Summary

John Watson had no intentions of taking over the family business, but when he returns from Afghanistan, battered and bruised, and discovers that his sister Harry has run their restaurant into the ground, he doesn't have much choice. There's only one thing that can save the Empire from closing for good – the celebrity star of the BBC series Restaurant Reconstructed, Chef Sherlock Holmes.

Notes

The One Where Sherlock is Gordon Ramsay. I have no shame. Tons of thanks to kizza for the Brit-pick, earlgreytea68 for the beta, and lady_of_clunn for the hospitality!pick. Kizz and EGT both bolstered my confidence on this fic when it flagged, and without them, it might still be languishing on my hard-drive. Lady was of immeasurable help getting the food service details in order. In addition, talloakslady was huge help with possible plotlines when I first started thinking of this fic a year ago, and my husband was the one who came up with the original concept for the Empire – he's pretty nerdy and worldly, this sort of menu concept is totally up his alley. Thanks also to just about everyone on my LJ, who watched me make random recipes and commented on my lack of plating skills. You guys rock. Come over some day, I'll bake you brownies.

I started writing this story for Nano 2012. I hit 50K within the month, and took another six months to write the other 100K. Please note that recipes will accompany some chapters, because I am just that insane dedicated. Updates every Wednesday, assuming I don’t get evacuated again, which would be quite the trick, since I’m back in the States for a while now.
Korean translation by millute.

Russian translation by Ламантин Джереми.

Chinese translation by Smoked_salmon.

Podfic by consulting_smartass.
A lovely reader who wishes to remain anonymous made me this fantastic cover for Mise! It's THE CLOSING TITLES. With Sherlock's name! And Mike Stamford! AND THE BBC LOGO. I'm totally flailing like a fish over here.

THANK YOU, ANONYMOUS READER!

Edited to add: And with the demise of Photobucket... there goes my ability to share awesome images on AO3. I would love to share this image with you; sadly I can't figure out how. If anyone would like to walk me through a method, I'm all ears!
Mise-en-place (noun, French, pronounced [meez on plass]): A culinary term meaning to have all ingredients for a particular recipe prepared, measured and ready for use before cooking actually begins.

"Approach love and cooking with reckless abandon." -Dalai Lama

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Prologue

John Watson loved his grandfather's hands. They were large hands, steady and strong, and John liked to watch them work, chopping the onions and the potatoes, mincing the parsley and sprinkling the green flakes over the finished food. He watched his grandfather knead the dough, pat it out into rounds, transfer freshly cut biscuits to the large, industrial-sized baking trays. James Watson could pull a piping hot tray piled with freshly baked biscuits out of an oven without using anything more substantial than his apron for protection, and at the same time, slide a tray loaded with raw biscuits in for baking. Seamless. And he never dropped a single tray.

When John had been very small, he'd wanted calluses like James Watson's. When he had been three and four and five, he'd played with the toy kitchen at home, transferring the trays and washing the dishes and chopping the vegetables. When he was done, he'd carry the finished product to Nan, and present it for inspection. Nan would pretend to eat the invisible food from the plastic plates, pronounce it delicious, and smother him in kisses.

On the nights that John and Harry went to the restaurant, John would stay in the kitchen as long as possible, over at the small table in the corner where he and Harry ruled. He watched the chef and the sous and the waiters spinning in flurries, shouting and laughing and ducking amongst each other in the middle of steam and sweat and butter. Harry sat and colored or read or did homework as she ate the bits of pastry and chips or naan or whatever the chef decided to feed them that night, whenever he had a chance to think about their stomachs. (That was half the fun of being at the restaurant; they didn't have an actual meal, they grazed all night long on everything and anything.)

But John couldn't keep his eyes away from the kitchen long enough to color or read or do homework. Sometimes he would watch a waitress come in, and he'd follow the order, start to finish, all the thousands of small pieces from every direction in the kitchen, coming together and magically appearing on the warming table, finished at the same time, and then out the door to be devoured.

And when a customer sent something back, John was just as indignant as the chef who prepared it, because he'd seen the work that went into it. He'd sit and frown and cross his arms, and if the chef decided to scream and throw things, John would drop a crayon on the floor, to show solidarity.

Once, the chef saw him mid-tantrum, and burst into such laughter that he ignored the order for a few minutes and instead brought the returned dish to John.

"Taste," he demanded, and handed John the small tasting spoon. Small, but it fit in John's childish hand just fine.

John opened his mouth obediently (you didn't question food in a kitchen, you simply opened and chewed accordingly), and tasted.
"Well?" asked the chef.

John swallowed and looked up with a determined eye, and tried to be brave.

"Too salty," said John, and the chef’s eyes narrowed at him.

"Sorry, Granddad," said John.

James Watson stared at his grandson, and then tasted the dish himself.

"We'll make a chef out of you yet," said James, and tossed the rest of the oversalted meal into the rubbish bin.

"Now you've done it," said Harry, never looking up from her drawing, and John sat back in his seat, feeling a little miserable.

"It was, though," he said. "And he asked."

"Just because he asked doesn't mean he wanted to be told," said Harry, sounding imperious in the way that all seven-year-olds do.

But half an hour later, when a second dish had long been sent out in place of the over-salted tangine, a tray of jam biscuits appeared on their table, with a bowl of clotted cream, cool and thick in the heat of the kitchen, and John and Harry ate them happily. John snuck a glance at his grandfather, and caught him smiling at the pair of them, and knew that James Watson hadn't minded his honesty at all.

John ate the jam biscuits, which his granddad had baked, and knew there wasn't anywhere in the world he'd rather be, than exactly where he was.
Chapter One

Are you the type of person who likes the searing heat [of working in a professional kitchen], the mad pace, the never-ending stress and melodrama, the low pay, the probable lack of benefits, inequity and futility, the cuts and burns and damage to body and brain – the lack of anything resembling normal hours or a normal personal life?

Or are you like everybody else? A normal person?

--Anthony Bourdain

Explosions in the far off distance, but close enough to rattle the ground. John could feel the reverberations in his bones, as if he were on a roller coaster ascending and nearing the top, the kinetic energy of the upcoming fall building anticipation.

The rat-a-tat-tat of nearby gunfire, quick and sharp, and he ducked, determined to push forward anyway.

Three more meters. Two more meters. One.

“Down down down!”

John fell to his stomach, waited as the whistle overhead screamed its falling cry, then worked the rest of the way on his elbows, dug his toes into the ground for purchase, and reached the man on the red-soaked mud.

Too much red. He pressed his fingers against the man’s neck anyway. Nothing.

Fuck.

Whistling.

“Down down down!”

Rat-a-tat-tat.

He started the way back, pulling the body behind him. The mud made it hard going, he could hear the horses braying somewhere nearby.

Horses?

“Put your knees into it!” came the shout, and John looked up, blinking through the reeds, and saw the cavalry come forward, the brass buttons on the officers gleaming in the sunlight. One horse trotted toward him, and a hand reached down to grasp John’s, to pull them both up onto the saddle behind the strangely familiar rider.

“What?” John asked, as the explosion rocked the earth beneath them.

“Never leave your man behind, son,” said the officer, and the horse reared up with the rat-a-tat-tat, and John felt the fire in his shoulder, and slid off the horse onto the ground.

It was raining.

