong,’ Molly retorted defensively.

‘And yet…’

Standing with definitive purpose, John advised, ‘Maybe Mrs Hudson would be better for this?’
Almost sobbing with relief – had this been so difficult that she couldn’t stand simple constructive scrutiny? – Molly gushed, ‘Yes, that’s a brilliant idea, I’ll go find her,’ and without waiting hurried off to do so.

Sherlock frowned but elected not to impede her progress, deciding to turn instead to John, who would (it was tremendously likely) put up an even greater show of resistance to being corralled into costume.

‘Makes a nice change for women to be running out of here without having just thrown water in one of our faces,’ John observed. ‘God, “The Bride of bloody Frankenstein.” Is that what we are? Just a…’

Sherlock regarded him with (masked) confusion. Why this particular reference was so disagreeable to John, he had no idea: if he’d known anything about the book/film/programme/other media work, he’d evidently deleted it.

‘Never mind,’ John muttered. ‘I’ll go get dressed as well, shall I?’

Ah. That reminded him. ‘Including this,’ he instructed, marching into the bedroom and (ignoring the rumple of the sheets: two bedmates, no sexual intercourse but indices marked close contact for a sustain period) unearthed his supplies.

John was waiting in the sitting room. When he looked at what Sherlock had brought, he first checked Sherlock’s expression (entirely serious, even if – beneath that – he was, all right, somewhat amused at this prospect) and then made a complicated series of flutterings and jostling of his facial muscles to connote… acquiescence. ‘Yeah, fine, I’ll wear the bloody moustache, you toser.’

Hours ticking by as they rehearsed the names, dates, practices, and any other relevant data pertaining to the seediest of just-barely-legitimate and some wholly underground art markets, dealers, exhibitions, trading hotspots, etc. Between them, Sherlock was genuinely relieved to find, John and Molly made a decent show of remembering the majority of the information Sherlock (and, admittedly, certain corners of the internet) had presented to them.

‘Do you really think he’s going to quiz me?’ Molly asked, pitch raised anxiously, once the day itself had all but gone.
‘Almost certainly.’

‘And what if I make a mistake?’ she worried. ‘Autopsies, I’m fine – I’m quite good at my job, at medicine and… and dead people – but this? Even Helen-Louise –’

‘Who?’

‘My accidental death case from last week, even she didn’t –’

‘Molly,’ John cut in, kindly. ‘You won’t mess up. And if you do, I will be there. Between the two of us, we’ve got it sorted. Really.’

She looked at him, a mixture of gratitude and distrust on her thin face. ‘I can hardly ask you the answer if Baron Gruener wants me to prove I’m not a fraud, can I?’

‘That’s exactly what you should do,’ John insisted. ‘You’re posing as a millionaire. You can call anyone anything you like.’

‘Gruener is a cat,’ Sherlock cut in impatiently, for the thousandth time. ‘He’s a cat who thinks he sees prospective mice. He enjoys the idea that he’s clever – that he’s the only one clever enough to understand the significance of this “book” that he’s carrying, or keeping or hoarding, doesn’t matter – but he’s the one who can put it together. He likes the game. They always do,’ he added under his breath. ‘Molly: you are visiting this man as his equal, as an affluent woman, who is accustomed to getting what she wants – in this case, a rare form of anatomically-correct pornographic art. He needs to believe you are worth his time, but he will be more inclined to show-off for you – which is, I must stress again since we are at the risk of actually forgetting the purpose of this plan, the point! – if you seem nervous, excited. If there is something you can learn from him, that he can explain for you.’

‘The world explained to me by a man,’ she levelled, turning to him again, voice and glance – reassuringly – stabilised by pique. ‘I wonder how I’ll imagine that.’

He grinned. He knew, with an acceptable degree of certainty, that she was capable of it. In all their years working together and being (at least John, and probably Molly herself would so-call it) friends, Sherlock had almost never seen Molly blink (figuratively or, most often, literally) at an oncoming threat. Feet secure, hair straight, bearing at times knotted but underneath that, balanced: she made, though she little knew it at times, a formidable, underestimated adversary.
‘So,’ Molly said, tucking her hair behind one ear (Sherlock closed then rolled his eyes: hair nearly straight), ‘I have one… a possibly elementary question.’

‘Is it entirely necessary at the moment?’ Sherlock stressed primly, getting to his feet. By the sound of it, their hired car had just pulled up downstairs.

‘Why don’t they just… well, kill him?’

John exhaled a laugh, one that ruffled (Sherlock was glad to note, realistically) his newly-acquired facial hair.

‘Which “they” are you referring to?’ Sherlock drawled. This was an entirely extraneous line of inquiry, since clearly he and John would not have allowed matters to come this far if it were possible to just kill people. Not this time, anyway.

‘Well, I’m not sure, but…’ She looked between them as though she was being quite reasonable and they were deliberately misunderstanding. ‘You know, the – the security services, or your… your brother, or… them! Whoever does… that.’

‘My brother has had a team of agents working on this case for quite some time, performing the necessary groundwork. Their determined belief – one with which I have argued strenuously – is that Gruener, given the sort of man that he is, would very likely provide a great deal of otherwise inaccessible evidence about the criminal networks with whom he works, if he could be persuaded that it would save his own skin.’

‘Besides,’ John added, ‘if we don’t get anything concrete tonight, there’s still time for them to pick him up in the morning. Make it look like he disappeared.’

‘But then our client – whoever they may be – would find Miss de Merville distraught and undissuaded from the Baron, and we might not get paid. Which reminds me Molly: I believe you would be agreeable to terms of one-third the client’s sum, whatever it comes to?’

‘Oh,’ she looked away awkwardly, almost physically incapable of discussing such vulgar matters as fees. ‘Yes, that. That seems fair. But I still –’
'Excellent. Then, let’s get going.’

‘What’s the worst that could happen?’ John asked dryly, in an undertone as he handed Molly into her coat (Helen von Furstenberg, several seasons old, gently worn – a familiar item, the sort that would suggest to Gruener, if he knew anything about it at all (unlikely) that ‘Dr Barton’ had not stumbled into money in the last few hours, but at least over the last decade).

‘Helen-Louise probably thought the same thing.’

Down by the car, the driver handed Sherlock his utilitarian tie (a size too big, though counterintuitively that would do perfectly) and keys. ‘Eurus,’ said the man – mid-forties, unmarried, currently seeing two women, fond of (Sherlock noted, removing his hands in the pockets) Rolos, wanted to become a stand-up comedian.

‘Thank you,’ Sherlock nodded.

John opened the door for Molly, then raised his eyebrows, watching the would-be comic get into the backseat of a purring second vehicle. ‘“Eurus”?’

‘Code word from my brother,’ Sherlock muttered back.

They climbed in, Sherlock into the driver’s seat, and John in the back beside Molly. Once the lumbar adjustments were made, Sherlock pulled the tight woollen cap over his hair, containing all of it, and making a radical departure from his usual appearance. Which was, of course, the point.

‘Oh,’ said Molly, observing (entirely superfluously) the obvious change, ‘I didn’t know you could drive.’ She buckled her seatbelt dutifully. ‘Did Mrs Hudson teach you?’

‘What?’ both he and John demanded.

‘Well, she…’ Molly looked between them. ‘Never mind.’

‘Has Mrs Hudson got a car?’ John murmured, clearly angling for the opportunity to ‘take it for a spin’, or whatever jargon idiots who salivated over motoring used this year.
With an impatient groan, Sherlock shoved the car into gear and joined the traffic.

Molly was silently rehearsing the information she needed, staring unseeingly out the window. (Perhaps after this, he would remind her more sincerely of the functionality of a working Mind… well, Coach House, at least.)

Evening was falling with deceptive gentleness over the city. The atmosphere in the car sobered with each passing mile.

‘What’s this?’ John finally asked, picking up the box that slid into his leg. (How long would it have taken him to say something had Sherlock not taken that last turning at rather a speed?)

‘Audio surveillance equipment.’

John popped open the box, and took out the vermilion-and-midnight blue lacquer pin (in the shape of an anatomically-correct, if stylised, heart) for Molly, who affixed it to her dress wordlessly.

‘What if he’s got metal detectors?’

‘The report’ (from his brother, he did not deign to say) ‘referred to purely personal security. Besides, Gruener is entirely too concerned with his public image as an aesthete and a notable social personality: he’d never sink so low as to have metal detectors going off when his guests arrive with diamonds.’

A soft nasal exhale meant John agreed with his assessment.

‘And he’s still getting married tomorrow?’ Molly repeated from their debrief this morning.

‘Speak now or forever hold your peace,’ recited John.

‘This works in our favour, of course,’ Sherlock reminded them. ‘He’s not so obsessed with privacy that he’s going to take your phones off you – he’s old-fashioned. And he’ll be so preoccupied with
wedding matters that he will welcome the opportunity to discuss his despicable hobbies rather than his pending nuptials.

‘Know a lot about planning weddings, do you?’ John inquired jocosely.

After a moment, Sherlock blinked, shifting gears, and admitted, ‘We… may need to insinuate ourselves at the reception. As a worst-case scenario. I’m looking into it.’

* * *

As he moved the car into park, his eyes flicked up automatically to consider John and Molly in the rear-view mirror. What was something of a surprise, however, was to find John’s eyes instantly lock with his in their reflections.

John sought confirmation. ‘You’ll be able to hear everything from a good distance?’

‘They’ll be triangulated through the car itself,’ Sherlock nodded, ‘and a… satellite. You, on the other hand, will not be able to hear me.’ He wasn’t entirely certain he grasped or, for that matter, cared about the finer technological details of the earpieces: they were, his midnight communiqués from his brother had assured him, fit for this purpose. That was all that was relevant at present.

‘That’ll be a first,’ said John, with a wry smile.

Bundled up, hair brush-dyed a further shade toward chestnut (and combed in a quiff over his right temple), absurd moustache on his upper lip, even more absurd (somehow) hat perched over his brows: John, beneath all these disguises, was still John. His eyes, even reversed in his reflection like a photographic negative, were still creased, still darkest blue and familiar, a tunnel with the faintest, surest pinprick of light shining through.

‘So. Stick to the plan.’ John’s mouth was out of the frame of his reflection. Sherlock knew what it looked like, but didn’t dare turn around to see all of him again before… before they went into the house. ‘If it doesn’t go well, we storm out, we get in the car, and you drive us back. Got it?’

Had Molly not been present, John would not have held back from more colourful language: I’m serious. Stick to the plan, you tit. Do not come in, do not get yourself in trouble, do not make me have to kick your sorry arse when we get home. No sodding surprises, for the love of God – just.
Don’t. (But of course, had Molly not been present, they would not be here either, not be able to make one last effort to bring some semblance of balance (the answers still unreached, threads still loose) - of purpose to the whole case that had driven John and, yes, himself, to the brink of what they could bear. More intellectually stimulating than locating jewels or trailing cheating husbands but... there was a price, too. One in a currency with which he was not familiar.)

To the words spoken and unspoken, Sherlock nodded again. ‘And remember, Molly,’ he noted, finally shifting in his seat so she could come into the mirror frame, ‘Gruener wants to show off for you. Make him. Salacious, yet cold.’

‘Pearls,’ she muttered, more to herself than him. With a look of steeling herself, inhaling deeply through her nose, she nodded. Then, looking out the window with the tightness of her jaw gone rigid, she clipped, ‘Mr Hill, will you please hurry up and open this door? I have an appointment.’

John snorted (impressed, as was Sherlock) and – with a last flicked glance at Sherlock – descended.

There was no reason to feel the sudden swoop of jealousy at watching John’s hand appear in the wing mirror, helping Molly out and away towards the house. Little rational reason for the anger at being told, effectively, to stay away while everything of importance was going on inside, where the ruse he had initially devised for himself – with his and John’s tandem skills, their almost perfect synchrony and minimal need for spoken interaction in mind. How foolish, it seemed suddenly, to send Molly Hooper, who for all her innumerable strengths was quite obviously not a person with battle instincts, no sense (that is, nothing like Sherlock’s finely-crafted sense) of how to read situations and adjust accordingly, a matter of body language and contextual clues that John, with his intuitive perceptibility, could pick up and fit himself to in seconds.

He shoved these illogical fears aside. Effect of the medication, no doubt: lowered inhibitions, compromised affective responses.

Stick to the plan, John had directed. Yes. Adjusting a dial on the well-nestled surveillance box in the… lower bit of the dash thing (cars: irrelevant), he suddenly was inundated with the crunching of shoes on pebble and two sets of respirations (one slightly faster than usual, one steady).

He pulled the car into gear again and followed the directions given them at the gate to one of the two forks in the path as it curved away from the house – no doubt to preserve the view and the grounds, as they backed up to the park (Gruener was, after all, entirely consumed by his efforts to present a beautiful, established, unassailable façade).

The guard at the front door, it seemed, presented no problem (even with only audible data,
Sherlock gleaned that the man was irritably hungry and distracted: at least one variable to their advantage), and soon Sherlock’s ears were filled with the grumbled sounds of John accepting a seat (‘Please wait here, sir, Baron Gruener will be with you shortly’) and Molly, whose demeanour had evidently reverted back to her entirely prim-and-proper upbringing, gone silent.

This won’t work, Sherlock, whispered a familiar (impossible) voice echoing down the corridors of his Mind Palace. You’ve sent the little lambs into slaughter. Your ‘friends’ who cannot tell you no – now you’ll get to hear them scream.

He slammed the car door shut slightly more forcefully than necessary.

‘Y’alright there?’ called a man climbing out from the ludicrously small wooden guardhouse. (No more than two on-site at a time; father, small baby, exhausted, hates employer, hates mother-in-law living with them during infant’s first few months, too much bargain sausage and mash in diet of late – reheated, even cold in leftovers during shifts. Too short to have been the man who aided in his stabbing – and, more fundamentally, only a guard: not the strong-arm type.)

‘Bloody toffs,’ Sherlock swore, roughing up his voice – made all the easier for having interacted with an unwitting voice coach from Billericay in only the last few weeks. ‘Hurry up an’ wait, all the time, y’know wot I mean?’

The man (recreational drug user, non-(cigarette)smoker) chuckled. ‘Yeah, I know, mate. Well, if you need to stretch your legs and that, go ahead. Can’t see you when the lights are on in there and it’s as dark as this out here.’

‘Cheers, think I will,’ said Sherlock, with genuine appreciation of the man’s utter stupidity in letting a potential adversary – hell, assassin – roam the grounds unattended. (Then again, he should keep an eye out for cameras and other surveillance equipment: Gruener was an idiot, but he had managed to elude at least the most rudimentary searches.)

He was unforgivably distracted, brain foggy with literally and figuratively sickening disorientation, deductions coming embarrassingly slow as he listened to Molly (playing up, with the instincts of a natural, her breathlessness as anticipation, eagerness to have a fellow connoisseur to share her illicit interests with at last!) and Gruener (smitten, possibly, or sufficiently entertained to push the farce as far as it would go: equal likelihood of both) make innuendo-laden small talk about the putative ‘beauty’ of ‘exposed bodies’ and the ‘embrace of death’. Meanwhile, when Gruener moved on to the quiz portion of their meeting, John chimed in gruffly with his (poorly disguised disgust-filled) answers to who had sold various (fictitious) works in ‘Dr Barton’ (that was, Molly’s) (fictitious) collection.
Of the sluggish apperception dawning with the speed of an actual Arion intermedius Normand, a vague conclusion was beginning to take more concrete shape: something involving Gruener’s published interests; combined with the remark he made in response to Molly’s ad-libbed comment, ‘All about one’s view of the world’ (the reply itself saturated with significance: ‘So much depends, I have found, on how much of the vision is consumed with a single image. You are right, Dr. Barton, yes… this the problem of perspective.’); and finally the matter of his victims, a question not only of perspective but… the word itself flashed in his mind… SCALE.

This drove at the heart of it: how he had eluded them – clever, impressively clever; but foolish, too – fiddly, immature, conceited. And this of course was entirely consistent with the man’s profile: antiquated, proud even unto overplaying his hand, and interested in childish things. (In childhood; in children.)

His mind ran through the images he had stored from scanning Gruener’s volumes, overhearing snatches of conversations of Molly and John’s speculations that struck his subconscious as important enough to preserve for study.

• Miniature

• Souvenir – custom-made? Or simply discs/plates/lenses that could be replaced, interchanged – so there would be alternates somewhere. Even if they could get the device itself, with its latest album of victims, there would be, in some – proverbial needle, haystack –

• Photographs

Sherlock continued to circumnavigate the grounds while the chat continued inside, constructing a mental map of the blindspots of the CCTV, normalising his presence to the guard who was bored of keeping an eye on the supposedly equally bored driver of the Baron’s latest guests.

But something was nagging, something further, just out of reach! He found himself pacing the laboratory of his Mind Palace while perambulating outwardly, reviewing chemical compounds for etchings – something Molly had mentioned stuck in his mind, engraver’s acid…

‘How are you doing it!’ Sherlock growled under his breath.

A light lift of breeze exposed a distant patch of grass that should have been dark, smooth, unbroken, still: a figure, then, not a guard, moving too fast, too stealthily, too small –

‘Damn,’ he swore, realising his mistake – the magnitude of it: John and Molly inside, to say
nothing of – he was on the wrong side of the park, ‘DAMN!’

He ran.

‘What’s –’ the gatekeeper began, shrugging on his blazer and gazing at the house. ‘You! Stay –’

Sherlock made quick work, wasting time, must get in, and the man was groaning at his feet, clutching various now-swelling aspects of his facial (and elsewhere) physiognomy; Sherlock’s own lungs were straining as though suddenly perforated with a hundred bright-hot punctures, but he sprinted because he did not have time to be outside while John and Molly were effectively alone in an ambush –

The blind corner he had identified, just under the ancient vault door – he was in and dodging barrels of he did not have time to deduce precisely what in the dark (ignoring the bruise in his side as he collided with several heavy, dusty metal arms and platforms, reminiscent of nothing so much as medieval torture tables) before he fully processed Gruener’s mistake – still thinking so petite a shadow was Sherlock rather than who it quite obviously was – and her words flooding into his ears,

‘I’m going to tell everyone about you,’ Suze was seething in a raised voice even over the noise of his breathing and the thunder of his fears as he raced, as quietly yet quickly as possible, through the bowels of the house up the long-neglected narrow stone staircase, scrabbling with hands on both walls as he climbed, ‘– you... you fucking MONSTER!’

‘Let’s all stay calm, all right?’ John urged, and Sherlock reached the top of the stairs, pain radiating through his abdomen, forcing his breathing to stabilise so he could move as silently as possible into the room, while everyone (the guests and the guards alike) had their attention focussed on the Nemesis now in their midst. ‘Now just –’

‘You silly girl.’ Gruener’s tone was almost honeyed, purring, a sleek and creeping thing that made Sherlock shudder. ‘My bad little girl...’

The pat of two (flat, rubber-soled) footfalls then –

BLAST – explosion, resounding, breaking glass, a shout – anger and light and sounds of Molly shrieking quietly and almost certainly ducking down, another body folding and sinking to the floor with a groan (a man’s voice) – Sherlock’s viscera froze in terror – Molly’s jagged breaths as loud in Sherlock’s feed as John’s grunted, ‘Shit –’
THINK! he shouted inwardly, deducing from only the sounds of four (or five?!) people heaving adrenalin-soaked breaths in his ears. John, John’s familiar exhalations: spiked, but steady, not accelerating or shallowing – not hit. (Molly: … ditto.)

The gatekeeper could not have entered so silently – heavy-footed, dazed, several minutes behind what was going on –

Two guards: the famished guard by the door! Evidently (slightly) less slow on the uptake than the one outside. (Sherlock needed the name of this private firm, if only to know when he wouldn’t have to prepare overmuch for the next invasive scenario.)

Yes: the low animalistic whimper (muttered, reverberating – off the floor – located from John by a far enough distance as to be almost inaudible through his microphone). Incapacitated, inarticulate –

‘Stay where you are!’ Suze croaked through his earpiece.

John, of course, spoke the mantra of the battlefield medic: ‘He’s bleeding, can you see? I just need to –’

‘No.’

The corridor was deserted, illuminated in faint bronze by the most elegant track-lighting money could buy, and Sherlock slipped between the recess in what had once, in a world that knew nothing of the chaos erupting in the hall, been a vestry. No cameras here – another security mistake. Idiot, Sherlock had said, but – maybe clever – how was it clever – second stair case, a blindspot as convenient for burglars as for residents smuggling their own illicit goods and chattels in and out – plausible deniability, nothing on camera, no records, innocent –

‘And now, Heinrich, your turn.’

‘That would be unwise of you, my dear mistress.’

‘I will!’ Suze snarled. ‘I should. It’d be better, for all of us…’
He was close, moving through a – a workshop? Ah, there it was: Gruener’s boasts of being himself a craftsman of the very art he collected, the difficult work of replacing the photographs without help, Molly’s chemistry, Suze’s injuries. (Wagner?) Developing fluid, but – no – more effective, more… craftsmanlike, acid (ferric or nitric, depending on the artist’s preference for medium). Or even – he dusted over the label on the bottle in his Mind Laboratory – Dutch Mordant.

And suddenly the glint in her eyes, the decision to come now, in person, not to shoot him right away, made perfect sense. An eye for an eye.

Soundlessly, he crossed the threshold between the antechamber and the hall, thus breaching John’s sole injunction, at the very moment John – here, though like the rest of them all out of his eye-line – spoke again.

‘Easy,’ John said – he no longer needed the hardware to hear him – as though soothing a spooked animal. ‘Easy now.’

‘You can see she is plainly mad,’ Gruener offered, fool.

‘Shut up!’ howled Suze, tears streaming down her face – a face he saw reflected in a glass display case as he crept ever closer to the fray. He just needed to get to Gruener before she made her move, ruining not just her own future freedom but everything they had risked, all the information they needed, from coming tonight.

‘I’d shut up if I were you,’ John’s steady tone warned, with more composure, ‘because if I’m honest, I am seriously tempted to let her shoot you.’

Had Sherlock been standing beside him, he would have had to stifle his smile. Here in the shadows, a foot at a time, Sherlock clung to the margins of the room moving away from him instead of towards; listened to Suze’s fragmented, unimpeded mutterings (possibly high, prepared for anything – unpromising) as he neared his destination, the dais where Gruener (based on Suze’s outstretch gun’s indication) was standing –

‘You are a monster,’ she repeated, ‘you’re sick, I can’t even imagine how you –’

‘Suze,’ John said, and Sherlock wished he could see him, but he was nearing the front of the hall now, ‘Suze, he is going to go to trial, I promise you. He is not going to hurt anyone anymore.’
‘Promises, promises, John.’

That voice.

Heart rate, adrenalin, respiration arrhythmic – phantom pain at the incision site – _that voice_ –

He doubled back the direction he had just come, sliding along the obscured edge of the hall back towards the main entrance where – by the sounds of it – a _third_, partially-glimpsed guard (stupid, _stupid_) had made their – her – appearance.

Through a darkened exhibition case, he could make out the basic shape: she was standing in black Semtex (or a similarly professional ensemble), arm outstretched – far steadier than Suze’s – with a much nicer gun, pointed across the room at –

‘Mary?’ Molly muttered, the first words she’d managed to whisper in minutes.

‘I… I don’t,’ John stuttered. Sherlock crept low and continued, with renewed fear pumping along his veins, because it was one thing for erratic and therefore dangerous Suze to invade, gun or other weapon in her hand, and very much another for AGRA alias ‘Mary Morstan’ to be standing in the flesh, in the middle of what had just become a hostage situation in full hitman (hitwoman) gear, smirking at them all.

_Stupid, stupid, STUPID._

‘I don’t understand,’ John repeated.

‘That should go on the t-shirt,’ Gruener remarked across the room.

Suze, evidently thrown by the sudden arrival of another actor in this melodrama, still remembered to sob, ‘You _basta_–’

‘Ah, ah, ah,’ she chided, sliding the gun fractionally over and up, away from where it had been
staring directly into John’s chest to, he had no doubt based on the angle, the neighbourhood of Suze’s head. ‘I wouldn’t.’

‘Mary.’ His throat sounded like sandpaper.

‘John.’

Sherlock could not – would not – allow this woman, whose mere ghost had been the bane of their existence, haunting their every move, for months, for almost a year, since before Sherlock had known he would survive to see John Watson’s face again, to have any more of their lives. He moved around the corner, finally arriving at the end of what would have been the pews, and stayed low as he now found himself behind even AGRA, the last man before the door, before any of them could leave…

Head spinning – The smile she was wielding like a keener-edged weapon than the one in her hand, than the glint in his memory – underwater drowning him momentarily breathlessness – a boiling throbbing burn along his nerves, the surge of bile at the back of his throat. He knew that face. Knew her, as he had anticipated he would, by her smile.

She did not, by any tick or sign, appear to have noticed him, though, so he continued to inch closer to the cool, perfect calm of her features, feet grounded, balanced, with every resemblance to the Mary Morstan who had stood so evenly in the afternoon chill in the alley beneath the railway, warmly enveloped in her almost entirely nondescript grey peacoat, smiling now with something like flirtation in the corner of her mouth, despite (because of?) the sudden increase in people-to-gun ratio in the room. A woman who had been in John’s life (in his bed), who had come so close to standing beside him in another church to make such different pronouncements (promises indeed) – every resemblance to that dangerous figure, and none.

‘Molly, isn’t it?’ Mary went on blithely, evidently in no hurry. ‘I’m surprised to see you here as John’s beard. On top of… Seriously, John, did you really expect anyone to buy the moustache?’ The way her tone curved into familiarity when addressing him – Sherlock wanted to tear the sound to shreds, wanted to abolish it from any mouth except his own.

But he kept his position crouched (despite the shooting pain – transport: inconvenient, distracting, necessarily disregarded, transient) with an ear lest the reluctant groundskeeper should recover from his fractured jaw and sore testes earlier than estimated.

‘Is he alright?’ John asked curtly, no doubt referring to the clumsy mess of a man at her feet.
‘Oh, he’s fine,’ shrugged Mary, not disquieted in the slightest, because evidently her moral code (if she had one, a question that was gaining weight with every minute) did not extend to protecting mere underlings: she was an internationally infamous assassin, not the nurse she had posed as, not a – not anything like the bundle of drives and codes that made up and had attracted her to John. (For christ’s sake, Mycroft was going to get an absolute EARFUL when they got out of this.)

‘If he needs medical attention –’ John persisted.

She snickered, ‘Come on, John, look at his jacket: bullet-proof. He’ll be fine.’ She hadn’t blinked, it seemed, in ages, eyes trained – trained, the deduction struck him with force, by whom – elsewhere. ‘Besides, Ricoletti was a shit. Terrible agent, terrible bloke. Leave him.’

His options (and therefore their options) were rapidly narrowing. John, hand still outstretched, palm up in placation, no doubt – indeed the narrowing of his eyes proved – was having the same thought, if along slightly different lines considering he knew of one fewer person that was currently present. But John, reflexes notwithstanding, could hardly prevent Suze from harming Gruener while simultaneously fending off Mary and shielding Molly (who, though she could almost certainly get herself out of harm’s way, was nevertheless a vulnerable target, and – from the sound of her shallow, choked breathing, beginning to panic about her odds of ending up in a fire-fight). Sherlock was displeased with the odds himself, as it happened, but he knew something that no one else in the room did – a feeling that so seldom got old, and never in circumstances like this, when his knowledge was decisively to their advantage…

‘If I may interrupt this little reunion of sorts,’ cut in Gruener, and Sherlock, ignoring the warning bells of allowing Mary’s – whoever she was’s – gun out of his sight, glanced back at the artefacts along the walls for anything like a weapon he could use when the suitable moment arose. ‘Morstan, if you wouldn’t mind, this slut who thinks she can invade my private home –’

‘He ruined my life!’

Footsteps again – Sherlock peeked over the edge of a refracted-glass shelf – Suze’s whole self was now glowing like the Byzantine icons in the recessed corridor, but with the modern amendment of a gun rather than a lily or lamb outstretched, while her other, gloved hand grasped something (too tight a grip to be a button for a bomb? dear god, he hoped it wasn’t an actual bomb, but only the very limited object his deductions concluded it would be), arm as it had been when she’d been at Baker Street, wrapped self-protectively across her chest.

‘You’re a sick – you’re evil, you – you don’t deserve to be alive!’
‘Not this way,’ murmured John, nearer to Sherlock, trying to radiate tranquillity in precisely the way he had been trained, years and continents ago, to speak to someone about to self-immolate with a suicide bomb, and before (or was it after?) that, the same tone for someone else entirely on the roof of a building, looking down at a gathering crowd. (His stomach flipped at the memory: disorderly affects, crowding his body and memory in own fell swoop.) ‘This doesn’t solve things. This won’t save anyone—’

‘It certainly won’t get you out of here alive,’ added Mary, with only steel in her voice.

Suze was now laughing hoarsely (self-preserve and rationality fraying). ‘All the little girls whose lives will be scarred forever? Scarred, Heinrich – do you remember?’

Yes – so it was as he suspected – they would need water (but of course in some cases – depending on the composition of the concentrate – different chemicals react differently to require water or, in other cases, emphatically not water to stop the effects of the burning), a burn kit, possibly sedatives – but then again, if Gruener were the only one hit, Sherlock was somewhat inclined to wait until the paramedics arrived –

‘Art is always a pleasure,’ hissed Gruener, words shimmering with malice, and there was what Sherlock had glimpsed when Suze had first arrived in their sitting room: her arm across her buttoned-up, scarf-draped chest (even in summer); her resistance to touch; her unspeakable pain beyond the horrible experience she had already been able to name.

More noise was inadvisable, but he needed a way to incapacitate AGRA, so when she shouted –

‘Put your hand down now! Right now. Slowly—’

– he risked the miniscule sound of one metal (bronze) abrading metal (stainless steel) to grab what looked like a jewel-encrusted sword, complete with (hence it keeping company among Gruener’s things) pornographic illustrations dimly perceptible along the hilt –

‘He has to pay. He’ll never go to prison,’ Suze declared with certainty, a sob shaking her. ‘They never do – and he won’t stop…’

‘We’ll m-make him,’ Molly swore, trembling violently but carrying on, daring to speak despite the shock of finding a colleague’s former girlfriend was in fact a paedophile’s bodyguard (little did she
know), ‘we believe you. Don’t throw your life away from a – a horrible, despicable –’

‘Morstan, for god’s sake, stop this nonsense!’