John had missed the rain, in Afghanistan. Endless days of sunshine were good in theory, but the monotony was what got John in the end. He'd enjoyed the heat at first, the brightness in his eyes, the sharp line between shadow and sun. The sunshine had both washed out the colors of the landscape, and made them brighter and vibrant. It was an impossible paradox, like much of Afghanistan, but after a hundred days of it, John just wanted a good rainfall.

Of course it was raining; had been for the entire week since he returned to Upper Brickley. It wasn’t a good hard rainfall, the sort that washes everything clean and sparkling, or a light mist, which would just give a pleasant sheen to the streets and the cars, but the piddling kind that couldn't make up its mind whether it was one or the other. John woke with a start in the darkened house sometime near mid-morning, and it took a long minute to realize that the inconsistent patter of rain on the windows wasn't far-off gunfire, and the dark gloom of his attic room wasn't the middle of the night in the desert, but the thin morning sun of an English rainy day. He closed his eyes, and then let them spring open again, because closing them felt too much like returning to the nightmare, and felt his heart pound in his chest before he began to breathe it back into calm.

The house was quiet. Harry was asleep, or gone already. Either would do; after last night’s argument, John didn’t want to face her. Not just yet, anyway. He swung his legs out of the bed, took a breath, and picked his cane up from the floor.

He showered, dressed, and bypassed the kitchen entirely on his way out the door. It was nearly half past ten, and John knew where his sister would be, and he let his legs start the walk into the town, half wishing he could stop them.

"Come by tomorrow when you wake up," Harry had said the night before. "Anytime. Might do you good to see the place."

"Yeah, maybe," John had said, but even as he said it, he knew he didn't want to go. And as he locked the door of the little house, with all its resident ghosts, he knew he was going anyway, because that had always been the problem with being in Upper Brickley; you couldn't get away from the Empire. Life centered around the restaurant, just as surely as it had when John had been five, and his grandfather had ruled the kitchen with a wooden spoon.

James Watson hadn't been in the Empire kitchen for nearly thirty years. John hadn't been in it since the summer before he'd left for university, nearly twenty years before, but when he thought of the Empire, he didn’t remember the kitchen where he’d logged more hours washing dishes and chopping vegetables than most kids spent on homework or video games. He remembered the kitchen as his Granddad had ruled it, bright and sparkling in the haze of childhood memories. He didn't imagine it was the same anymore, not with thirty years of appliances malfunctioning and oven replacements and rusted trays and broken stemware. His legs might have remembered the way to the Empire, but John had no intention of leaving the dining room.

It was a quick walk to the center of town, and John found himself on the opposite side of the street from the Empire before he even realized it. He stared at the front, holding tight to the cane.

It looked exactly the same, if a little more worn down. Down to the bright red door, which was a bit dusty with age, and the striped awning above, which was faded and threadbare. The entire building looked tired, almost slumped to the side as if it'd had an extremely hard night. John wanted to give it a bit of a shove to get it sitting upright again, but even tired, it looked comfortable and familiar. John imagined that he walked straight across the road, without a hitch in his step, to push open the front door. There’d be Mum to show him to a familiar seat, and Cathy to bring him something to drink (chocolate milk when he was small, and fizzy drinks later as he grew bigger),
and if he went into the kitchen, there'd be Granddad at the range, shouting orders to his sous, incomprehensible to anyone who hadn't napped in the manager's office as a toddler.

Except Granddad and Mum weren't alive anymore, and Cathy had retired ten years back. And the last conversation he'd had in the dining room wasn't one John was keen to relive. Too many people he'd loved weren't ever going to put their heads out the door and demand that he come in and sit for a spell.

"John Watson," said a familiar, friendly voice, and John straightened, automatically going to attention, and then he heard the laugh.

"Mrs Hudson," he said, and turned sharply - or as sharply as he dared, with his leg - to the right, to see the older lady standing outside her door, apron dusted with flour and her hair in its familiar sticky-uppy style.

"Harry said you were back," said Mrs Hudson, pleased, and she leaned up to kiss his cheek. "A week ago, she said, and here I am making lemon biscuits for you every day."

"Sorry, Mrs Hudson," said John, sheepish. "I didn't know—"

Mrs Hudson patted his arm. "It's all right. Going over to see the old place, are you?"

John glanced at the Empire across the street; he thought he could see a flicker of movement from the curtains, a bit like Harry knew he hesitated on the other side of the street.

"Harry's expecting me."

"So good to have you home again," said Mrs Hudson. "And in one piece!"

"Or nearly," said John, and he tapped his cane against his leg gently.

"Oh, tosh. I have a hip."

"Mrs Hudson, you were born with that hip."

Mrs Hudson playfully swatted John's arm. "The whole town's missed you, John. Tell me you're going to stay with us for a bit before you flit off somewhere else?"

"Don't know," said John, and pointedly did not glance at the Empire. "I was thinking London. Always wanted to live in London."

"You in London?" Mrs Hudson made a face. "Bit exciting, after Afghanistan, I should think."

"Bit dull here, after Afghanistan," said John, glancing up and down the empty street.

"Maybe for a little while. But I know you - you're the quiet sort."

"Not the same as I was fifteen years ago," said John.

"Noooo," said Mrs Hudson thoughtfully. "But I don't suppose you're much different, scratch your surface a bit. Still do anything for a lemon biscuit, I shouldn't wonder."

"Only if they're yours, Mrs Hudson. Other lemon biscuits have no sway over me."

"There's the charm," said Mrs Hudson. "Oh, it'll be good to have you back again. Just what the Empire needs."
John caught the hint of wistful longing in her voice, and coupled with Harry's nerves the previous night, suddenly wanted to do anything but walk across the street and into the restaurant that waited for him.

"Wouldn't mind one or two of those lemon biscuits now," said John. "And a cuppa to go along with?"

"No, best not to keep Harry waiting - she'll have the lunch hour on her before you can blink, and it'll be busy then."

"There's time."

But Mrs Hudson shook her head and tapped her finger on John's chest. "John Watson. I'm properly ashamed of you. You are avoiding your sister."

"Yes, I am," said John.

"None of that, now." Mrs Hudson took John by the shoulders, spun him around, and gave him a light shove toward the Empire. "Tea and bikkies waiting when you're done, and we'll have a proper chat then. Give Molly my best, if you would."

"Right," said John, and felt the dread pool in his stomach as he walked across the road. The rain picked up, just a bit, and by the time he reached the awning, he could feel the dampness under his collar.

John took a breath as he rested his hand on the knob, and opened the door. The rush of warm air, scented with cinnamon and paprika, enveloped him, and for half a minute, John fully expected to hear the familiar voices calling out his name in cheerful greeting, the way they would have done when he was in school. "Johnny! You’re home!"

But instead, all he heard was the beat-beat-beat of the music from the kitchen in the back, where Harry and Clara were surely holding court, going through the morning’s vegetable deliveries and bickering about the dessert tray. There was always bickering about the dessert tray. John closed the door behind him and decided to be grateful for the moment alone, before Harry tried to suck him back into the business.

The dining room looked exactly the way he remembered it: a bit dark and mysterious, like walking into a fortune teller’s tent. The walls were papered in an odd maroon shade that had faded into something garish and strangely bright, almost pink but not quite. There were sconces on the wall to provide extra lighting, and in between, pictures of far-off places: Japan, or Egypt, or Kenya. Other things filled in the blank spots – masks and hats, bits and pieces of souvenirs picked up from around the world by one relative or another. There was a bar in the back corner, next to the kitchen door – big enough for a register and a few stools, but not much else – and there was a window where Harry could talk to the staff, or the kitchen staff could sneak peeks at the dining room in their more worried moments.

Twenty tables were strewn around the room, set up for parties of two, four or six. They were already set with tablecloths and candles, silverware shining from their serviette envelopes. John thought it was a bit formal for lunch, but then, Harry had been in charge the last six years, not him.

John frowned as he looked around the room. Something not quite right. It was…the same. Exactly the same, the wallpaper and the dim lighting and the ridiculous flowers on the tables. John reached out and touched one, and then trailed his hand along the tablecloth. He was halfway to the back of the room when he realized what wasn’t quite right.
Thirty years later, and John was used to seeing the portrait of his grandfather along the back wall, next to the portraits of his namesakes. The three of them stared out onto the dining room of the Empire Restaurant, like three kings looking out over their own empire, proud forefathers all. But now there was a fourth portrait hanging with them, smiling and looking right at John, as if to say “welcome home, welcome back, eat something”.

“John,” said Harry, appearing in the kitchen door, and she stopped in her tracks, eyes wide. “I thought you’d be longer – I saw you with Mrs Hudson—”

“Wanted to get it over with,” said John, still staring at the portrait. “When did you put up Dad’s picture?”

Harry let out a quick laugh. “Six years ago, when he died.”

John winced. “Yeah, it’s been a while.”

“No kidding,” said Harry, and she walked behind the bar. John joined her, sliding onto one of the stools, and watched while Harry pulled out a tumbler and poured herself a whiskey. “Have to admit, I didn’t think you’d want to come in at all.”

“I told you I would.”

“You’ve been back a week. I was beginning to wonder if you even remembered where the Empire was.”

Harry took a long drink, and John frowned. “Bit early for a drink, isn’t it?”

“Nearly noon,” said Harry. “And I’ve been up for hours already.”

“My profits would say you’re drinking away your profits,” said John pointedly, and Harry glared at him.

“My profits, of course,” said Harry. “Quick to forget that we own the Empire together, baby brother. Mum and Dad left it to the two of us, you know. Not that you’d have noticed, running off to play hero in the desert. You’ve got no idea, do you? What it’s like to come in and work your fingers to the bone—”

“I think I know a bit about what it’s like to work,” said John coolly. “And trying to save someone’s life as they’re bleeding out into the ground is a damned sight more important than serving someone a plate of chicken.”

Harry slammed the glass back on the counter and took a few sharp breaths before she spoke. “Wanker.”

John struggled to his feet. “Forget it. I’m going to say hello to Clara.”

“You can’t.”

“My restaurant, too,” John reminded her, but Harry’s didn’t meet John’s eyes. He frowned. “Harry. What’s wrong?”

Harry didn’t answer. She gripped the edge of the bar so tightly her knuckles turned white.

“Harry.”

“Clara’s gone,” said Harry quietly.
“Gone? What do you mean, *gone*?”

John walked past the bar and into the kitchen before he even paused to think. The moment he was through the swinging door, he realized what he’d done, because the kitchen was the one place that didn’t look exactly as it did in his childhood memories.

The kitchen, strangely enough, wasn’t quite as small as he remembered. To the left of the door, just under the window behind the bar, was the small table where he and Harry would sit as children, coloring and eating tidbits of food. In his memory, the table was a bright white, but he could see the paint chipping at the edges of the table, and the stains and spots from dripped bits of sauce and fizzy lemonade.

Just in front of him was the warming table that served as the Line, the clear division that separated the kitchen from the rest of the world. The table was high, to make it easier for busy wait staff to take the food, and the warming lamps were turned off now, but John remembered their orange-red glow.

Beyond the table, on the left, were the grill, the ovens, and the range. There were shelves just above the range, places for the chef to stick tickets of orders for cooking, rows of bottles and bowls for the mise-en-place. Above that were the hanging hooks for the pots and pans and an extra shelf for the tangines, but now the hooks were empty, and the pots and pans were piled precariously on the shelves. They looked as if they’d topple if anyone so much as breathed wrong. The tangines were nowhere to be seen.

The prep table, in the center of the kitchen, was covered in papers, books, dishes, towels, half-filled bottles of olive oil and vinegar. John couldn’t imagine anyone actually trying to work on it. It was an utter mess, and it ought to have been cleared. There were drawers and shelf spaces below the table for storage, but as John took a few heavy steps closer, he could see that the shelf spaces were stuffed with additional ridiculous debris – glasses, bottles, boxes, more books and loose papers, and a pile of towels that looked yellow and dusty.

On the other side of the table, against the wall, was a small fridge, the larger walk-in, and another range. But the range was clearly not in use; it was piled high with plates of varying sizes and more pots and pans. The walk-in door was covered in food-stained papers, hastily taped.

Beyond all of this was the door leading to the annex, where the small dishwashing station was located, and a stairwell leading to the flat upstairs, where there was a washer and an ironing board, and where Harry and Clara lived. Well, John supposed, just Harry now. John saw the piles of pots and pans and dishes and other debris presumably remaining from the previous night’s service, and didn’t want to even consider what the inside of the walk-in looked like.

In the center of all of this, standing over the range, was Molly Hooper. John had always liked Molly; she was young and quick on her feet, with a friendly smile. She’d started waitressing just before his last tour had started, so he didn’t know her very well, but Mary Morstan, the other waitress, spoke well of her, and John trusted Mary’s judgment. In the kitchen, wearing a chef’s coat that was just a little too big for her, with the sleeves rolled up inexpertly, face bright red with heat and sweating just a little, Molly looked out of place and somewhat sheepish, as if she’d been caught out with her hand in the biscuit tin.

“Molly,” said John, unable to think of what else to say.

“Oh. Hi, John,” said Molly, nervous and startled, and the wooden spoon clattered as she dropped it to the range. “Harry said you might be in. I heard about your leg, does it hurt very terribly?”
“At times.”

“Must have been awful being shot. Do you think about it often?”

“I wouldn’t say it was the most pleasant experience I’ve ever had, no,” said John carefully, and Molly’s eyes widened with what might have been embarrassment.

There was a commotion from the kitchen’s annex, where the sinks and industrial dishwasher were located; a gangly young man with a smudge on his chin and his shirt damp from washing dishes popped his head out, rolling his eyes. “Cor, Molly. Queen of the inappropriate comment.”

“Sorry,” said Molly, and was saved by the timer on the oven. She turned her back to John to pull a tray of something out of the oven, and John frowned at the young man.

“Artie,” said John. “What are you doing here? Your shift doesn’t start for two hours.”

“Have to do my laundry somewhere, boss,” said Artie Wiggins cheerily.

John tried not to sigh out of sheer exasperation; some things about the Empire would probably never actually change. One of them was Artie. “You’re not using the laundry upstairs, Artie.”

Artie looked highly affronted. “Of course not. I wash all my things by hand, thank you.”

“Artie, tell me you’re not using the sink.”

“All right, I won’t tell you.”

John was about to protest again, when he caught sight of the casseroles Molly was moving to the prep table.

“What are those?”

Molly frowned, looking at them. “I think they’re meant to be potatoes.”

“Molly. What the bloody hell are you doing back here?”

Molly dropped the tray of unidentified objects on the range with a rattle; John winced. “Clara left a month ago.”

“But – you’re a waitress.”

“Ladies and gentleman, the new king of inappropriate comments,” said Artie.