‘Mary, wait –’ John was swearing –

Several things happened in a blur: a grunt from behind John made him take his eyes off Mary for a fraction of a second – this was Sherlock’s moment – he leapt –

Clocked Mary across the temple, only a _fraction_ of a second of recognition in her eyes before she was on the floor, knocked cold – or faking it –, blood glinting gem-like from one nostril –

– just as Molly gasped at what had distracted John, who was shouting, ‘Fuck! No –’

– he pinned Mary’s arms, pushed her unmoving body beyond of arm’s length of the second also unmoving guard (Ricoletti), grabbed both guns – sent one cascading across the floor into a far, out-of-reach, obscured corner, the second to stow it in his own waistband like John would do, like he himself had done too often in their 797 days apart – extracted multiple twist-ties from the depths of his pockets –

– Suze cried out, muffled – Gruener had (the villain) taken up a heavy lattice-patterned carved wooden box and, in two steps, smashed Suze in the temple with it – she staggered (concussion? internal haemorrhage?) and brought both hands to her blood-streamed face, dropping the gun – Gruener went towards it with hands outstretched – John raised his gun – Suze opened her hands – not dust, not a bomb – and, with smears of blood along her fingers, threw the opened phial of liquid towards Gruener, who screamed and screamed and fell, clutching his own face –

‘ARRRHHH!’ Gruener writhed, ‘MEIN GOTT, MEIN GESICHT, OOHHHHH!’ and John ran towards him (ever the healer), shouting over his shoulder, ‘Molly, help her!’

Molly scrambled to her feet, unsteady like an Olympic runner after a 100m dash, and moved towards Suze who was crumpled on the ground –

John turned to look over his shoulder as he ran towards the other two – and his eyes met Sherlock’s for the first time since they had met in the mirror in the car.
The sudden *thunderclap* of this moment sent a chill down Sherlock’s spine that had nothing to do with riot of cries and chaos around them. John’s expression… Sherlock couldn’t fathom, couldn’t parse the shadow, the sudden flare of *anger*, an exothermic reaction, the detonation of oxidant meeting reductant, blinding in John’s face – directed at *him*? For what, for saving them all? For harming Mary?

(Was this it, then? This objectively, utterly unimportant case – this one night, just a handful of hours – and the fragile trust and… and more, the nascent fledgling *something* between them had fractured; a fault opened, John’s trust riven by Sherlock’s fundamental tendency towards logic over sentiment?)

Shoving these nauseating suppositions away, Sherlock swiftly yanked plastic ties around two sets of hands, another around AGRA’s feet, then (certain they were tight enough – if that was possible –) sprinted across the room and knelt at John’s side. ‘There’s a studio, off the hall – his workshop, certainly gloves. There should be a sink as well, a kit –’

‘*Ambulance,*’ John rumbled menacingly, and even in the ringing din of Gruener’s screams and Suze’s low keening, the fierce, venomous edge in John’s tone was the most chilling, ‘*burns unit,* all of it – *now.*’

Not waiting for Sherlock to produce his phone, John turned to the man squirming like a maggot and moaning incoherently on the floor, squatting and looking beneath the trembling hands to see the curdled, corroded skin, poppy-bright with slithers of wet where the acid – or whichever solution she had used – had burned straight through the skin. (It would, he noted logically, make a good (if malodorous) experiment.)

‘Move your hands,’ John instructed, battle voice taking over, ‘the chemical is still live.’ They needed to flush whatever chemical was eating – ‘*Christ,*’ John whispered – eating through his flesh *off* – even so, first step was to cleanse and remove it, and he suspected Suze was too deeply in shock to tell them what acid she had prepared, even if she’d wanted to.

‘*Yes, Mr Holmes, sir?*’ said the new voice in Sherlock’s ear. He could multi-task: in the next room, the antechamber where Gruener had boated he did his own printing, he had seen the metallic glint of what was (logically) a sink –

‘Don’t let him touch *anything* in his pockets!’ he ordered John, then sprinted for the next room, brusquely instructing the team now descending on the house, ‘We need an ambulance – bring burn specialists, and a medic for a possible shooting victim; and at least *two*’ (he estimated) ‘agents for extraction of AGRA. *Now.*’
‘Yes, sir,’ agreed the voice, and then the static-silence of an ended line.

The faucet was indeed a simple handsink, but, as he raced closer, he recognised the style of dark, unlabelled box beneath the basin: a plastic-case, chemical symbol on the exterior. Grabbing it, a (possibly unclean) cloth, and (as swiftly but surely as he could, dumping the contents of a jar of art tools) some water.

When he dropped back beside John, the Baron’s fingers were shaking minutely mere inches away from his ruined, once-elegant upturned face. Another smell he would sooner never taste again: the scent-flavour of flayed, iron-drenched skin.

John took the kit without words, opened to find water, cream, gauze. ‘This is going to hurt.’

Gruener screamed.

* * *

About ten minutes after the ambulance carrying the Baron on a stretcher pulled away through the fleet of police cars, Mycroft arrived.

It was a measure of how exhausted Sherlock found himself that he didn’t even bother to attempt a first shot.

‘Another successful, subtle resolution to matters, I understand,’ Mycroft intoned on a sigh.

As far as Sherlock was concerned, they had all narrowly avoided being shot, burned, stabbed (again) or assaulted, and he wished to deal with these facts (and the ensuing adrenaline crash, post-traumatic episodes, and/or whatever lurking, banked, fury was still smouldering in the corners of John’s eyes) in the privacy of their own home. (If it still was theirs. No – he swept his mind clear of the thought once more.) On top of this, it was getting colder out now that night had indeed set in. Sherlock retreated tightly into his coat.

Evidently John was no more in the mood for brotherly/derogatory slurs.
‘Here,’ John said simply, thrusting the spherical fob ‘watch’ and matches they (well, Sherlock had) nicked out of Gruener’s pockets towards Mycroft.

Mycroft raised an auburn eyebrow, quirling his head to lift it even higher. No doubt the imbecility of his operatives, the high cost of overtime, the poor intelligence and the personnel reshuffling were whirling in his bureaucratic brain. Sherlock had no energy to wait on attendance for his brother to break the silence, and so broke it instead.

‘A Stanhope,’ Sherlock pronounced solemnly. Mycroft extended his palm and took the items, eyes swivelling now to his brother.

(Had the world any justice, Mycroft would not be familiar with the workings of miniaturised photographic novelty items, and Sherlock would have the very muted pleasure of explaining it to him.)

But no, there was no forgiving grace in the chill of the evening air. His brother brought the two pieces to his eye and, just as Sherlock himself had done only minutes earlier, thumbed in the back of the slightly oversized red-and-black V matchbook to retrieve:

‘A wheel of slides,’ narrated Sherlock, voice flat with – with fatigue –

(how he hated the drain of his body, the way it congealed the brainwork – but this bone-deep weariness felt worse than mere tiredness, felt colder, shivering like the come-down of a twisted, bottomless hit from which he dreaded to try to climb). (Mitigated, at least, by the scant pleasure of explaining the blatantly obvious as if his brother were an utter simpleton.) (The schedule for pain medications meant he was long overdue, but he would gladly suffer further if it meant John’s expression would soften and he would look at him at last.) Meanwhile, the bulbous silver thing, the very bulkiness of which had been the tip-off as his fingers slid amongst the otherwise streamlined contents of Gruener’s pockets, was no timepiece, but rather an odd fob watch-shaped decoy (a bit, John would likely say, like a globular kaleidoscope); the button, it turned out, was no button but a viewer. –

‘The collection of the three most recent conquests Baron Gruener committed to record, each with microfilm captions narrating relevant data and… testimony.’

As Mycroft incrementally slid the wheel round, Sherlock dared not spare another look at John. His strained, downturned mouth and weary eyes made Sherlock concerned that he was concealing something, that he had drawn into himself as a way of recoiling from something akin to a punch (from a knife wound to the gut). Sherlock’s own viscera still felt twisted, his lingering anxiety –
foreboding, even – perched on the edge of a fall. He wished Mycroft would take his prizes and go.

Once, not really that long ago (nearly 900 days now), John had not worried so much. Well, all right, he had worried a great deal, but he had been able (once Sherlock had got him out of his head) to enjoy himself – the thrill of the chase, the thunder of his blood at the climactic moment of catching the criminal, the long drunk slide of euphoria during which he and Sherlock tended to laugh themselves silly and wandered back to Baker Street like conquerors – and had even drawn heady strength from the realisation that that had been too close, so heart-stoppingly sublimely too close, there but with the grace of god go I, or rather, go we.

But these last few weeks had taken a special toll, almost steeper than the price of Sherlock’s return – perhaps (almost certainly) connected – and somehow the case itself had dwindled in Sherlock’s interest in contradistinction to the enigma of how they could possibly go on taking cases if John – if they both – could not control their emotional responses to letting the other near to danger.

It would be difficult, he saw now as he considered the years ahead. The flat returned to its baseline of ticking clocks and silent skulls. The cases evacuated of the laughter, the mischief, the drive to care in the first place. Perhaps he wouldn’t stay in the flat at all. It might be easier, to avoid the same relapse as he’d undergone at the lowest points of his time on the run. Easier, too, on Mrs Hudson, not to have to bear the burden of caring for him without a buffer, without someone to tell him when he’d truly crossed the unforgivable line. It had been borrowed time (an expression he’d never particularly liked). No one had believed it when John had stayed; they’d been impressed and sceptical when John had returned. And, for once, they were right. But Sherlock wished he’d committed more of the previous night to memory, the soft heat of John’s body next to his, fingers scratching minute, beguiling aches of sensation across Sherlock’s skin, humming and smiling and behaving as though it wasn’t the last time.

‘A reasonably clever deception,’ Mycroft was admitting, lowering the gruesome pornographic toy, so uninteresting that Sherlock considering storming away.

‘He also carried a lighter,’ sighed Sherlock with despair. Even Mycroft could admit the obvious carelessness of his entire staff of morons overlooking that contradiction: it should have caught someone’s eyes (Sherlock was furious with himself already) sooner.

‘Mildly clever, then – relatively speaking.’

The man was made of ice, there was no other way about it. (Sherlock had once thought himself the same. The reality, he discovered, was proof of the difference.) But if he had noticed Sherlock’s inner distress, he had elected – for once – not to exploit it.
‘He’ll live,’ John added, as if to remind them of the ultimate victory: the balance of justice meted. ‘He’ll live, and with this he’ll see trial.’

‘Mmm,’ Mycroft acknowledged.

‘Trial,’ John stressed again, in his stoniest voice, because he was a bleeding heart, a knight errant, the soldier who had never come home from the war but who still, with a depth of belief that pressed Sherlock past comprehension, had hope for the future. ‘Trial, Mycroft, or I swear to god –’

‘Of course, Dr Watson,’ Mycroft placated, and he looked like he so often did: crooning with the impression of rolling his eyes just beneath the surface. Smarmy goliath.

The rhinoceros’s departure left only John and himself amidst the last of the police cars and agents milling around, taking statements. Molly had, Sherlock had insisted, been escorted home (and would be receiving a subtle – if any of Mycroft’s people had a single competent bone in their body – visit from a psychologist in short order).

‘We need to go to the hospital.’

‘No.’ He wrapped his coat – stowed (with foresight he was grateful of now) in the car – tightly around himself.

‘Damn it, Sherlock! I’m not doing this now. You need to have those stitches looked at, probably broke the skin and tore half of them out.’

‘None, I’m sure, and a little strain –’

‘Somehow, I think when the hospital discharged you, they didn’t imagine wrestling an armed bodyguard and knocking her out to be the same as a game of ten-pin bowling in the park.’

‘I didn’t knock her out, I merely broke her nose, which, as you very well –’

‘Shut up – just… stop.’ John commanded, flatly, rubbish his face (hiding his heavy eyes behind his hands, covered as they were still in trace amounts of other men’s blood).
He couldn’t – If they didn’t go home now, wrap themselves in the certainty of Baker Street and all it held, its strange and vital power… Sherlock refused to go to the hospital, its stringent separation: no. John was his doctor until such time as he renounced the role, and not a second before.

‘It would be far better if you simply checked them at home.’

A siren wheeled to life as the last but one of the black town cars rolled away, its police escort in tow, taking a dazed- looking Suze away from here. Sherlock drank him in, stowing every detail in reserve: face uncovered, John stared into the distance with the look of a man who hadn’t slept in a year, but also like he was reaching the tipping point after which he was on track to punch a vicar as readily as a villain.

John’s left hand flexed angrily, visibly struggling with himself.

‘Your way,’ John muttered, marching around the final, stalling car and ducking inside. ‘Always your way.’

He grimaced. How little, at times, John knew him.

*

Chapter End Notes

(Oh, Sherlock...)

Firstly: all credit for the Stanhope goes to Ripper Street. T’would be spoilers to say more but it came up there and seemed to be to be a nice Victorian/modern blending of
Gruener's original scrapbook method, because come on, a master villain is not going to go *scrapbooking*. Secondly, yes, that is a Rathbone reference: *Sherlock Holmes in Washington* (1943). It's really actually very good -- a good case, good comedy... a good film. Much nationalism, though, because um #1943 so mind your heads there. And yes, those who've seen Series 4, that reference is as close as I'm getting to Eurus. But this chapter tried to knit together ACD, Rathbone, S4, the Bert Coules radio ep, and a few bits and bobs, so no wonder it's so hectic.

A bit upset with myself that this Mary wasn't quite as S3 as she was S4, and then not even that? And in fact, while I'm listing grievances, bit sorry that Molly didn't get as many lines as the boys. Being a fem-identifying feminist writing from cismen's perspectives? Headache, at times.

Hope the wait was worth it. This chapter gave me a lot of trouble and Sherlock's perspective was deliberately disjointed... but (full disclosure) I still think it could be improved. Oh well. Next chapter is where I'm really looking.

To which end: yes, I've added a final chapter count. May change but... we're nearing the end. Hold your breath.
Sixteen (John)

Chapter Summary

(Or maybe, beneath layers, no, years of closeted rubbish and self-loathing and self-protective macho bullshit, it is *exactly* like that, said a voice uncomfortably like Harry’s.)

[a long night of the soul]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 16: John

‘The fist clenched round my heart
loosens a little, and I gasp
brightness; but it tightens
again. When have I ever not loved
the pain of love? But this has moved

past love to mania. This has the strong
clench of the madman, this is
gripping the ledge of unreason, before
plunging howling into the abyss.

Hold hard then, heart. This way at least you live.’

–Derek Walcott, ‘The Fist’

The one good thing about post-operative stitches in a proper hospital was, at least, that they’d done a good job putting them in the first time. Took them seriously and used the good stuff, rather than the glorified fence wire he’d sometimes been forced to use on the battlefield.

A dab of gauze that brought away only two pinpricks of blood – only pulled, then, with surrounding skin very red and angry (he’d have to be extra watchful for infection and temperature), but nothing fully ripped. Not for lack of trying.
He taped a fresh square of cotton wool over the skin after rubbing water, iodine, and antibiotic ointment over the area, then stiffly stood up (his knees groaning, dear Christ he was getting old), shoved the overdue pills in Sherlock’s direction. Began to wash his hands. Most of the blood there wasn’t Sherlock’s, anyway – at least not this time.

His gaze remained focussed on the soap between his fingers. ‘When did you know it was Mary?’

Sounding almost impatient at being spoken to for the first time since being told to sit, Sherlock replied instantly, ‘Only the moment before I disarmed her, just after Miss Winter began to move on Gruener.’

John huffed without glancing sideways.

‘You don’t believe me.’ His deduction voice, flat, inarguable. Brilliant.

John shut off the tap, dried his hands. ‘You were outside, according to the plan, apparently prepared to keep to that plan. Molly was doing well, Gruener was talking. Next thing I know Suze is throwing some kind of acid and you’re handcuffing my ex-girlfriend.’

‘Then follow your deductions through!’ Sherlock urged harshly, and John gripped the cool tile basin of the sink so hard with wet hands he felt in danger of slipping and knocking out his own teeth. ‘I did not know, definitively, that your former…’ he waved his hand in John’s peripheral vision, ‘… partner was involved when you went in. I quickly realised, however, that there was very little reason – in fact a staggering amount to the oppose the idea – of sending you accompanied by only Molly into the house of the man who employed a usually useless but nevertheless ruthlessly directed cohort of guards who, though you were going in costume, nevertheless cannot all be entirely relied upon not to see through the air-tight disguise of a moustache and some temporary hair colour.’

John’s head popped up to stare at the ceiling, furious, because the fake moustache, now stowed in under-the-sink drawer, had been perhaps his only contribution to the whole sodding plan and honestly, if Sherlock was going to pick him up on it now of all fucking moments, to score points in the contest of ‘who wore it better?’, John was going to need to go for a long walk away from his own temper.

In the siren- and jackboot-rocked din of the paramedics arriving, Gruener, the guard, Mary, Molly, Suze, all being manhandled or carted or escorted away, John had been too preoccupied making sure the ambulance people had all the necessary information (acid, Christ, not a pretty weapon; he shoved aside the phantom odour of more serious guns and explosives, more dust and desert, more
blood) to have much time to keep an eye on what became of Sherlock, never mind Mary. By the
time he found him again – apparently arresting yet another guard, the outside one – the MI5 or
whatever-they-were-in-suits-and-handguns had carted her off.

He shook his head and tried to get clear. ‘That doesn’t explain –’

‘How I knew that one of Gruener’s lackeys by her smile.’ Then he added, eye still boring into the
side of John’s skull, ‘Even had I not recognised her face, however, she went to the very useful
smokescreen of wearing women’s perfume to catch me off-guard when she stabbed me.’

John’s spine went rigid. He turned now to look down, past Sherlock’s dark gaze, nearly level from
where he sat on the lid of the toilet, to his shirt still open – though at least tonight he’d at least lost
the driver’s oversized jacket, baggy and all wrong – and skin exposed to the unheated air, like the
night they’d rowed after the opera, but now the normal pasty white was flushed and pained and
bruised and raw. He didn’t… He clamped down, hard, on as many thoughts clawing in his head as
possible and tried to stay in control.

‘When she stabbed you.’

Sherlock’s frown was etched all over his face. ‘It only escaped my notice directly afterwards.
Slown.’ Self-disgust and -reprimandation was plain on his face but John wasn’t ready yet to comfort
him, to tell him it was fine, when it wasn’t. ‘But I remembered it almost instantly. Claire-de-la-
lune.’

He was halfway to the sitting room before his eyes had even adjusted to the darkness. He paced
until he couldn’t stand the sound of his own tread anymore.

Wanted to scream, to kick something (someone) – wanted to go back in time, erase the woman at
the Pret, have Sherlock unaccept this case, stop them getting in that first awful row after the last
one, or the rows during the Carbuncle mess, undo Mary and the fact that John was either so stupid
or had such a hard-on for danger that he’d courted, fucked, maybe loved – tried to love – a fucking
assassin! Most of all, the way he (coward, fool) was afraid to say it all out loud, suspected that the
cases would always win – as he knew they would, should even, since in the great balance of human
affairs, he was so, so unimportant and the lives of the girls they’d saved on this case, the wrongs
Sherlock had righted, even when he’d been away doing GOD knew what, all those other people
were better off, and John knew in his bones that if this thing with Sherlock broke that they’d both
have to live with the fact that there were future cases, future people, whose lives would be worse
because John couldn’t get a grip.
Planting in front of the empty grate, looking hard at the mantle with Sherlock’s magpie-like collection of oddities and contraband solid objects, with the thick orange and violet city light streaming in like a flood, staining the floor and walls with familiar colours, he tried not to decide whether he was more furious with all of them, or himself. It was a close call.

‘So, when you said,’ interrupting the silence, since he heard at last Sherlock’s peculiar kind of stillness standing just beyond the threshold, ‘you didn’t know who had attacked you – the person who… who’d smiled when she – Christ, when she stabbed you – you decided not to mention not only that she was working for that disgusting bastard, but that it was the same person who I’d very nearly married?’

His restrained shouts, hopefully quiet enough not to wake Mrs Hudson, nevertheless sent a shockwave through the room, binding them both to several more minutes of silence. In the corner of the mirrored image, Sherlock’s ice blue shirt, altered even as it was in this half-light, reflected the only light in the room.

‘I did not know,’ Sherlock growled, audibly bristling with pride, ‘I had not seen her picture, I had instructed my brother not to provide me with any more information than was necessary, which evidently meant in his enormous fat head that I didn’t need to know that she was last seen working in London, a fact he and I will be discussing in–’

John snorted in disbelief. Sherlock paused mid-rant.

‘I know,’ through gritted teeth, the arse, ‘that you do not want to believe me right now, but I am quite obviously telling you the truth: I got the essentials of your file, but I did not – I never wanted to –’

John felt his laughter curdle in his throat. ‘It’s obvious, is it? Let me tell you, it feels just like all the other times. Every single sodding time that everyone in my life has lied to me, over and over again. But what do I know?’

‘I didn’t lie –’

He might kill him. ‘Yes, Sherlock, you did. I don’t care about the semantics of it. You kept me in the dark, again. After you promised not two weeks ago – no, fuck that, before then, you swore, after Neville bloody St. Clair!’
'Are you going to persist in *not* listening, or are you simply too emotional to take in new information? It wasn’t a premeditated deception! For god’s *SAKE!* ‘ He was shouting now, to plough over John’s words which were shaking and livid, hurled across the room. And Sherlock, as John would’ve bet, saw a fight and hurtled into it, no holds barred. ‘I belatedly realised my mistake: *of course* Suze was going to turn up and try to get some sliver of revenge, obvious to anyone not *forced to take painkillers* that dull brainwork,’ – John gritted his teeth, balled fingers digging into each other, but Sherlock careered on – ‘she had very little left to lose and a waning window in which to get even what pittance she could. There simply wasn’t time to inform you of developments until they were already in progress. I could hardly text you while you and Molly were impersonating people, “Dear John, do be careful, Gruener’s former lover may turn up and try to kill him. Best you try first. Hope no one else reads this! *Kisses,* Sherlock”. *Think it through!*’

The lurch to a sudden halt in his speech left the words, biting and urgent, full in the room between them, somehow simultaneously stuffed and deflated, like one small prod would send all the air rushing out of it and leave everything collapsed in on itself, them included. He felt twisted internally, behind the place where the millstone left its bruise, fear clutching his guts with claws that stung.

‘You are unhappy,’ noted Sherlock, tone hollow, and John couldn’t stand it a moment longer.

‘I’M *AFRAID!*’ he bellowed, spinning suddenly to stare at him at last.

Sherlock blinked.

‘I am…’ His lungs felt swamped and his molars ached, but he gripped at the worn fabric of his chair between them, dragged the words out like thick-rooted weeds in a garden. ‘I am fucking *terrified* that the only thing that would prevent me from being there to keep you safe is *you.*’

He tried to be glad he’d managed to admit it rather than feel sick, but he waited until his breathing was steadier before looking up. Sherlock continued his stunned silence. They were going round in circles.

‘How many times can we have the same fight, Sherlock?’

A long, long pause followed this question. In the pause he felt his heart pounding, not fast but almost surreally slow, beating the long, heavy seconds in which everything they struggled to say or resolve or confront about themselves and each other seemed to whisper like the ticking of the radiator.
Eventually, Sherlock spoke again. ‘Loathe though you think I am to admit it, John, I cannot control my own realisations. I cannot apologise for that. I cannot promise to know when pressing data will crystallise, nor can I promise to wait at home, twiddling my fingers, waiting for your permission to act on it. No more than I could ask that of you.’

Some tight, long-suffocating band across his chest seemed to loosen. Was that… progress? John thought back to previous fights on this same subject. They had, at least, managed to sort out where the boundaries were. ‘You can’t find a middle ground until you know where you stand,’ Sholto had told him once. It had sounded trite at the time.

But clearly Sherlock seemed to think it was a cataclysm, standing there with his shoulders hunched.

‘I understand if…’ Sherlock swallowed thickly, and John watched him from beneath heavy eyelashes. ‘I can appreciate that this is no longer sufficient. Needless to say, you can have a great deal more from someone else, as we have always known, so if you would prefer to end our current situation, we can… go back. To the previous arrangement.’

The flat, toneless way Sherlock delivered this offer collapsed over him with the strength of a tidal wave. He – these words were more than resigned: they were practised. The broken, poorly-hidden expression on Sherlock’s face exterminated the relief that had momentarily sprung to life in John’s chest. Not even a week ago, in the safely unfamiliar space of a hospital room, Sherlock had clung to him, wrung out, seeking the comfort of John’s body just as much as John had wanted his; had offered, almost by accident, the three words no one on earth had ever been fortunate enough to hear from him (at least John suspected so; not like that). John refused to give them back.

Two alternatives now loomed in Sherlock’s everycolour eyes, between stalemate and outright surrender: turning back the clocks, ‘deleting’ the past few months as though they hadn’t shifted the entire course of their lives, or – by the sounds of it – ending the whole thing, tidy away the last five years like some sort of a ruined experiment.

‘Go back’? There was no going back.

‘So, you think this is it?’ John asked bluntly, pointing between them.

‘As if recent events do not speak for themselves, yes! As I have been attempting to make clear. We are both fundamentally stubborn people, and I cannot give you –’
‘This?’ John’s voice sliced in low and desperately sharp, pulled back his shoulders. ‘This isn’t it.’ He bit his tongue and re-grounded his stance, alarm bells in his head clashing between the impulse to shut up, Watson and protect his weakest flank, and the need surging from his toes to his fingertips to the base of his skull to stop Sherlock talking himself out of… everything.

‘That’s what I’m saying, John, it isn’t, so if you’ll –’

‘No, Sherlock, you listen now. You think you can’t… You have no idea what I want.’

‘YES! Exactly! Understood!’ He was trying to retreat back into the kitchen, no doubt to his room – their room – to tend his wounds, or possibly to ignite the walls. ‘Now if you’ll leave –’

‘What I want,’ John raised his voice, because if he went to his grave without saying this, he would be worse than a fool, ‘is you.’

Sherlock had the audacity to roll his eyes but John ignored the blatant taunt, like tens of thousands of times before.

‘That’s it. You’re telling me you didn’t know about Mary? Fine. I – I can accept that. I may need to punch your brother but that’s… You didn’t have time to warn me about Suze. I get it. I believe you. I didn’t… I’m not good at this stuff, but I don’t…’ He grimaced at his own inarticulacy. ‘Seeing you there, after the hospital, after walking inside that house and leaving you where I couldn’t see you… It wound me up, all right? I overreacted. I’m sorry. But that’s not what I meant, before.’

Downstairs, Mrs Hudson was doing her washing up, with her radio for company.

John’s body knew before he did that he needed to be closer, just three steps closer, to Sherlock, but arriving there, at an intimate-but-respectable distance less than an arm’s length apart, he felt something flutter behind his sternum, choking the rest of him to get out.

‘This isn’t all there is. We could… We could go to the Yard tomorrow. You would solve a dozen cold cases, for your website, for my book. Next week we could go to the pub and I could get you plastered on two and half pints of weak bitter, because you are terrible at holding your drink. The day after we could go for a walk through Regent’s Park, and you could show off for me and I could pretend not to notice how much you admire the kids when they find good hiding places in the flowerbeds even though their parents will tell them off. We could… We could have a kid of our
own, someday, a little clever thing that made you tell her Victorian ghost stories, or dragged you to Bart’s to meet Molly so he could learn how to prepare his own slides.’ His thick murmur wavered for a second, stumbling at the shock on Sherlock’s face, but he quickly went on. ‘Or not. We could take care of Mrs. Hudson if and when she ever decides she wants to be closer to her sister – boring, you’ll say, but, you’ll do it for sentiment, as usual. We could borrow your arsehole of a brother’s credit cards and take ourselves on holiday to Italy or Australia or someplace where you’d rush down before dawn to inspect all the best deck chairs and at night you’d run after some smuggler and we’d eat and shag and sleep with the window open and dance to slow music, because you love to dance. You could teach me. We’d ignore your brother’s calls asking how the hell we spent a hundred quid on an old-fashioned magnifying glass that wasn’t actually antique. We could get a dog. We’d have a bit of a shout when I’m fed up with doing all the dishes again or when one of us gets shot at because we’re both shite at this sort of thing. We could move, both of us or all of us, whoever we are, to the country when you decide it’s time to write your full memoirs, to fix whatever second-rate romantic thrillers I’ve peddled to the masses. You could keep bees or cross-breed poisonous plants and take me up to the opera whenever the sound of the ocean and the seedy underbelly of Cornwall or the Outer Hebrides or wherever isn’t dangerous enough to keep you from going spare. We would be there to take care of each other if we get sick, or when we're too old to get up the stairs or even to the toilet. And we would continue to get into trouble and worry and hate it and resent it and fight about it, and we would wake up in the same bed, and tell anyone who suggested we find a “healthier relationship” to go fuck themselves.’

He was slightly out of breath. He hadn’t – hadn’t meant to go on at that length – hadn’t quite known his imagination had painted those pictures, contradictory in places, consciously or even unconsciously.

Sherlock didn’t speak.

‘This,’ John concluded, more quietly, but he couldn’t stop himself, he felt one last thing in his throat, needing to be said, ‘isn’t going anywhere. I’m going to be angry sometimes, and I’m sorry about that, but it doesn’t actually change anything. I don’t know how else to convince you that I’m in this for good, but. Just… know it. And all I need – the only thing I need – is for you to be in this with me.’

After a second to prepare himself, he looked up at Sherlock. The red-rimmed desolate anger of a moment ago had given way to an expression very like when Sherlock’d asked whether John knew him, one hundred percent? Like he still half-expected John to reveal a hidden joke at his expense, at the cruellest possible moment.

‘Alright?’ John asked, mostly because he wasn’t sure what else to say. Sherlock softly nodded. So John nodded, in echoing confirmation, then leaned in slightly, not giving Sherlock too much time to overthink himself, and brushed his lips. And then, when Sherlock didn’t flee, tried to say it all again with a second, deeper kiss.
It wasn’t a kiss that needed to lead anywhere in particular, didn’t make demands on either of them, and when it came to a natural end, John continued to rest his forehead softly against Sherlock’s, with arms holding tight to the bespoke wool puckers at Sherlock’s elbows. He’d hated, bristled at the implication Molly made: *Bride of Frankenstein*, playing dress up, two old mad… *queers*, was the word that sprang to mind, bitter-edged and damning. Was that them now? Was that him? But kissing Sherlock didn’t feel like that. Holding him didn’t feel like that. *(Or maybe, beneath layers, no, years of closeted rubbish and self-loathing and self-protective macho bullshit, it is *exactly* like that, said a voice uncomfortably like Harry’s.)* Either way, it was nobody’s business what they did in bed, in the kitchen, on the cases, on the bloody *moon*. And if it took him spending the next fifty years of his life telling people to mind their own fucking business, he could live with that.