Molly sucked in her breath and opened her mouth. “I—I mean – Harry said…”

John wondered exactly how thunderous he looked right then, to put fear in the heart of Molly Hooper. He suspected it wouldn’t have taken much. “Right. Fine. Two minutes.”

John walked out of the kitchen and back into the dining room, where Harry was half cowering behind the bar.

“What the bloody hell, Harry?”

“It was the logical solution,” muttered Harry.

“Logical? Logical? Your chef leaves and instead of advertising for a new one, you replace her with
the waitress?"

“There wasn’t anyone else—”

“What about the sous? What was his name, Martin?”

“Left a year ago.”

“What about his replacement?”

“He didn’t have a replacement.”

“Clara was back there alone? Christ, no wonder she left, she must have been exhausted.”

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing, your chef is exhausted, you bloody hire help for her. I’m not even in the restaurant business, Harry, and I know that much!”

“That’s right, you’re not in the restaurant business,” snapped Harry, slamming the half-full whiskey glass back on the bar. “You’re off saving Afghanistan just like your forefathers, aren’t you? Have to uphold the family honor by getting yourself shot up in the name of Queen and Country! Well, bloody good on you, mate! I’ll just stay here and work my fingers to the bone and never see my wife to the point that she wonders why she’s even bothering to stay with me. I don’t half blame her, either.”

Harry’s hands shook so hard she couldn’t even pour the whiskey straight. John took the bottle from her and set it down on the counter, while Harry buried her face in her arms.

“Harry,” he asked, quiet but firm, barely holding his anger in check. “Molly says Clara left a month ago.”

“She quit a month ago,” mumbled Harry into the bar. “But I moved back home two months before that.”

John sighed, and sat on a stool opposite his sister. “You said you were at the house to keep me company.”

“Yeah, well,” said Harry, and she lifted her head to wipe the tears from her face. “I was always a better liar than you were, even on the worst days.”

John reached over and poured a finger-full of whiskey into the glass, and drained it himself. He slammed the glass back on the table; it made a satisfying hollow-sounding thwap.

“Molly, though.”

Harry groaned. “I know, I know.”

“You can cook,” John pointed out. “I know Mum taught you the basics. And it’s not like anything on the menu here is that hard, we’ve been making it since we were in nappies.”

“John,” said Harry. “You do not want me in the kitchen. No one wants me in the kitchen.”

“Got that right,” shouted Artie from the kitchen.

“Artie!” yelled Harry. “Have you been listening to this entire conversation? I will so bloody fire
“No, you won’t,” came Artie’s voice, and Harry sat back down with a groan.

“He’s right, that’s the worst part,” she told John, and reached for the whiskey. John held it out of reach.

“Tell him what you did to the pasta!”

“Shut it, Artie,” Harry yelled over her shoulder.

“What about the pasta?” asked John.

“Nothing about the pasta,” grumbled Harry. “There is absolutely nothing to tell about the pasta. No one is telling you about the pasta.”

John sighed. “Fine. You aren’t the chef. Why didn’t you advertise?”

“I tried. John, don’t look at me like that, I really did try.”

“She did,” offered Artie, now looking through the kitchen window. “The notice is still in the trade mags and papers, and she even plastered a few of the culinary colleges nearby. There’s been a couple of kids showing interest—”

John raised an eyebrow. “Kids, Artie?”

“They’re worse than I am,” said Harry glumly.

“And that’s not easy,” added Artie. “No offense, Harry.”

Harry waved him off.

“But – this is the Empire,” said John, looking around the room. “We’ve got a history, a reputation – we’re a bloody landmark. When Dad died, there were chefs from three counties around coming by and giving their condolences. Half of them were mad that they’d never had a chance to work here with him.”

“Christ, John, don’t tell me you believed them?” said Harry, and John pushed away from the bar and went to look at the portraits on the wall. “It was a wake, Johnny. They were being nice.”

“They were being honest,” insisted John.

“They were saying what we wanted to hear. They sure as hell weren’t going to tell us the truth.”

“Oh?” John rounded on Harry. “And what’s the truth, then?”

“That the Empire is past its prime. There’s no place for us anymore, John. We’re an ethnic restaurant with no ethnicity. We showcase dishes from around the world, from places where the British Empire used to have control, but the thing is that there isn’t a British Empire anymore. There hasn’t been in years. Everyone’s figured that out but us, Johnny. We’re not even unique – if you want Thai, there’s Papaya Garden on Kensworth Lane. If you want Indian, you go to Bombay Towers four doors down. There’s even a sushi place in the next town over, and they deliver.”

“That’s not the point,” said John.

“It is the point,” said Harry, and she stood up and walked over to her brother. “I’m sorry, John. But
“it’s over.”

“No,” said John firmly, and he changed the grip on his cane. “The lights are still on, you’re still getting food deliveries, there’s still customers for lunch and dinner.”

“John—”

“You aren’t honestly going to tell me that you’ve taken a restaurant that has succeeded for nearly sixty years and run it into the ground, are you, Harry?” demanded John.

“What was I supposed to do, John? Change the menu? Redecorate? Add a buffet? Granddad would have rolled over in his grave and you know it.”

“This was Granddad’s legacy.”

“I know that! And I’m trying to stay true to it.”

“You and I grew up here. Don’t you dare tell me you’ve drunk it under the table.”

“I’m not the one at fault!” shouted Harry.

“Then who the fuck is? It wasn’t me – I wasn’t here!”

“You’re right!” shouted Harry, throwing her arms in the arm. “You weren’t here! So don’t you dare tell me what I should have done to save the restaurant. I’ve done everything I can think of to keep it afloat, and I can’t, I just can’t, not without destroying everything Granddad was trying to do. I’ve taken out loans, I’ve tried having daily specials, Clara even had a whole educational program worked up. And none of it worked. The Empire doesn’t have history – it is history. It’s the last holdover of an era where people dressed up to go to dinner and left the kids at home, went to have something fancy and special because they didn’t do it every day. But that’s not what the world is like anymore – people eat out when they feel like it, not because it’s special, and the kids come along, because no one bothers with babysitting.

“And the worst is – no one cares about what Granddad was trying to do. The whole ‘British Empire’ theme is just a holdover of an era that doesn’t exist anymore. The last couple of years, I’ve found it harder to explain the whole idea behind the menu. Especially when I’m trying to tell someone from Hong Kong or India or Pakistan.

“I’m sorry, John. I know you loved the Empire. But the Empire you love doesn’t exist anymore. It hasn’t for years. And unless a miracle happens, and it turns around, we’re going to lose it.”

John took a breath. “What do you mean, lose it?”

“I can’t pay the loans, John,” said Harry quietly. “I can barely pay out salaries for Artie and Molly and Mary. I told Clara to leave because I wasn’t even going to be able to pay her, and she deserved the chance to find a new place. We’re going to default on the loan in another two months, unless something changes.”

John closed his eyes, and kept breathing.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Harry.

“Yeah,” said John, and opened his eyes again to stare at the portraits of his father and grandfathers. “Yeah, I’m sorry, too.”
John made a clean, quick about-face, and went for the door.

"John—"

"No, Harry," said John, and pushed open the door. The rain hit him in the face, and John walked steadfastly into it, blinking rapidly in order to see where he was going.

Home, he thought. But instead of turning left, he turned right, and went further into the town, not quite knowing where he was going until he found himself standing outside the little whitewashed brick building with the familiar multi-colored logo on the window.