After several moments unspooled and slowly regathered them back to themselves, John breathed a sigh, nose skating against Sherlock’s jaw, and stood back. Somewhat expectedly, Sherlock was staring into the middle-distance, retreated into himself, as he did when he occasionally hit a threshold of new, especially emotional, data, and needed the space to work through it, classify and compartmentalize it, let it go, before he could return to the present.

Now that they were no longer touching, John felt it was probably a good idea to take himself to bed. With Sherlock in processing mode, it’d be better for him to carry on as normally as possible. The come-down from a case didn’t, historically, bring out the best in either of them. Rather give Sherlock and himself some space, allow the bits of him that had been bruised or drained to repair with sleep. Put a lid on all the bloody talking everything to death.

He went, unhurried, through his evening routine (it felt much later, the drag of his eyelids protesting as though it was 4am and not quarter-to-midnight, not least for the muscle-memory of the post-case replacement of his gun from his jacket pocket to the bedside drawer).

Pushing the dial up to hot, he stepped into a brisk shower, scrubbing the last of the day away, the hair-dye and acid cream and blood seeping down the drain, carrying with them the onslaught of dark little voices and screams that he’d heard tonight and would probably hear again in his dreams for a while to come. Pushed away questions and guilt and other people’s consciousnesses, all out of his mind. He peeked into the sitting room on his way, saw Sherlock standing now in front of the mantle mirror, just where John had gone. Still processing, then. Swallowing a lurking gnaw of doubt, he padded on.

Under the covers in a vest and shorts, lights out, finally, finally, he allowed himself a deep breath. Around him, silence also slipped in, settling down for the night like mountain fog.

Just as he was falling asleep, the tread of familiar footfalls sounded the approach. The shudder of the doorhandle heralded the sudden silhouette of Sherlock, who charged, eyes front in the dark, to climb over the duvet and curl from nose to knees into the blanketed angles of John’s body. *(He should be lying on his side.)* John blinked, instantly very awake, at the ceiling, and waited to hear
what – if anything – Sherlock wanted to say.

Like a long, stretched-out downbeat, Sherlock’s quiet, ruffled breaths sent reflexive shivers of gooseflesh where he was tucked in below John’s chin. At least, stilling, John told himself it was reflexive. He waited.

‘I don’t…’ Sherlock shut his eyes, evidently deciding his tack, while John continued to stare at nothing, sharp barbs stinging inside his chest as he more or less held his breath. ‘I don’t know what I want. I don’t know what you want.’

John blinked. ‘Did you miss the bit where I spilled about twenty –’

‘Those were hypothetical goals!’ Sherlock argued, jaw tensing against John’s shoulder, fingers tight on John’s ribs. ‘I’m not interested in hypothetical eventualities based on cultural norms and assumptions you’ve accrued from being just around – people!’ He spat the word with such venomous disgust, John couldn’t help but pull his head back and sit up to look at Sherlock, who lifted his chin just enough that his eyes – grey opal whirlpools in the dim – could meet John’s.

‘Aren’t you the man who told me, “beauty is a construct based entirely on childhood impressions”?’

Sherlock huffed, scowl knotted. ‘I was on a case.’

‘You were beautiful.’

The words tingled on his tongue like hot peppers, drying and simultaneously flooding his system. Sherlock was beautiful – had always been staggeringly beautiful, and as strange as John felt to saying such a thing about him, about any man, he realised with sudden clarity that that Sherlock, the aloof, untouchable, untouched just-a-mate downstairs: that person no longer existed for him. Here, in John’s arms, was the man he was mad for, the one he could and desperately wanted to dance with in the sitting room, to call pet names, to kiss on his way out the door, to crawl over and make giggle and gasp beneath him, to hear laughing across a crowded room and know that before the night was over he’d have heard about not only the joke and joker that made the great Sherlock Holmes break into his genuine, stupid, lovely deep bubbling giggle, but also every unspoken secret in the room, every peculiar fact about the canapés and folded serviettes, every construction detour on every street they’d taken on the cab ride home.
With deadly seriousness, he kept his eyes on Sherlock’s, knowing at least some of his no doubt soppy sentimentality was visible in his expression. Sherlock gazed back, frown unmoved but eyes shifting back and forth between each of John’s, up-close.

At last, Sherlock finally cracked, looking bewildered and imploring all at once. ‘I’m selfish, John. You know I am. But I cannot allow myself to ask to you to give all of that up. Not for – for me.’

How could he still – ‘Sherlock, I don’t understand why you think I’m giving something up!’

‘Because that is patently the case!’ He shifted to sitting up now, wincing (*damn the stitches, damn the whole fucking world*). ‘Because I have lied to you, on *innumerable* occasions! Because I insult your friends and have ruined your birthday dinner without even attending. Because my brain moves faster than yours and I cannot and will not pretend otherwise. Because I have black moods and destroy things and despise the entire world when that happens, even you, and I can’t just wish myself free of it at convenient moments because there’s an “important” wedding or funeral or children’s birthday party to go to. People expect their partners to *attend* things, to remember sentimentally significant dates and occasions and rituals, to drop everything when the other person needs something. You will want to have sex more than I do; you will miss having sex with women. But you should have all of those things!’

John considered him, heart so heavy with everything built into these constant roundabout conversations in which Sherlock informed John in one breath that he had been a lonely man before John came into his life, and with the next that John should leave.

His throat caught but he didn’t want, *wasn’t right*, for it to linger as if it weren’t the case, as if Sherlock were the only one with failings here. ‘Sherlock, I’ve lied to you, too.’ (*The tomato soup; Irene Adler, ages ago now…*) ‘But I lied to myself for too long about… about this. What we could – become. I don’t need all of that stuff you just said. I know you think I do,’ he hurried to say, while Sherlock huffed disbelievingly, ‘but I’m here to tell you, I don’t. And I can tell you, if it changes.’

‘That’s my *point*, it *will* change. With your previous partners –’

‘What do they matter? It’s done, I’m not with them – I’m here.’

‘You were looking forward to that kind of life,’ Sherlock insisted darkly. ‘You wanted to marry her – “very nearly married”, you said.’
‘Do you have any idea how lonely I was –’

‘Yes, obviously, that is what I am saying: you’ll be lonely.’

‘I was lonely because you weren’t there.’ Brutal, ugly and needy, dependent and clingy and emasculating and weak, dangerous, but god, it was true. The way he’d survived all the shitty three-night-stands he’d called girlfriends had been because he’d had Sherlock to come home to. Paris with Mary had been a disaster not because of her driving or his rubbish French or even the fact that, as it turned out, she’d secretly been a casual-hours gun-for-hire. From day one, leaving his bedsit, even when he and Sherlock had fought or hurt each other or pretended it was anything but what it was… He made himself say it. ‘The only thing I need, not to be lonely for the rest of my mad, screwed up life – is you.’

His fingers found the sweep of Sherlock’s cheek just as Sherlock scooted to lean over and kiss him, and John refused to worry about stitches or Suze or Mary or Molly, about any of the things they had said or done in their entire lives, and just kissed him back.

By the time they lay back down, Sherlock was shivering beneath his fingers, face tucked in once more to John’s neck, breathing jaggedly.

‘I want you to be happy,’ Sherlock said with a sigh, a small breath a thing, like the rustle of a spring breeze through the tulips in St. James’.

He nudged his knees, beneath the covers, into Sherlock’s. ‘What about you?’

Sherlock shrugged uncomfortably, nose wrinkled, and shook his head all at once. ‘I’m perfectly fine.’

‘Sherlock,’ John urged, voice faltering with the weight of it, and suddenly, for no clear reason, Sherlock’s voice cracked too when he said,

‘No, you – you still don’t – that isn’t just a, a meaningless –’

‘I want you to be happy,’ John insisted, in a lower, more broken voice still, coming close and looking at Sherlock, whose were eyes much too bright and jaw much too tense. ‘I want to make you happy.’
‘You make me happy by existing,’ Sherlock breathed, ‘happiness is so absurdly inadequate a word that I –’

John kissed him, deep and all-consuming, and Sherlock wrapped his arms around him and poured himself into every kiss with the desperation of a drowning man.

Breathless, breaking a kiss to take a shuddering gasp of air, Sherlock forced words through his vocal cords: ‘I don’t make you happy, I make you miserable, and I don’t know how –’

‘You make me happy by existing,’ John returned, hands clinging tight to the nape of Sherlock’s neck, where the beautiful rough callus from his violin was already a little fainter than just a month ago. ‘Even when I’m also furious, you make me happier every day than I have ever been anywhere else – with anyone else. And if you…’ He swallowed. ‘And I think once we both start accepting that, maybe it’ll get easier.’

Sherlock frowned and burrowed shamefully into the crook of John’s neck once more, right hand holding John’s shoulderblade in his palm like a life preserver.

‘Just – tell me,’ John muttered, ‘when something gets to you. I will too. Even the small things. Because either it’s as stupid as you’re thinking, in which case I’m happy for us to laugh it off together; or it’s something you’ve got worked up in your own head, something I’ll gladly point out is a worry over nothing real, nothing as serious as you’re afraid of, and we’ll move on; or, it’s really bad. In which case, we’ll handle it.’ He stroked gentlingly along Sherlock’s spine.

‘Together.’

‘You cannot be certain that that will be enough. No more can I.’

‘Okay. So then let this be the one thing you wait to pass a verdict on. This is it, us. Watch and see.’

Several minutes later, grips no longer quite so vice-like on each other, John felt Sherlock release a shuddering breath. ‘You have no idea,’ Sherlock gulped, in a voice wet and trembling, ‘how deeply I love you.’

John half-laughed on an exhale, fingers threading the long curls at the back of Sherlock’s brilliant head, the soft lobes of his ears, the ripples of flesh of his neck twisted against John’s. For 797 days John had wondered, scraping at his own imagination until it felt like he was bleeding inwardly, if
Sherlock had ever had feelings for him. Whether he was even important to Sherlock, or just another variable to play with before casting away. What his feelings had really been. Whether Sherlock, as John had told himself and a few other people time and again, even felt things that way.

He felt now that he did, perhaps, finally, have some idea.

* * *

They never quite slept, so eventually, when Sherlock rolled, stiffly, face caked (more palpably than visibly, in the darkened room) with his own and John’s tears, John forced himself back to waking, swung his legs around to sitting, then considered the time. Very late. Too late for delivery – anything decent, anyway. Jesus, he was really getting too old for this. Well, in a couple of hours, the earliest street market vendors would begin to claim the High Street; and in the meantime, there was bound to be a food truck or 24-hour express shop somewhere. Years of practice told him they would regret indulging a post-case deep sleep without at least trying to eat something.

‘Would you prefer some naff middle-of-the-night, overcooked Chinese? Or wait until it’s properly light out?’ He stood, came round the side of the bed and stopped by the door. ‘Toast now, kip, then… breakfast – or lunch, really – someplace later?’

Sherlock slowly, planted his feet on the floor, still perched on the edge of the bed. His everycolour eyes sparkled in the reflected hallway light.

‘I want you to know,’ he vowed solemnly, hands steepled and resting on his knees. ‘That you will not be alone anymore. You don’t have to hide anything. I will not expect you to be anything other than John Hamish Watson. I won’t always understand how to give you what you want but I will always want to, just as I will always - ultimately - tell you the truth. Sometimes you will be impatient, or frustrated, or disappointed with me; you almost certainly have to be explicit, more explicit at times than you feel comfortable, to explain to me what you need. But there is nothing you could want or need or do or be that would make you anything less than the most important person in the world. More important than the cases, though I cannot say it will always seem that way to others. But the cases, the work, would be – would be utterly meaningless without you. As would everything else. I loved you before I knew what love was.’

He couldn't breathe for a moment, throat and fists tight. ‘I…’

How Sherlock knew – how long he’d known – the right things, the things John had most desperately ached to hear, whether it had been the scuffs on John’s shoes or the fold of his wallet or the even-deepening furrows creasing his forehead or the way he sipped his tea that gave him
away… How, how, the world that had shaken them about, dragged them along, spat them out, rough and angry and not sure it was worth going on alone, had also made it possible to be here, in the middle of the night, finding everything they’d ever needed in the most unlikely place – a cramped, chaotic flat, filled with two men who should both have been dead scores of times but somehow come through, and found this, this amazing, disastrous, incredible mess of a love that included chases across the city and midnight takeaway and medical journals and violins and a future of utter, glorious madness.

Sherlock waited, then when it became clear that John wasn’t going to – how could he possibly?! – come up with anything better to say, he simply cleared his throat. ‘Which is to say, I fancy some chips. I know a place, near Hyde Park. Open all night.’

He couldn’t help it – he laughed, voice rasping.

‘God, that sounds brilliant.’ He stepped forward and leaned over, kissing Sherlock through a smile because nothing had ever felt like this – like someone was there to catch him, not just to have his back during a fire-fight or notice when something was wrong just by looking at him (although Sherlock could and had done both). They tipped forward across the bed (well, backward, for Sherlock, flat on his back and petting those beautiful, alien fingers along John’s sides) and John knelt over him, flooded with desire and affection and relief and… hope.

By the time he crawled off, Sherlock’s mouth was newly flushed, and John’s eyes had just about readjusted to the darkness.

‘Chips?’ he asked, holding out a hand.

Sherlock’s mouth quirked. He took it.

* * *

An hour later, climbing back into bed, smelling of fried oil and ears chilled by a faint drizzle, John felt his heavy eyes sliding shut before Sherlock was even properly under the duvet.

‘Socks,’ Sherlock chattered, nudging John’s feet with his toes.

‘Get your own ruddy socks,’ John grunted into his pillow.
‘Your socks,’ Sherlock amended. He emphasised the point by beginning, with toes dexterous in a way John was too knackered to think about much just now but swore inwardly to investigate tomorrow (today, whatever), to push them off without using his hands, scraping the sides of John’s ankles until it tickled too much to continue –

‘Stop, stop,’ John laughed. He contorted quickly, managing not – though it was tempting – to knee Sherlock in the balls in the process, dipping and freeing his now even colder feet into the icy tundra that was the end of the bed. ‘Jesus,’ he added, as Sherlock’s flippers slid under his own normal ones, ‘feet are freezing, you wanker.’

‘I believe you will be glad of the change in the morning.’

_Hmm._ Worked that out, then. He wiggled his toes, hoping Sherlock would be right, that they could both drop into a deep, dreamless sleep for at least a solid, indulgent eight hours – they’d switched off their phones – uninterrupted. Wake up together.

Settling into the mattress, he muttered, as he caught a whiff of the scent of Sherlock’s skin only centimetres away, ‘Was right about the birthmark, though.’

‘Mm.’ He stilled, then: ‘It’s not a pleasant thought, John, but I have this terrible feeling, from time to time, that we might all just be human.’

John opened his eyes a sliver. He wasn’t sure what that meant. ‘Even you?’