Loans, Harry had said. If Harry had taken out loans on the Empire, there was only one person who would have given it to her. John stared into the window, felt the cold rain on the back of his neck. A woman with a baby buggy struggled with the door; John jumped forward and held it open for her, and when she was through, followed her inside.

*

"Hello, sorry, I’m looking for Sebastian Wilkes?"

The woman behind the front desk at the bank looked up from her computer, giving John a half-hearted glance. “I’m sorry, Mr Wilkes no longer works for Lloyd’s.”

“Oh,” said John, momentarily flummoxed. “I didn’t know. Can you tell me where he’s gone?”

“Retired to Majorca,” said the woman, clearly uninterested. “Did you have business with Mr Wilkes on a personal matter, or can I direct you to another bank employee?”

“Ah, right. I’m not sure – it’s about a loan taken out a few months ago by my sister, Harriet—”

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the woman, and turned back to her computer. “Any information regarding financial services between this bank and your sister would be confidential.”

“It wasn’t a personal loan, it was a business loan for our restaurant, the Empire.”

“If your name isn’t on the loan, sir, I’m afraid we can’t give you any details.”

“I’m the co-owner of the restaurant,” said John, trying not to grit his teeth. “So I’m afraid you probably can.”

The woman shrugged and kept typing. John thought about slamming his cane down on the desk to get her attention again, before realizing that being carried out of the bank would probably not go over very well if he was trying to negotiate whatever idiotic thing Harry had done. Instead, he took a deep breath and glanced at the nameplate on the desk.

“Anthea,” he said, and the woman glanced up, a bit startled, from her computer. “I’m sorry. I’m being boorish, and rude, and it’s certainly not in your job description to receive abuse from angry customers. If I could trouble you just a little further to determine who made the loan to my sister for our restaurant, I would very much appreciate the chance to talk to them.”

Anthea blinked at him and glanced at the computer screen again. She typed for a few moments, and then picked up the phone.

“Jim,” she said, “there’s someone here to see you, are you free?”

John couldn’t quite make out what Jim said on the other end of the line, but he waited patiently,
and hoped Jim wasn’t head of security.

“Right, cheers,” said Anthea, and hung the phone back up. She turned to the computer again. “You can go on back to see him. First door on the left. He’s expecting you.”


“Righto,” said Anthea, never looking away from the computer screen.

The bank offices were small and somewhat cramped, and John had only been in them twice before. Both times were to arrange the financial dealings of the Empire – once after his grandfather’s death, and the second after his father’s. Sebastian had handled both transactions; he hadn’t been that young, but John hadn’t expected him to be so old as to actually retire.

But as soon as John saw the open door on the left, he realized it must have been true, because Jim was in what had once been Sebastian’s office. It didn’t look quite as John remembered it; Sebastian had been a collector of books, of photographs, of knick-knack souvenirs from his travels. The office had been a mess of ridiculous proportions, but the flotsam and jetsam was gone now, and instead the office had a clean, industrial, brisk feeling to it, as if the wooden furniture was actually cold steel, and the man who sat behind the desk, his pen scratching against the paper, was only an automaton performing a predesigned task.

“Ah – hello,” began John, but Jim lifted one hand, as if to hold John at bay, and kept writing for another moment. John shifted from one leg to the other. His muscles were beginning to complain; for a moment, John wished he was back in Afghanistan, if only for the heat and lack of rain.

Jim stopped writing and set down his pen, and then looked up with a friendly and thin smile. “Ah, you’re my visitor,” he said. “Pleasure. Do come in. Tea?”

“Yes, thanks,” said John, and Jim stood to shake John’s hand. His hand was cool, his fingertips cold, and he turned to the electric kettle on the credenza and flipped it on. “John Watson. I’m here about—”

“The Empire,” said Jim, and smiled at him as he sat back down. “Of course. I’ve been expecting you to stop by.”

“You have?” John sat down on a chair. “I’m sorry. Do we know each other?”

“Jim Moriarty. We’ve never been introduced formally, but your sister has told me about you, and of course I know all about the Empire. Lovely old place in its day, shame about the current situation.”

John had trouble not bristling. “The current situation is fine.”

“Is it?” asked Jim, nonchalantly. He spun back and forth in his chair. “Well, matter of opinion, I suppose. I imagine you’re here to ask about the loan your sister arranged.”

“Yes. I don’t have the paperwork naming me as co-owner with me—”

Jim waved him off. “Oh, no worries, Dr Watson, I am completely aware of the ownership of the Empire. Let’s see. Your sister took out a loan against the restaurant a year ago. Well, that’s not precisely true – she took out the original loan three years ago, and was making the payments as scheduled. A year ago she renegotiated the terms to draw more funds with the intention of expansion – I wasn’t quite certain what she was planning, but she seemed very certain and your family has always been such good clients, how could I refuse?”
“What terms?” asked John, hoping he sounded calm. He didn’t feel calm. From the way Jim’s eyebrow raised, he didn’t sound particularly calm, either.

“Rather unconventional, I have to say, but then, I’m a gambling man. The terms were that if I gave her a year to halt payment on the loan, at the conclusion of the year, she would pay the amount in full, or lose ownership of the restaurant entirely.”

John stared at Jim. “That’s – that’s not legal.”

“I admit it took some rather fancy legwork,” said Jim, who managed to sound cheerful and sympathetic at the same time. “But I assure you, it’s quite legal. In this matter, anyway.”

John swallowed. “How much.”

“Hmm?”

“Harry said the loan is due in two months. How much will we owe?”

“Oh,” said Jim, and he shuffled the papers on his desk. “Here it is. Six hundred thousand pounds.”

Jim turned the paper around and pushed it toward John, who was already unable to think past the idea of six-hundred-thousand pounds. He stared at the paper, and seeing the numbers in black and white didn’t make them any more palatable.

“Plus interest,” added Jim helpfully. “I can compute that if you want.”

“No, that’s all right,” said John hazily. “Ah. Right. And due in two months.”

“Six weeks,” said Jim. “If we’re going to be particular about it. But seeing as I can tell you’re rather blown over... why don’t I just add another week to that? Would seven weeks suit you, Mr Watson?”

John couldn’t speak. He thought his heart was going to crawl out of his chest, jump into Jim’s smiling mouth, and choke the man.

Jim didn’t wait for a response; he turned and made a few notations on his computer. “There, done,” he said. “Seven weeks from tomorrow, Mr Watson. Payment can be made any way you like, of course. And here’s the tea ready. Milk and sugar?”

“I’m sorry,” said John, and still clutching the paper with the absurdly high number on it, he stumbled out of the room, down the hall, and back out into the rain.

* 

The rain stopped somewhere near ten that night. John was only half aware of it; he’d spent the last seven hours on the couch in the sitting room, the telly providing a steady hum of background noise as the thin sunlight faded and turned into night. The exhaustion he’d been feeling since returning to England had compounded full-force, and he barely had the energy to flip between channels.

John wasn’t sure if he believed Harry, when she said that the Empire was finished. Maybe there’d been some bad times, growing up – but that was the way of the world, wasn’t it? Waxing and waning and loyal customers always came back again, once they’d tired of something new. The platitudes people said at Hamish Watson’s funeral hadn’t been platitudes when they’d been said about his father James. People really had wanted to cook with, and for, James, who’d been a pioneer, opening an ethnic restaurant in 1948 when everyone had told him it couldn’t be done. Not
with rationing worse than ever; not with people still trying to find their way in a new world order. And half of them still convinced that the world was going to break into war again any second….

But the visit to the bank, and the slick and smarmy Jim who glibly recited a number that was so astronomically high that John wasn’t even sure what so much money would look like – and to think it was due in seven weeks…

John wondered, briefly, what Harry had done with the money. She certainly hadn’t hired a chef or redecorated with it. And he hadn’t heard anything about plans for expansion. Given the way that Harry had been talking about the decline of the restaurant, expansion should have been the last thing on her mind.

No. The Empire had been through a hell of a lot worse. It had been born in a worse time. It had stayed open through recessions and rationing and the death of its patriarch. It would not close just because of a few bad months.

Seven weeks. John had seven weeks to turn the Empire around, to find six hundred thousand pounds, to save his family’s legacy.

He wondered if winning the lottery was a good bet.

“Coming up next – do not switch off!”

John flipped the channel. The blue light illuminating the room changed to green, to red, to yellow as he moved through American sitcoms and BBC costume dramas, Doctor Who reruns and commercials for air fresheners. He’d landed on a cooking show when the mobile in his pocket buzzed with an incoming text, and John dropped the remote to dig it out.

Harry.

On my way home. Hungry?

On the screen, a tall, thin, dark-haired man was talking to a sniveling teenager wearing a cook’s toque and coat. No, not talking to – talking at, in an angry stream of words that never rose above a spoken level but were clearly designed to hit the young man exactly where it would hurt most. John hit the mute button on the remote before shoving it to the side. It took a few minutes to type a negative reply to Harry’s request, and he reached for the remote, thinking to just turn off the telly entirely and go upstairs to bed.

The remote wasn’t there.

“Bugger,” he swore, and started digging in the cushions, trying to find it.

On the screen, the man was no longer talking; instead, he was walking through a farmer’s market with the kid, showing him various vegetables, arguing good-naturedly with the vendors, and clearly bargaining down the prices. John wasn’t sure why he had half an eye on the screen; he really couldn’t have cared less, particularly about a cooking show of all things, but when he found the remote under the couch and was about to hit the off switch, the scene that was showing caught his eye.

The man, and the young cook, walking into a restaurant, carrying their purchases. The restaurant was empty, but there was a crew repainting the interior and showing off the new designs for lighting. Clearly, there was some kind of renovation going on.

And then the man and the young cook were in the kitchen, cooking together – or rather, the man
was explaining something, and the young cook was nodding intently, as though desperate to emulate him exactly. Or maybe fear that if he didn’t, the man would start ripping into him again.

John didn’t turn off the telly. He turned the sound back on.

The man’s voice, calm and collected and in the middle of a voice-over, wrapped John up like a bit of pastry and butter. “…will never be a great chef. He lacks the imagination, but he does not lack the drive, and it is Billy’s drive alone that might save the restaurant from failure. If he can manage to control his temper and not storm out to throw a wobbly when he gets in the weeds.”

“Not so hard,” said the young man, Billy, cheekily, and he pulled out a tray of turnovers, all perfectly golden brown. “Oi! Look at that!”

Billy grinned at the camera and turned to put the tray on the worktable behind him. Instead, he hit the tray on the corner of the table, accidentally overturning it, and the turnovers tumbled to the floor. Billy dropped the tray with a clatter, his mouth open in shock – and in the next moment, Billy had thrown the tray to the ground, stormed out of the kitchen in a rage, and the tall man slumped against the counter, shaking, though John couldn’t tell if it was with laughter or anger.

The voice-over continued, perfectly dry and unassuming. “That might be harder for Billy than it appears.”

John chuckled, and sat back on the couch, the remote still held loosely in his hand.

The scene changed – an establishing shot of a small, quaint little town, cobblestones and bustling pavements. The sun setting over the moor. A little inn with attached restaurant, and finally, a busy dining room.

The man’s voice came on again. “Two weeks ago, Gary and Billy would have killed to have half this many people eating at the Cross Keys. It’s been years since Billy has had to cook for so many tables in one night. It’s time for him to put the skills he’s learnt to the test: if he can keep a dining room of customers happy, they’ll come back for seconds. And thirds, and fourths.”

John sat straight up on the couch.

An empty dining room, now full. A chef, being shown how to cook properly. And a man who seemed to know exactly how to make a failing restaurant turn around.

John didn’t move a muscle, except for the very end, when he saw the credits roll, and two names stood out.

Sherlock Holmes’ Restaurant Reconstructed.

“Sherlock Holmes,” repeated John, and he scrambled for a piece of paper to write it down. When he glanced back up at the screen again, he caught sight of the second name, and broke into a grin.

“Well, bugger me,” he said, and reached for his mobile again, and dialed.

The man on the other end of the line picked up after two rings. He didn’t sound particularly upset at being called so late at night, which made John feel instantly better.

“Stamford.”

“Mike Stamford,” said John. “It’s John Watson. From Bart’s, we went to—”
“Watson!” said Mike, and the briskness dropped from his tone immediately. “Well, isn’t this a turn-up. Haven’t heard from you in ages. Thought you were in the Army getting shot. Where’ve you been?”

“Getting shot,” said John.

“Same old Watson, dry as brick,” said Mike with a chuckle.

“Same old Mike, twenty fingers in forty pies,” countered John. “What the hell are you doing producing television shows? You were in med school with me.”

“What were you doing invading Afghanistan?”

“Touché. Look, Mike – you work with that Sherlock Holmes bloke, don’t you?”

“Wish I didn’t. Why?”

“Because,” said John, watching as the television screen started in on the next episode of Sherlock’s show. “I think I’ve got a humdinger of a problem for him, and I could use your help convincing him.”
"I can't believe you would do this behind my back. Did you call him the minute you were in England, or did you at least wait to see the bloody restaurant first?"

"I called him two weeks ago, Harry, and I only found out last night that he’d be able to come here at all. And anyway, you’re really going to sit there and honestly complain about me doing something behind your back? You went and took out a bloody second mortgage on the restaurant."

"That was different."

"Six hundred thousand pounds, Harry! What the bloody fuck were you thinking? And to open an extension! You can't even keep the first restaurant solvent, how the hell were you going to manage keeping a second one afloat?"

"All right!" shouted Harry. "It was a bloody stupid idea, but it could have worked, the location was fantastic, right on the high street and lots of traffic and it would have given me a chance to get away from the God-awful history, all right? It was going to be fresh and new and not have our bloody grandfathers looking over my shoulder every time I tried to do anything different, something people actually want to eat - salads and soups and sandwiches for lunches and really great steaks and seafood and pasta for dinner, and it would have been fantastic, and then the heater blew and the oven needed replacement and the walk-in's temperature regulator went on the fritz and we lost every scrap of food - over ten thousand pounds worth of meat and veg and breads and I had to stock the entire bloody thing from scratch. And we couldn't open for a week because that's how long it took to fix the bloody thing. The Empire would have been finished six months ago if I hadn't taken the loan, so don't you dare make me apologize for it, because I won't."

"Fine. That's just fine, Harry," said John, his heart still pounding. "I don't want you to apologize."

"Oh, come off it," scoffed Harry. She stormed across the living room and straight to the bar. The first bottle of whiskey was nearly empty, and she groaned in frustration. "You want me to admit that I went over your head? Then here you go, sit down and get ready. I went over your head and behind your back and I fucked you up sideways and I'd do it again. I was trying to save the Empire."