With a steady look, Sherlock gazed back. ‘No. Even you.’

Exhaling, John threaded his fingers through Sherlock’s, examining the tangle of bare limbs. ‘Sherlock –’

‘William Sherlock Scott Holmes,’ he interrupted, in an undertone. ‘That’s – the whole of it. So now you know.’

A memory, or constellation of memories, surfaced in his mind: Sherlock pestering him for weeks, trying to catch him off-guard, hoping to deduce (‘Henry.’) or surprise (‘Humphry!’) or maybe just
stumble upon (‘Higgins…?’) John’s middle name. The invasion of privacy, at the time, of coming home one afternoon to see Sherlock reviewing a birth certificate John had quite definitely not given him, had been mitigated by a sense – even then, before Irene, before the full hell of Moriarty, before what came after – of the lengths Sherlock would go to know him, one hundred percent.

And now he was offering himself – the whole ridiculous truth of him – to John. Even had the night not already been a long one for testing the mettle of his soul, this alone would have bowled him over.

But he was exhausted, and at some point, he was out of words. Besides, now everything that mattered was between them, spoken, out, and ready for rest.

‘Lie flat,’ John grunted, as though his voice wasn’t as wrecked as it sounded even to himself in the quiet, budging up so he could curl once more around him, nose to toes. His feet were warming up already.

With a snort deep in his chest, Sherlock shifted dutifully onto his back. ‘Happy?’

‘Yes. I am.’

*

Chapter End Notes

Yes, that is a Jane Eyre reference. Are you surprised?

Only one chapter left—but I hope it's worth it. (I quite like it.)
Chapter Summary

Seventeen steps; or, an epilogue.

Chapter Notes

♪ ♪ ♫

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 17: Sherlock

‘I did not understand you. I shut my eyes, and would not understand you, or do you justice. This is a recollection which ought to make me forgive every one sooner than myself. Six years of separation and suffering might have been spared. It is a sort of pain, too, which is new to me. I have been used to the gratification of believing myself to earn every blessing that I enjoyed. I have valued myself on honourable toils and just rewards. Like other great men under reverses,’ he added, with a smile. ‘I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve.’

— Jane Austen, Persuasion

It was over a year since Sherlock had returned from being ‘abroad’, as he preferred now to term it, and on paper (or, perhaps more accurately, MI5 electronic record), very little was new at 221b Baker Street. Two residents: both male, both middle-aged, both unmarried; frequent visits from police officers, homeless persons, illustrious and ordinary clients alike; rubbish consisting of tea, takeaway, chemical waste, biscuits wrappers, plasters/medical supplies, bean tins, beer bottles (and prophylactics). Irregular hours. Irregular purchases. Regular necessity of continued surveillance — at least, so the file would purport.
Very little of this could not have been said a year previous, or at any point of the first period of his and John’s cohabitation. Changes, therefore, were in the details: it was, after all, an axiom he stood by, that the supposedly ‘little things’ were infinitely the most important.

‘I’ll try not to take that personally,’ said a mirage of John with a smirk.

Sherlock rolled his eyes and continued perambulating his Mind Palace-replica of their flat.

There was the new artwork directly across from their bed: a gift for John’s birthday, in museum-quality framing, of a drawing (ink on (Spanish, manuscript) paper, 1899) of a sagittal section of neural tissue, one that looked as good — indeed better, Sherlock and John agreed, than most things in the Tate Modern. (The Vitriol case, as he’d come to term it in his own files, had had the surprising upside of a becoming acquainted with several high-quality, albeit ‘disreputable’ art vendors. John had not asked, and so did not know how much it had cost to acquire the original work, nor indeed did he need to.) Originally, this had been the entire present, more than sufficient — John said afterwards — even for the first proper gift exchange of their romantic relationship. But, particularly after Sherlock’s birthday, he had felt a need to go above and beyond.

(In January, despite Sherlock never having told him the date, John had, with a brilliance and thoughtfulness beyond Sherlock’s reckoning, found a seedy pub down by the docks near Greenwich, at which he encouraged him to get slightly drunk as John unfolded the details of a case the Met’s team had been working on without telling Sherlock for more than two weeks (a marvel of secrecy he had not credited them with being able to maintain). It had ended in a flying manhunt down the Thames, culminating Sherlock commandeering a vessel, upon which two bearded sailors had, recognising him, asked, ‘Arren’ you Sherlough Holmes, the detective?’ To which he had, even with the adrenalin and beer rioting in his brain, had the elated wherewithal to reply, ‘No: the pirate.’ It had been, quite possibly, the best night of his life.)

So by March, even having spent the better part of the equivalent of John’s medical wages on a work of admittedly beautiful proto-Modern art, Sherlock had known he must do more. He had thrown himself fully into the project, contacting everyone from Molly to Mrs Hudson to Lestrade (in a manner which — the security team that had arrived, sirens wailing, at Baker Street mid-one afternoon — he was informed was ‘absolutely out of line’ and ‘never to happen again, do you hear me, Sherlock?’) to Bill Murray, who, it transpired, proved the most helpful of the lot. Thus, Sherlock and John found themselves on a rocky outcropping, shrouded in fog, very nearly freezing, looking out over the variegated, somewhat frozen moor of the Isle of… well, whichever Inner or Outer Hebridean one Bill lived on for half the year.

‘Wouldn’t have put you down for mountain climbing,’ John admitted, sipping from the thermos of tea gratefully.
Which was precisely the reason they were up here, approximately 442 miles from home or anywhere with sensible mobile phone service, in boots that made their feet ache and not another human life form visible. Thankfully neither of them was, as yet, planning to kill the other, though the setting made such a scheme all too easy.

‘When I was away,’ he began, ‘it involved… some degree of hiking.’

John’s attention was laser-like, palpable as much as the wind whipping the lobes of his ears until they felt in danger of frostbite. They need not stay a moment longer than it took to finish his (prepared, pared down) narrative.

By the time he finished, John was not sitting any closer, but the way he looked at Sherlock — a welter of anger, fierce protectiveness, confusion, (several other things that had no accurate label even in Sherlock’s growing hieroglyphic lexicon of John’s expressions,) and… gratitude — allowed Sherlock to release the full exhalation he had been holding since this morning, knowing their itinerary. Since just under an exact year previous, when Sherlock had returned to Baker Street. Since seeing an old-yet-new familiar face illuminated by flashing red/blue police lights, calmly waiting behind police tape, disguising gunshot residue with an oatmeal jumper. Since he knew not when.

‘Thank you,’ was all John said, voice thick but steady. ‘For telling me.’

Then at last — and Sherlock’s breathing went mottled again — John leaned over and embraced him, held him with such forgiveness, such absolution for the fact that Sherlock had been instrumental in the deaths of other human beings, had left John behind, when now he knew, or suspected, that in fact to bring John anywhere was to make the world, and himself, safer. John kissed him, twice (it was always the second kiss with John that mattered: the first was frequently the only one in a series, a gesture of affection akin to a brush of a hand along his shoulder as John paraded by on the way to work; when there was a second, however, it meant he wanted to stay. A second sometimes lapped into a third, a fourth, beyond count, but the second was always the richest, the taste on his palate just right, like the caress of fine, well-aerated Cabernet).

After a while, their joints were seizing up, the rocks holding no warmth whatever but indeed seeping it from them greedily. Why anyone lived in the North after the Ice Age was, frankly, a mystery. They came down the mountain silently, the same, but somehow restored — old and new, a philosophical conundrum of bodies, minds, time…

Late that night, after the family and a selection of John’s army self-styled ‘mates’ sang and toasted and made consummate fools of themselves with no sign of regret or remorse (though, blessedly,
they let him alone after a few ribald comments: no doubt on Bill Murray’s orders to behave), John giggled and, in the guest room (the attic of the renovated barn on Bill Murray’s property), pressed and pulled and dragged and exalted Sherlock with a slow ardour that made him feel like he was losing his mind, obliterating the entire world because the entire warmth and weight of it was surely here, beneath John’s skin.

‘I love you,’ John (hair gone dishevelled from recent rough treatment) said, for the nth time. (It had become impossible to be more precise as to number.) ‘Best birthday I’ve ever had.’

‘Mmm,’ Sherlock murmured, inwardly euphoric with relief and letting a small percentage show through the surface. ‘My research paid off, as usual.’

John laughed. Sherlock thought, also for the nth time, that he had very much ended up with the better bargain of the two of them.

Despite not being overly-prone to sentiment, they had — by mutual, unspoken agreement — brought home the stone that had made its way into Sherlock’s supposedly impenetrable boot, marketed (for — again — more than John would be comfortable spending) as ‘EVERYTHING-PROOF!’ (Naturally he’d brought them home and subjected them to relentless testing of every possible substance and eventuality. The results were enlightening, and would absolutely be relevant should anyone ever commit a murder in the peat districts of Great Britain.) But the stone was not for experimenting — he was a chemist, not a geologist — and so it sat, on the mantle, with their other assorted objects. For a week, every time John had gone to sit in his chair, his eyes had traced a particular constellation from the rock, to grate (even when empty, which it usually was), to the headphoned bison, to Sherlock’s chair (to Sherlock). Even when, in the months since, cases had proved disappointing or John’s surgery work had upset him (or the singular difficulty of combining their wardrobes into what had formerly been Sherlock’s room), all of which brought them both to the edges of their tempers, their rows were less vicious, less fraught, and their (often wordless) apologies somehow knitted from a skein of trust brought home from Scotland.

With careful steps, Sherlock backtracked through the tableau flat, assembled in the billiard room of his Mind Palace, walking past the reminders of days of the week, relevant politicians’ statuses (front- and back-benchers who might conceivably be mid-scandal, and therefore likely to need his expertise), the fiction and nonfiction bestsellers list (another potential source of clients, or at least of crimes to be copied, affairs to be acted out by the desperate, the attention-seeking, the bored, or the personally unimaginative), and the usual other decorations to the main corridor. The water damage had long since been repaired, and he was able to walk under the main balcony now without a twinge in his chest, precisely the index of a knife.

‘There you are,’ smiled John — the actual, material John — chest stretched in pride and pleasure beneath his soft, somewhat new fitted eggshell blue button-up: short-sleeved and breathable for the warm British summer weather. (It had been an eminently well-received purchase, not least for its
tactile qualities.) He was, it transpired, sitting in his chair much as Sherlock had conjured him moments (or, well, possibly long moments) earlier. Even the tea was accurate.

Sherlock loved him, but perhaps more miraculous (i.e., literally incredible, defying belief or logical proof) was the way the world seemed changed once he’d accepted, some time between John insisting he reserve final judgment and now, that in fact John loved him back. Romantically. (Sexually.) Passionately, deeply, foolishly, unreservedly, permanently. In no way he could cite or specify, he had continued to respond to stimuli and situations generally in the same way as ever, but the feeling travelled with him, as though…

He looked up and met John’s eyes, crescented with amusement.

… as though no matter what room Sherlock walked into, no matter how dire or tedious or bewildering or cacophonous, that look on John’s face entered with him. As though at any given moment, he could feel the thrill of John’s confidence, his stability, like a reassuring hand at the small of his back, or a huff of a shared joke across a crime scene. Once, with Alec certainly, with Victor less consciously, the notion of a perpetual sensation of someone else’s hand touching him, prodding him, invading not only his physical but also (more importantly) his mental space, would have made him scream, shudder, shut down. Dive for cover (or cocaine). Now, like a revolution, like nearly everything John brought into his life, this inexplicable difference was simply a fact, not something to resolve or deconstruct, but simply acknowledge.

‘Just… know it,’ John had said. It proved, as it happened, a useful epistemological/psychological mantra.

‘Back to the living?’ present-John inquired. His hair was doing a sort of upward swoopy thing, and he was considering Sherlock with his cheek in his hand, fingers squishing endearing lines up around the natural ones: overall, a look that made Sherlock’s stomach flip at the same speed he lost the sharper aspects of his vocabulary.

‘Nearly,’ he admitted, voice slightly hoarse. (Perhaps it had been rather longer than he’d expected. He examined the light through the windows, the sound of the traffic, Mrs Hudson tidying downstairs (did she never cease tidying?): late afternoon. Already.)

‘Fantastic. Because I would quite like to have sex with you later, if you fancy it.’

He blinked several times.
‘You had sex with me only yesterday,’ Sherlock reasoned, feigning objectivity. (He did have standards to maintain, even if they were both entirely aware it was a front.)

‘Mm, that was two days ago, love, and as much as that was, you know, great, I wonder if at some point you’d like to get off, too.’

Sherlock studied him. This was another mutually supported, nonverbally consensual arrangement. Whenever John wanted sex (which was, Sherlock had learned, possibly all the time, but reasonably speaking meant an average of 2.2 days, with fluctuations for fatigue, post-case hormonal swings, and impatience and/or indulgence with Sherlock), he hovered slightly unnecessarily between wherever Sherlock was and the bedroom, making frequent eye contact and otherwise broadcasting his elevated libido. In some cases, Sherlock either didn’t or chose not to notice, at which point John took himself to manage the problem unilaterally (roughly 30% of the time); other times, Sherlock happened to/elected to be involved in the process, enjoying — always — kissing and mapping John, taking in his smell and taste and weight and pressure, thus arriving at a satisfactory result for both of them (though with different definitions of what constituted attainment of this goal): this made up the bulk (roughly 55%) of their intercourse, a fact which initially, John had confessed, made him feel guilty for being the only one who climaxed, but which he had taken in stride as something Sherlock more or less preferred. (The look on John's face as he approached, unblinking, while Sherlock played or slowly put down his violin was, some days, as much seduction as he could handle.) Only an approximate 3 out of 20 times saw Sherlock himself partaking in orgasm, usually immediately before John’s. These instances were therefore surprisingly common, relative to the amount of sex he had had in the whole of his life before beginning with John. They were, though, he could admit to himself and, in the event, to John, superb: electrifying and soothing in equal erotic measure.

In other words, John’s proposition was entirely consistent with their praxis. Nevertheless the tone in which he uttered it, the precise syntax… Something was slightly off. Health? No; family: no; work (cases, clinic, patients, medical… requirements [John wasn’t going away? Sherlock was relatively certain he would have committed that to memory by sulking, much though he would deny the label]: so, no.) Hm. That left only a few likely areas, namely…

Over the last fifty-six days, John’s interest in dogs that they happened to come into contact — or even eye-line — with, had risen proportionally to his (ineffective) attempts to disguise that interest. The catalysing incident had been a case during which, stashed overnight in a barn at a preeminent thoroughbred stable in Yorkshire, an infamously vicious dog (a mixed-breed Alsatian and Bullmastiff) had made for Sherlock, only to sniff his hand and, as it were, jog on. John’s audible sigh of relief had been slightly a bit excessive: dogs had been Sherlock’s first (love, he might have said, to John privately, but more importantly his first) species study in reading cues. Knowing — or rather, being told — from an early age that his ability to interpret emotions and thereby predict actions was ‘inadequate’ [a word that had burned onto his mind in bright red official ink, bleeding through every page of his self-assessment], he had turned to dogs. Dogs were simpler, tended not to mind of you spent hours with them observing their responses, and had been thoroughly studied, meaning there was a mass of literature on ‘Knowing Your Dog’ that Sherlock had been able to consume in order to verify his own findings. By the time of the dog in the night-time, nothing
happened, as Sherlock had known from the dog’s body language it would. But John had seemed to consider it a brush with a mauling.