"I'm trying to save the Empire, too, Harry."

But Harry was too angry to listen. She stood, a nearly-empty bottle of whiskey in her hand, and refused to look at her brother. She slammed the bottle on the top of the bar and started looking for a glass. "By letting some posh berk in the back door so he can rip our lives apart for the amusement of the entire bloody country? Funny way of going about it, Johnny."

"If you've got any better ideas, I'd love to hear them," snapped John.

"You don't know the first thing about how to run a restaurant."

"Turns out I'm not the only one in that boat, am I?" snapped John, and regretted the words the minute he saw Harry's face crumple. "Christ, Harry - I'm sorry."

"No, you're not," said Harry, bitterly, and she emptied the bottle into the nearest glass available. "You've been thinking it all afternoon. Don't even bother lying, you're a bloody awful liar."

"I don't think that."
"You might as well, it's true." Harry disappeared behind the bar again, and John heard the clink and clank of bottles hitting each other as she searched for something else to drink.

"Harry." John walked over and put his hand on her shoulder. "We're going to lose the restaurant in five weeks."

Harry slumped a little, her hand stilling on a bottle of brandy. "I know."

"Is there anything left from the loan?"

"Some," said Harry, and she sounded tired. "Enough to pay out salaries for Molly and Mary. Take care of the bills and settle with the suppliers. We won't end up in debt, anyway. Well, except to the bank. Cold comfort, I don't give a toss for what they think, but I don't want to stiff anyone else."

"Then what do we have to lose?"

Harry snorted. "Our pride? Our faces? Have you even watched one of those shows, start to finish? The man's an arsehole. He'll make us a laughingstock of the industry."

"Yeah, but he's an arsehole who knows what he's doing," said John, who half suspected Harry was right. "He's the only chance we have, Harry."

"Didn't you hear about the Birdcage? He destroyed them."

John shook his head. He'd spend the last two weeks gorging himself on Sherlock Holmes, desperate to glean any bit of knowledge he could, while he waited for Stamford to call back with good news. The Birdcage had been one of the first episodes he'd seen. "Harry, they destroyed themselves. Four Indian restaurants, all in a row? Who does that?"

But Harry was shaking her head. "I won't let you do this. I'm half owner, I can stop you."

John snorted. "Fine! Then tell me why we're even bothering to continue, Harry? Why don't we just chuck in the towel now and use whatever's left to try to keep ourselves a little more out of debt? I can re-up my medical certifications, I'm sure there's a half-bit surgery somewhere that won't mind having a doctor with a limp and a tremor in his hand. The PTSD might give them pause, but eh, it'll work out. And you can get a job at the local McDonald's serving up chips, will that do? The Empire's full of antiques, we can auction them off with Sotheby's, think they'd be interested? Probably not, we'll try eBay, if the shipping doesn't do us in."

"John—"

"WE DON'T HAVE A BLOODY CHOICE, HARRY. Unless we can turn the restaurant around, we're going to lose the only thing that Mum and Dad cared about, but if that's fine by you, Christ knows it's all fine by me."

Harry banged her head against the wall. "Stop. Stop. Stop."

John pulled her away from the wall, and gave her a little shake. "Harry. We have to try something. Sherlock Holmes is the last chance we've got. We have to try. I've got to try."

Harry opened her eyes. "Okay."

John let out a breath. "Finally."

"But it's your deal, okay?" continued Harry. "I don't want to be a part of it. I'll sign whatever they
need me to sign to let them film in the Empire, but I don't want to be on camera, and I don't want to be interviewed. Hell, I don't even want to meet the bloody bastard. Pretend I'm not even part of it, okay? I don't need all my fuck-ups aired for the world to laugh at."

"Harry. You're not a fuck-up."

"Aren't I?" asked Harry bitterly, and she opened the bottle in her hand - brandy, this time, and she lumbered to her feet and reached for a glass. "I've done a great job of imitating one, then. When's your savior get here?"

"Two weeks," said John. "Stamford wasn’t sure he could fit us in, they’ve had their schedule set for weeks now. But there was a...cancellation."

Harry snorted. "Meaning the next restaurant on his chopping block got chopped before he could get to it. Lucky sods. They got the easy way out."

"Lucky for us."

Harry snorted. "Two weeks from now, I'll remind you about your definition of luck, and we'll see if you still believe in it."

*

Two weeks went by all too quickly. Two weeks of enduring Harry’s crash-course in restaurant management, which was both exactly and not at all like an Army campaign, though there were enough similarities to a busy A&E that John caught on quickly enough. Two weeks of trying to decide how much to prepare for the onslaught of Sherlock Holmes. Change the menu? The drink specials? The opening hours?

Most of all: what to tell Molly, Mary, or Artie. Harry wanted to put it off until the morning of; John wanted to tell them immediately. They compromised on the Tuesday before Sherlock’s arrival, after the evening service (which had amounted to two tables, no appetizers, no desserts, no drinks, and according to Mary, no tip).

Artie had breathed a sigh of relief, and then asked for Wednesday afternoon. “Party tonight at my mate’s house,” he explained cheerfully. “No one’ll be here to dirty the dishes anyway.”

“Artie,” scolded Mary. “There’s always one...or two...” But Mary didn’t sound terribly confident, either, and Molly burst into tears and refused to be comforted.

"It's my fault," she sobbed as John tried to comfort her.

"It's no one's fault," he soothed her. "Moll - you're doing a bang-up job. You're fine. This isn't about you."

"Of course it's about me," wailed Molly. "It's always about the chef on that show, he's going to shout at me and make me feel like an idiot."

"You already feel like an idiot," Artie said unhelpfully. "So I hardly see how that's Sherlock's fault."

Molly went into a fresh round of sobbing, and John sighed and rubbed his eyes, feeling a headache coming on.

“Helpful, Artie, thanks.”
“You’re welcome, boss,” said Artie, and handed Molly a tissue. Molly seemed to take this as an invitation and ended up crying on Artie’s shoulder, while the young man stared at the rest of them in abject horror.

“What do I do?” he hissed, and Mary patted Molly’s back sympathetically.

“Try not to drown,” she advised Artie, and kept feeding Molly tissues.

When Molly started to let up on the tears, John poured them all brandies. Mary drank hers with a happy smacking of the lips, Artie eyed the bottle, and Molly practically had to have hers poured down her throat. She came up coughing.

"Go home," John told her kindly. "And get some sleep. Artie, have a great time at the party, but try to make your way here tomorrow afternoon at some point. We’re not going to open to customers, but we are going to clean. I’d like to at least try to have the kitchen in order before the cameras find every last wayward breadcrumb."

"Righty-ho, boss," said Artie, and he sounded halfway impressed. "Never understood why none of those buggers bothered to clean, if they knew he was coming."

"Maybe they didn't," said John, wanting to give his predecessors the benefit of the doubt. "Anyway, we'll take the advantage we're given."

"Good thing, we won't get many," said Mary wisely.

Cleaning the kitchen had been a nightmare, and despite the sweeping, mopping, and dusting, despite breathing in the noxious cleaning fumes and the odd elation at finding a broken Pyrex measuring cup behind the dish racks (because Christ, if Sherlock had found it...), despite being absolutely positive that Sherlock Holmes would walk into the restaurant Thursday afternoon, sometime between the lunch and dinner service, and immediately begin to pick apart exactly what was still wrong with everything...John felt ready.