In the intervening weeks, John’s gaze had lingered on every dog they passed on the street; his browsing history showed him searching for and bookmarking (‘dog-earring,’ John might have written for his blog) pages on how to keep a dog ‘In The City?’ and the proper food and the best breeds. Once, Sherlock had come home from offering his opinion on a corpse to Molly, and instantly deduced that an actual dog had been in the flat — hair on the stairs; odour still wafting. John had acted as though he had no idea what Sherlock was talking about, and asking Mrs Hudson meant Sherlock was treated to a long and scone-filled conversation in which she speculated that she had heard a canine being shushed into the flat earlier that day, but that she had been too preoccupied with ‘baking’ (aka Mr Rosenthal, her new gentleman-friend) to find out more.

Only a week ago, a dog (a much less menacing golden retriever) had streaked across a large open field of grass in the park and come, wagging its entire body and barking joyfully, to lap at Sherlock’s hands and then, when he stopped mid-sentence and dropped to his knees, jumped up to slather his entire face in saliva.

‘Sorry, I’m so sorry! Really, Freddie, get down! I’m so sorry about this!’ (She hadn’t sounded overly repentant, nor had she exhibited signs of preparing a stern lecture for… Freddie… when they arrived home, now that she had regained his lead.)

‘It’s quite all right,’ Sherlock had informed her, through the licks.

The woman, in multi-coloured lycra leggings (thirty-one or -two, Iberian ancestry, avid social media user, regular runner but also today exercising away a hangover from a work-do with several closer-than-colleagues that she preferred not think about now, bisexual) had given them a wide and good-natured smile, and then looked to John, as everyone did.

‘He’s lovely, isn’t he?’ John had said, removing his sunglasses and sticking the other hand down into the canine’s long, soft coat and scratching him generously while Sherlock was still being alternately slobbered over and nudged with a wet nose. ‘Who’s a good boy? Yeah, good boy.’

Sherlock had risen to his feet, leaving a hand available with which Fred could present his ears for ruffling. ‘Very good.’

A few more meaningless words had been exchanged between the humans, before, with a brisk tug, the woman had pulled Fred in the other direction.
Admittedly, Sherlock had been watching the bounding retriever gambol down the path, wondering how many words he knew and if he had been properly trained to avoid any foods that might be injurious to his system (signs pointed to no), when John had grabbed his (somewhat saliva-covered) hand.

‘Who’s a lovely boy, then?’ John had said, feigning the absurd affectionate infantilising voice people used for dogs.

Sherlock had rolled his eyes. ‘Dear lord.’

John had suddenly popped onto his toes and bestowed a swift, firm kiss. On him. In the middle of the wide, currently well-populated avenue of Regent’s Park under a baking summer sun.

‘I can’t believe you, sometimes,’ John had admitted, whirlpool-blue-brown eyes squinting in the now-unguarded sunlight. His thumb had gone on caressing Sherlock’s palm from beneath, and Sherlock had shivered with the — the intimacy of it all.

‘Eau de chien,’ Sherlock had murmured, wishing there had been a second kiss, one enough to scandalise the entire crowd of morning tourists and fellow Londoners, the bulk of whom had seemed to find it compulsory to expose their pale, often overweight flesh to the sun at the first sign of even partially cloudless weather. The miracle of John Watson had been, as ever, not merely that he was not one of those so compelled, but that — unlike approximately everyone on the planet — his was still the only body Sherlock wanted to take home and explore. (Well. Only living body.) ‘I’ll keep that in mind for attracting your attention next time.’

‘Add some spandex to that, and you’ll definitely have my attention.’

Many a true word spoken in jest. Sherlock had filed that away for a more adventurous afternoon.

Thus: John was planning on getting himself/Sherlock/them/someone a dog. He either knew Sherlock knew and was playing with him, or was slightly inept at keeping secrets from him. (Equally plausible.) But he was, for now, for the most part, intending either the arrival of a specific dog or the launch of the conversation about really getting a potential one to be a secret.

Today, though? Was today the day for some reason? Not either of their birthdays. Was John getting Mike Stamford a dog? That seemed, though Sherlock had a hard time putting his finger on
exactly which, to breech several social codes of friendly and gift-giving behaviour.

John was acting strangely, though, a little more solicitous about their coital plans for this evening.

‘Is this to do with —’ Sherlock began, and then, at the last second, he vacillated — if John wanted this to be a surprise for some reason, Sherlock would either wait to find out or deduce it — so half-choked instead, ‘your book?’

It was John’s turn to blink several times, quite plainly stunned but (ever the soldier) maintaining composure.

Why is he shocked? Sherlock immediately cycled through the potential reasons, but could not proceed without more information (before the data). Did he wish Sherlock would deduce the issue? Or was this truly about the book, and Sherlock had been both more right and more wrong than he had expected?

‘Yeah. I’m just… pleased about it,’ lied John.

John was a terrible liar, but the genuine pleasure and fondness threaded through his tone kept the peripheral confusion at bay somewhat.

‘So pleased we don’t need to go to this preposterous celebration this evening?’ This, half to gauge whether John’s mood needed to be settled before they left the flat or more gradually.

Evidently the latter: recomposing himself, John barked a laugh. ‘Not a chance. Mike’s birthday. Told him, like an idiot, that I’d pay for the first round for the whole group.’

Considering the gaggle of medical personnel, 9-to-5 enervated office workers, and their respective, even more uncomfortable or undesirably outgoing partners (to say nothing of the crowd of pub-goers that would make such a large gathering possible without a reservation!) — it was indeed a foolish move.

‘Didn’t Stamford just have his birthday? Are you entirely certain he isn’t taking advantage of your offer to treat his friends?’
'Er, no. And some of them are my friends, too.'

'Of course.' Naturally. John was a social creature (and, at times, he had a divertingly inaccurate sense of his relations with others: this, within recent memory, had been one of the factors that made Sherlock deem it impossible to know how John truly felt about him).

'Y’know, the words are agreeing, and yet somehow when you say it, it sounds more like “yes, dear” than actual agreement.'

Sherlock smirked, meeting the golden-flecked cobalt of John’s eyes, reflecting the unusual amount of late sunshine. ‘I’ll leave you to your deductions.’

Just then, a loud knock on the other door downstairs — delivery, parcel service, something bigger than could be put through the letterbox — and John jumped and went to retrieve it. Sherlock stayed in his seat. (Could dogs be procured by delivery?)

John returned a moment later — no, unless he was carrying a very, absurdly, stupidly small species, whatever was slowing his steps minutely was not canine —, a brown box and several assorted pieces of post in hands. Balancing the box on one lifted knee against the worktop, John reached over it, sifting through and whittling down the post to two single letters; the rest went in the bin.

‘Are you coming tonight, then?’ he called distractedly, opening the letters.

Sherlock’s eyes were attempting to deduce the package now taunting him from the kitchen table, but he answered, ‘Yes.’

That got John’s attention. ‘Seriously?’

Sherlock met John’s eyes then rolled his own. ‘Yes. For… at least an hour. Will probably walk, though: construction in that neighbourhood has been moving apace in the last several weeks so it may be necessary to refresh my survey of the area. Construction zones are excellent locations to commit a crime.’

‘Right.’ Brightened (though probably not at the notion that building sites were ideal for criminal activities of several kinds), John reclaimed the parcel (movement upon elevation: several heavy,
muted *thuds* against the inner walls of the box; muting not of polystyrene but more probably bunched paper. Likely contents: books. Plural) and headed for the bedroom.

Eventually, Sherlock re-emerged from his simultaneous contemplations of the books in the bedroom and the related matter of John’s dog mania, to find John shrugging on a light summer jacket. (Added: the cologne, now almost entirely used, that Sherlock had bought him roughly a year — Oh.)

‘See you there then?’ He swooped down and pecked Sherlock firmly on the lips, then, finding Sherlock’s hands creeping under his jacket to slide his hands alongside his belt, John smirked and followed the first with a second kiss (the promising kind, the sort that pushed Sherlock back into the soft leather of his chair and scattered his thoughts slightly).

A year. A year ago.

‘Yes,’ Sherlock replied, distracted in more ways than usual, and watched John go, filled with a new and unfolding list of thoughts.

* * *

*A dog as an anniversary present?* he asked himself once more, standing outside the pub with his own suit jacket, less brutally warm in the heat than his Belstaff but still — for July — perhaps unnecessary.

The long survey of the regions between Baker Street and the pub restaurant at which these (oh, god, already roaring) festivities were to take place had been a productive one, not least for Sherlock’s ability to observe and review outward and inward data on relationships, subcategory: anniversaries.

John had not mentioned a particular date on which their relationship was… confirmed? Accredited? (That made them sound like a university rather than a couple.) Certainly not ‘serious’: they’d been solemnly devoted to each other before there had been any sexual interaction — or, deliberate sexual intercourse, perhaps was more truthful — between them at all. Whatever the correct terminology, there had been no precise date affixed to it. Nor had this seemed to matter. But it struck him, now, as slightly odd, that he had spent 797 days in France, Norway, Serbia, Indonesia, Florida, Venezuela, counting every single day like a toll on his life, as though each precious one stretched and contracted into the distance, taking with it the finite amount of time on the earth that he could, should be spending with John Watson. And so to discover that, having — so improbably, so utterly humblingly — *got* John Watson in his life in every possible human way,
that he had not been measuring each of those days with corresponding observance, was peculiarly chastising.

To which end: he pushed open the door to the pub.

A wall of sound toppled over him, like a blinding light invading an unlit room (mixed metaphors: irrelevant), but he pushed through and made his way — if only he were truly as tall as John made him seem in his stories — to the back corner of the establishment, where even over the roars laughter and argument and boasting and confession, the unself-conscious tones of Mike Stamford’s Welsh wife could be heard distinctly.

Thankfully, they were not perched at a (no doubt sticky, uncomfortable, beleaguered) high-top table, but rather one of the properly ancient corners of the multi-angular, haphazard building, complete with well-worn oak benches and a thick, heavy dining table. Near the edge (never liked to be completely locked in, even within a seating arrangement), was John, smiling up at — well, one of the usual (male, middle-aged) co-workers who attended Stamford’s gatherings. As Sherlock waded through the gridlock of drinkers — deductions flaring and fading as he went, not bothering to preserve them in long-term storage: if no one did anything interesting (i.e., criminal) this evening, he would not need this information tomorrow) — John looked up. The wattage of his smile would have illuminated the entire room.

Anniversary, blared Sherlock’s inner alarm clock. A celebration of this feeling, the warm hand that steered him away from the elbows and odours of every other obnoxious human (many of whom no doubt had been those sun lotion-lacquered bathers on benches and lawns throughout the city again today, and were now both slightly burned and moderately dehydrated: a charming combination), and simply kept him.

Ignoring the way the man had not stopped talking (just got a promotion; considering moving out into a nicer house, with a proper garden; friends with John for some time and likely to read his blog; not especially calm under pressure; small bladder; ex- (or, actually, now only casual) smoker), John did not take his eyes off Sherlock until he had approached the group, feeling every inch of John’s attention like a high, racketing up his heart-rate, making the entire raucous painful planet seem suddenly full of good-will, amusement, and interest. (The rest of the world could go to hell for all he cared just now; but this buzz, around John, never entirely dissipated.)

‘Wahey!’ Stamford shouted gleefully, coming over to grin and lift a pint in Sherlock’s direction. ‘You made it! Good lad.’

‘Many happy returns, Stamford,’ Sherlock intoned warmly, hoping that his lowered voice would become contagious and the rest of the room might lower its decibel range substantially. (Doubtful.)
'Good walk?' John inquired.

‘You walked?!’ blurted out someone he had not met (early thirties; loud, already on his third pint, much too into football, unfaithful to his girlfriend — who was conspicuously absent —, and otherwise all-around cocky), one person over on John’s other side, sandwiched between a woman (a nurse from Barts) and an even younger man (a technician, also at Barts). ‘What, from Baker Street, you mean?’

It really had been an oversight for John to use their real address on his blog. (Then again, Sherlock had already posted all his information on his blog the year before, in an attempt to attract any clients whatsoever. But that was work, not… celebrity-mongering!)

‘Very satisfactory,’ he informed John, who was after all the only person (aside from Stamford) he felt obliged to speak to this evening. Unless someone did something interesting, he was here to observe, think, and keep John company. And then promptly leave.

The man with whom John had been speaking backed up a step, and taking one last sip of his pint, added the empty glass to the accruing stockpile of foam-streaked vessels waiting for collection. (It might be interesting, actually, to discover the effects of alcohol on sweat and the breakdown of both/either on fingerprints…)

John stood up — releasing a few imprisoned inner-benchers who quickly made for the bar or the lavatories, leaving a sudden gap in the seating — and made to move past him, but instead stopped short, shoulder to shoulder, facing the rest of the room. ‘What are you drinking?’

Whether the sudden wash of proximity (of body heat that was entirely unnecessary in the humidity of a summer pub packed to the gills), or of the playful lilt to John’s low question, Sherlock felt a shiver.

‘I won’t presume the red wine at a place like this is even remotely decent, so —’

‘‘Nother pint, John? Sherlock?’ called Stamford’s wife, from closer to the bar. ‘I owe you one, don’t I.’

‘Well, if you’re offering,’ joked John. ‘And,’ his eyes flicked up to Sherlock, ‘a gin-and-tonic for this one.’
'Phwoar,' she replied, laughing, ‘that’s proper dainty, isn’t it.’

Sherlock rolled his eyes.

‘You don’t have to —’

‘It’s fine,’ he assured him, just as quietly. Far more important than the drink was the man, not unlike the black origami lotuses they had stumbled across those years ago. Small, tight-packed, dense with meaning, superficially ornamental but, when unfolded and seen in its full ontological spread, comprised of one continuous, beautifully simple texture: John.

At some point, Kate (whose name John had helpfully supplied) returned with their drinks, then scooted gamely into the bench, taking with her the irksome football fanatic, the nurse, and the technician, who all clustered into the 90° angle of the bench and made swift work of an asinine, prurient game involving other people in sight.

Sherlock sat (a clean — well… — distance away from them), leaving enough room for John just where the bench extended beyond the length of the table: easy to go on conversing with those standing by the table’s edge, as well as to run unimpeded from the scene, should the need arise. (The need was certainly arising for Sherlock with each passing minute.)

Suddenly the warm pressure on his leg, the inner seam of his dark jeans (hence why he’d worn them), made him freeze slightly at the novelty. They were not especially demonstrative in public, despite the fact that, at home at least, they sat with skin in contact as often as not. Here though, to have John at his side, pressed somewhat needlessly up against him, nattering away and laughing with Mike and another doctor about texting and sisters and holidays and television, while all the time John’s hand was firmly rested across the splay above his knee… intoxicating, far beyond what the ‘dainty’ beverage in front of him could hope to accomplish. It certainly mitigated the mundanity of increasingly actually intoxicated birthday celebrants.

He hadn’t decided on a gift for the anniversary he was now 86% certain he had either missed or was imminently in danger of missing. John was not overly inclined to gifts (his somewhat Spartan nature, reinforced through the circumstances of his life, meant his material desires were few). Did this count? Sitting at some form of a party at which he contributed almost nothing, displeased with the cheating going on to his left as the rules of the parlour game were repeatedly and brazenly broken, annoyed with the inanity of every conversation he tuned in and immediately out of, keeping his mouth shut lest he ‘spoil the evening’ by informing any of the aforementioned of their wearisome, common idiocies? (A project that was getting ever more precarious as the effects of the overly-sweet G&T fractionally altered his system.)
‘All right?’ John asked, turning to him at a lull (though there were so many!) in the conversation.

‘Just,’ Sherlock admitted (many a true word spoken in jest), meeting John’s now-blue carbuncle-coloured (faintly perceptibly dilated) eyes.

With a robust squeeze of Sherlock’s thigh, John’s expression became a very subtle, conspiratorial smirk. ‘Thanks. For coming. I know it’s not…’ He shrugged, then looked at Sherlock’s now-melted muddle of ice cubes. Just then, a cheer went up — someone had scored, or not scored, or passed out, or wet themselves, or something equally puerile.

‘There is,’ Sherlock grimaced, ‘an experiment at home that I was hoping to complete.’

John nodded, understanding enough of it — that the experiment could wait, but that his patience, his sanity, his ability to function, could not, or not much longer — to slide slightly and stand.

For the first time in what felt like hours, Sherlock felt like he could take a complete breath. Like he was glimpsing the possibility of ceasing to be a shadow that loved John, and returning to his existence, switched back from sleep-mode.

‘I’ll give Mike your best,’ John offered, a tad sarcastically.

‘And congratulations on his promotion to head of department.’

‘What — he didn’t —’

Sherlock felt like he was emerging after having been shoved into a gastropod shell. ‘A deduction.’

Shaking his head, John rose onto his toes and planted a closed-lipped (beer; pub food) kiss — a shock, in the midst of these dozens of nosy, absurd people — on Sherlock’s possibly self-congratulatory mouth.

No one wolf-whistled, or even seemed to notice, for which Sherlock was deeply grateful.
‘Amazing,’ muttered John, licking his lips. ‘Get off home with you, then. I’ll see you later.’

Nodding, Sherlock escaped gratefully into the night.

* * *

The clock was ticking vexatiously loudly.

As the three separate solutions cooled from their various boiling points back down to room temperature, Sherlock stared unseeingly at the slide of the control compound. No hints, nor mentions of dogs during the evening; nor any (at least easily legible) signs of malcontent or resentment at Sherlock having blundered as a romantic partner. Perhaps John simply didn’t consider the annual marker to come into effect at this time of year: it was just as valid to date their relationship to the end of March, when Sherlock had returned from being away, reuniting them in a way that had been, from the first moment, renascent. Or for that matter, from some winter date, long since — also involving Stamford, and beverages, and microscopes. The thought was, for the first time, comforting.

The door downstairs clicked, sighed, thudded shut. Less than an hour since Sherlock had left the event. Reasonably frequent trains (operating with good service on all late-running lines); uninterrupted walk from the station homewards. Heralded by familiar sounds and calculations (the scrape of brogues heavily padding up seventeen steps), John himself came in, having only had one more drink (and not even finished it).

‘Mike says hello,’ John informed him, hanging up his coat.

‘I saw him approximately fifty-one minutes ago.’

John grinned. ‘Yeah, well, not sure he’ll be remembering that, the night he’s having. He wanted to make sure I told you.’

He paused looking at his microscope to see if John was joking. Unclear. ‘Even if he’s half as inebriated as that, he wouldn’t have — oof—’
John’s mouth was warm and amused, tasting of that last beer (ah, so they had run out of the ale, then) and — the second kiss clinched it — chips (more oil and vinegar this time: out in a hurry, not long enough in the fryer, too many customers, kitchen understaffed) and John. Sherlock inhaled the entire kiss until he was sure there were no sensations left unregistered, then drew back.

‘Hello,’ John smiled, still leaning over the bench on one knee, evidently pleased with himself for surprising Sherlock.

‘I sincerely hope that was not meant to be from Stamford as well.’

‘I did have to fight him and a few other blokes off once they saw how you look freshly kissed,’ John deadpanned. ‘But this is just me seizing every opportunity to get you while I’m taller.’

Sherlock rolled his eyes. ‘Three-and-a-half pints and a third of a basket of chips makes you talk nonsense.’

‘How do you know I didn’t finish the last one?’ John asked indulgently.

‘I just kissed you, John.’

He smirked again. ‘Is that a nice way of asking me to brush my teeth before I do it again?’

‘Sound reasoning,’ Sherlock replied primly, getting back to his slides.

John laughed and, well, he was smarter than he looked, even when more than slightly tipsy, so he downed a glass of water (loudly: Sherlock could visualise each mouthful of water as it glugged past his Adam’s apple) and then deposited the empty glass on the counter with a harder-than-usual thunk. (Tipsy. Or…)

‘You…’ Sherlock began, not raising his head. No matter if this was an anniversary offering, it seemed important to be clear that he hadn’t meant (in this instance) to make a dramatic exit. ‘You didn’t have to leave.’

‘I know,’ John said.
Sherlock did look up, just a quick glance, to find John topping up his glass again with water. No tension or other tells of reluctance, passive aggression, or blame.

After a few moments, John disappeared into the bedroom briefly, before returning. Then the sound of the telly blared at top volume — ‘Sorry, sorry, Christ, what —’ — then quickly decreased in volume to a subtle, after-hours ripple of chat and background music, then sport, then the sharper bass tones consistent with higher-quality sound equipment and less asinine viewer expectations: a film.

Every so often, John chuckled at the screen, evidently settled in but still very much awake, already somehow engrossed in a programme he must have seen before.

Well. The solutions were supposed to be at room temperature — indeed, overnight testing might provide additional data. He removed and stowed away the phials, tubes, and slides, switched off the light, and made his way to the sofa (careful to cross as quickly as possible in front of the screen), then sat (with the tiniest residual flip of his stomach at allowing the impulse of this to be acted upon) in the space at John’s side, beneath where John’s right arm was resting across the back cushion.

Sitting down, he found John’s arm effortlessly slide around him, and the flicker of anxiety in his stomach extinguished with relief. Much better than being surrounded by numerous superfluous people, vying for space.

The film was what was probably deemed a dark comedy, considering the verbal abuse several of the characters were hurling at the man with the stammer, and the fact of the criminal scheme at the heart of it, but Sherlock found himself sufficiently entertained to stay awake. John, of course, was… more than sufficiently amused by the time the familiar-sounding English actor screaming to find his wife (an actress not entirely succeeding at a posher accent than her natural speaking voice) rather than his duplicitous mistress in the study.

Before the scene was over, though, John scraped his fingers into Sherlock’s hair (he never tired of that), and murmured, ‘I didn’t mean to interrupt your experiment.’

‘The results are not time-sensitive,’ Sherlock notified him.

John mmm ed at that, so Sherlock slipped deeper into his seat to allow his head to rest against John’s shoulder.
‘The book — the galley copies, I guess — came today.’

Ah: that explained the books. (He had only, so finely, by the magnitude of a fruit fly’s hair, managed to avoid the temptation of sneaking a look at the parcel.) Evidently this was not a movie of sacred significance to John, so Sherlock also spoke over it: ‘How many typos have you found so far?’

‘Two.’

Alas. Such was the incompetence of human beings generally, proved daily.

‘I’m impressed you didn’t peak, Pandora.’

Sherlock snorted. ‘I knew they were books, and therefore unlikely to merit the level of subterfuge it would require to replace them in whatever carefully-tripped trap you had set for me.’

‘Calling me a tease?’

‘More or less.’

Now John snorted. (Beneath that, though, his leg was buzzing slightly, a (nervous? distracted? psychosomatic?) habit he seldom exhibited (not for years, not since the very beginning).)

Then, after another moment of flickering images: ‘D’you want to see them?’ John’s light tone betrayed his excitement — ah: restless excitement; (unnecessary) modesty. He was proud of this accomplishment, and rightly so. Well, not that the great masses of published authors were any proper competition in any sense, but John had worked hard (harder than either of them had necessarily expected to be required) to transform the cases and the blog into a book. A dream of his, he’d confessed to Sherlock, very early on — back when the blog had just started attracting a following, and one of Harry’s comments had piqued Sherlock’s curiosity. To send his words into the word; to see his name on bookstore shelf with his heroes and the other beings whose minds had survived their bodies into immortality.

‘Of course.’
John lifted his arm to allow Sherlock up, still watching the screen as he added, ‘On the bed.’

The light from the street shone on the open cardboard box, bursting with — he lifted the spines — ten copies, all in pleasingly attractive glossy jackets spelling out, ‘The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes’ with John’s name (‘John H. Watson, M.D.’) along the fronts and spines in bright, clear gold. (An excellent colour choice for his name.)

Sherlock carried one, flipping it over to see the quoted ‘praise for this work’ by an assortment of people whose works on supposed ‘crime fiction’ Sherlock had one time or another berated privately to John, as well as the brief biography and headshot photograph ‘About the Author’ in the bottom-left.

‘They’ve left off a comma in this summary,’ Sherlock announced, coming back into the darkened room.

‘I’ll call and cancel then, shall I?’ John quipped — from much closer than Sherlock had anticipated. (His stealth skills were frequently impressive.)

He was standing with his arms crossed, considering Sherlock with the book still in his hands, illuminated from behind by the (muted) telly and the uneven lights over the sink and microwave.

‘Did you open it?’

‘John, I’ve already read and commented on every page —’

‘There’s a dedication page now.’

Sherlock looked him up and down: calm, in precisely the way a John Watson staring at a gun barrel was calm.

Naturally Sherlock had expected that the book would be dedicated in some form to him (well, either him, or John’s mother, but since John’s mother had featured prominently in the Acknowledgements section, balance of probability left him). Yet John was nervous and calm, and so Sherlock opened it, the thick stiffness of new pages sticking together. It took him a moment to
get to right page.

In typeset, non-italicised, unembellished letters midway down the page after the frontispiece was simply printed:

It is my greatest joy and privilege to help you.

Marry me.

Sherlock blinked. He didn’t — He checked to see if the page had been inserted as something of a joke or… or publisher’s gimmick, to be printed at random on some romantic commercial holiday to boost sales with random proposals to and from unnamed lovers, but the page was sewn in with the rest, in the same font and spacing as the next page (‘Chapter 1: A Study in Pink’) and Sherlock was speechless.

‘It’s in all of them,’ John pitched in, apparently understanding Sherlock’s fumbling (he’d creased the page! Thank god there was another copy). ‘I wanted it to be in all of them.’

Sherlock looked up. John wasn’t holding a ring, or even on one knee (good, he would groan to get back to his feet and then feel self-conscious for his bodily needs). He was just… gazing at Sherlock. Smiling at him, eyes gone soft and reverent and a blue Sherlock couldn’t classify.

Anniversary, unfurled a banner in the foyer of his Mind Palace, ahead which now spread a second: Wedding.

‘You…’

He looked at the page again.

It still said the same message: twelve words, two full stops. Fifty-eight characters (including punctuation).

Sherlock blinked. His blinking function seemed to be the only thing operating; his mind had gone entirely blank.
‘Right, okay, well, while you think about that, I’m going to make some te–’

‘Think about it?’ Sherlock croaked. (Fantastic, he sounded like an adolescent tree frog.)

‘Yeah,’ John sighed with audible relief, apparently that Sherlock hadn’t *entirely* lost the power of speech (though full results were pending). ‘Did… you did read it, didn’t you?’

‘Of course,’ Sherlock responded automatically. ‘But… the dog?’

John grinned, puffing up. ‘So you did go for that, then. Suppose I… well, I couldn’t keep *this* a complete surprise, so I just… I dunno. Tried to throw you off the scent.’ He scrutinised Sherlock again. ‘I am pretty damn smart when I need to be.’

Stealth, impressive, *pretty damn smart* didn’t even come close.

He blinked some more. A million thoughts were clamouring in his head. It seemed utterly impossible; yet, here was the proof. And whatever remained, however improbable...

‘Sherlock?’

His eyes flicked up from the page once more.

‘Any answer,’ John swallowed, ‘is fine. Honestly. I don’t need one right —’

‘It isn’t a question.’

‘What?’ John asked, a little breathless.

‘It’s… grammatically-speaking, it’s an imperative. A command.’

‘You’re upset about the *grammar*? John revelled, face now breaking into all the lines and creases
of its topography in the smile the spread across his entire face, beautiful in its earnestness, in its joy.

‘I’m not upset…”

‘In that case.’ John came forward, finally unlocking his arms and stepping into the kitchen where Sherlock was frozen in place, fingers cramping where he was holding the book open to this particular, wholly extraordinary page. ‘Sherlock Holmes —’

‘William Sherlock Scott Holmes,’ he interrupted, because he had spent such a long time ensuring that the fewest number of people in the world knew his entire (slightly embarrassing) given name, but he found himself slowly, gently divested of the book and instead grasping for dear life to the biceps of John Hamish Watson, RAMC, three years in Afghanistan, a veteran of Kandahar, Helmand, and Barts Teaching Hospital, doctor, soldier, blogger, police consultant, author, brother, friend, and…

John was gazing at him with his hands at Sherlock’s waist, comforting enough, like he was pulling Sherlock in for something important, their feet overlapping like they did on the sofa and in sleep; looking at him like…

‘William Sherlock Scott Holmes,’ John whispered, his nose brushing Sherlock’s, voice firm and sure, ‘marry me.’

There wasn’t — there weren’t enough words or syllables or sounds in any language in the universe to wrap around the entirety of what he wanted to say, so releasing one hand from John’s (now also creased) shirtsleeve, Sherlock drew the pen from his breast pocket and turned in John’s arms, making very, very sure to keep the rest of his body in contact with John’s (who nuzzled closer and huffed something of a laugh and kissed his neck as Sherlock leaned over to the table and, quite impressively for a man with less than full utility of one limb, found the correct page and scrawled as meticulously as circumstances would allow):

Obviously. —SH

*
Well. When I started this series, I was in another country, in another degree; there was no Brexit, or Trump, or TAB, nevermind series 4. *Bowie was alive.* Which is all to say: this little AU has been with me for a while. And so to feel good — which somehow, amazingly, I do — about ending the story here, is sort of desolate and beautiful at the same time.

The footnotes before my real goodbye:
1) Sherlock buys a black-market page out of the drawings of Santiago Ramón y Cajal, the Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist, whose artworks are absolutely gorgeous, and which you can own (in coffetable book form) yourself here; or learn about here.
2) Lots of Austen references. Not sure why.
3) My headcanon for the epilogue of the epilogue, for anyone wondering, is that they do get a dog.
4) "A flying man-hunt down the Thames" is Conan Doyle's description from *The Sign of the Four*, because sure, that's where I would have put the pirate thing from TFP.
5) The first part of John's dedication is lifted from "The Devil's Foot," easily one of the shippiest cases in the canon. Not that you need it, eh-h, Potter?
6) No idea I went with the poorly-summarized film they're watching at the end. Seemed like something they would both put up with for at least five minutes. (For each other.)

I'm sure there's more but I should leave well enough alone. Thank you so much to everyone who read, liked, commented, or in any way interacted with this story — or who, in the future [from now] does so after it's no longer a WIP. This site does a lot for me, and I hope this fic has done anything for you. An ode to broken things.

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Feedback deeply, genuinely appreciated. Including if you spot a typo -- I hate those, but am not immune to them.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!