That Wednesday had also brought with it a camera crew and a truckload of equipment, ready to set up – that didn’t help with Molly’s nerves or Artie’s snide commentary.

“They’re messing up my clean floors, boss,” said Artie as the crew mounted cameras and halogen lights on the walls in strategic locations. “I just swept and mopped and now there’s dry wall dust everywhere.”

“Sweep and mop again,” said John, sweating as he scrubbed at a particularly difficult bit of burnt something in the oven.

“Oi!” yelled Artie. “You can’t put that there, I just cleaned there!”

“John,” hissed Mary. “There’s cameras in the dining room.”

“Yes, Mary, well spotted.”

“There’s cameras in the dining room.”

“Mary…”

Molly interrupted the circular conversation. John was almost relieved. “John, is the film admissible in court? What if I accidentally poison someone?”
John stopped being relieved. “I think I left the oven on upstairs. Sorry,” he said, and went up to Harry’s flat. Harry took one look at him, left the pile of unironed tablecloths, and poured him a glass of brandy.

“Having fun yet?” she asked mildly.

“Piss off,” groaned John, and buried his head in his arms.

*

Thursday morning dawned bright and clear. John had set the mobile to ring at seven, but he beat it by six minutes, and spent them staring at the ceiling, his hands resting on the concave hollow where his chest and stomach met.

There was a knock on his bedroom door. John didn't move.

"I'm awake," he called out, and the door opened cautiously.

Harry poked her head in. "Cor, you look awful," she said.

"Helpful as always, Harry."

"I try." Harry nudged the door open, and John was surprised to see her carrying a tray loaded with tea and toast and jam.

"What the hell, Harry?"

"Shut up or I'll never do it again," threatened Harry, and she set the tray down on the nearby desk.

"What time did you get in?"

"One. But the kitchen is sparkling, and the cameras and lights are in place."

Harry frowned. "You didn't keep Molly and Mary that late, did you?"

"Christ, no. Mary was out like a shot at four, and I sent Molly home at six. With sleeping pills."

"Good." Harry waited for John to sit up, and then handed him a cup of tea. "Look. I'm sorry that I've been such a bitch."

John drank his tea and thought about that for a moment. "It's fine," he said, when he came up for air.

"No, it's not," said Harry. She sat on the edge of John's bed. "I know I was behaving like a two-year-old and I should have been more honest with you all along about the problems with the Empire. I guess...I just didn't want to bother you."

"Harry, I was home six months ago for a visit. You could have brought it up then."

"John, you'd just spent two years in and out of war zones, and you were headed back for another tour. There were people shooting at you. I'm sorry, but I didn't want you to be distracted."

"Yeah, and sometimes a little distraction from that would have been nice," said John. "Besides, Mum and Dad never wanted you to shoulder the burden alone, or they wouldn't have left the restaurant to the pair of us."

"Yeah?" asked Harry bitterly, still looking down at her hands. "All right, then. What if I'd told you
the truth about the Empire? That I'd taken out a loan and gotten in over my head and that my marriage was on the rocks and we were losing ten thousand pounds a week? You thought we were fine and dandy, and you still got shot up."

John put the cup on the side-table and reached out for Harry's arm. "Me getting shot up doesn't have anything to do with the Empire."

"No, but it could have. That's what the websites all say, that you shouldn't bother your soldiers with information they can't do much about, it's just a distraction."

"I could have given you moral support, Harry."

Harry snorted. "Shouldn't that have gone the other direction? Me, give you moral support? You had people shooting at you. I just had people throwing dishes at me."

John frowned. "Someone threw dishes at you?"

"Figure of speech. Maybe someone threw a napkin one night. Fly in his soup or something."

"Was it doing the backstroke?" asked John innocently.

Harry gave him a look, and then they both started to giggle.

"I hate you, sometimes," said Harry.

"Same here," said John. "Get the fuck out of my room, I have to get dressed."

"Like I care," said Harry, and yelped when John kicked her from under the covers.

"No!"

"You are," said Harry, almost delighted, and John threw his pillow at her. "As if I actually want to see your bits and pieces!"

"Out!" Harry left, laughing, and John grinned. He glanced out the window, and saw the one or two wispy clouds hanging low in the sky.

"It's going to be a good day," he said, determined, and swung his legs out of bed.

* 

The morning passed frustratingly slowly. Mary spent the hours ironing every single tablecloth, every napkin, and even attempted to steam the curtains. She cleaned the windows without John having to ask, and worked until they were streak-free.

Molly dithered in the kitchen, checking her supplies three times before she was satisfied. When John looked in on her, she was measuring the space between the dishes on her mise-en-place.

Artie was out back, smoking. He was draped over a few leftover crates from the morning veg delivery, and he might have exuded a bored and amused demeanor, but John saw the crisp line in his trousers and the face that was neatly shaved around his still scraggly goatee.

“Hi, boss,” said Artie, the cigarette dangling from his lips. “The birds getting to you?"

“Yeah,” admitted John, and he sat on a crate opposite Artie. “Hand one over?”
Artie dug his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lobbed them to John, who caught them softly and shook the pack until one fell out. He twirled it between his fingers thoughtfully.

“Didn’t know you smoked,” said Artie.

“I don’t,” admitted John. “Well, not anymore.”

“That’s good. These things’ll kill you,” said Artie solemnly, and blew out a smoke ring.

John chuckled. “Never could manage those.”

“It’s all in the wrist,” said Artie. “I say we get pissed. Make the afternoon a lot easier.”

“Maybe afterwards,” said John.

Artie nodded, as if they’d just planned a date, and blew out another ring. “Boss,” he said, a bit too casual. “You sure this is a good idea?”

“Smoking out back of the restaurant while Mary and Molly spin like tops inside? Not really. Mary’ll have my arse wrapped in plastic when I go back in.”

“No, this Sherlock Holmes bloke.”

“Probably the worst idea I’ve had in years,” said John.

“Well,” said Artie, “as long as you admit it.”

*

The production team arrived just before lunch, announcing themselves with a firm knock on the door. John caught sight of the man in front as he hurried to let them in – tall, with grey hair and a friendly but studious expression. He was laughing at something one of his companions had said, and when John opened the door, he caught the tail end of the laughter.

“Hello, welcome to the Empire,” said John, and reached out to shake his hand. “I’m John Watson, co-owner.”

“Mr Watson,” said the grey-haired man, who looked younger than his hair implied, now that John was up close. “Greg Lestrade, I’m the director of Restaurant Reconstructed. You met Sam Anderson yesterday, he’s our cameraman. Thanks for giving him access.”

“Come on in,” said John, and stepped back to allow them through. Anderson carried a few large boxes, which John assumed was additional camera equipment. There were a few more boxes on the pavement, waiting to come in.

Movement at the end of the street caught John’s eye. Harry, at a brisk walk. She lifted her arm and waved at him, and when Anderson stepped back outside to fetch the rest of the boxes, John followed and waited for Harry to catch up.

“Didn’t think we’d see you here,” he said, trying to keep his voice from being too cold.

“You really think I’d leave it all to you?” said Harry, and shook her head. “Don’t answer that. I want this to go well, honestly.”

John bit his lip. “I know.”
“I don’t want to be on camera,” said Harry. “But I can’t let you do this alone.”

John nodded, briskly. “All right. The director’s here, we’re supposed to get a briefing on what’s going to happen, and sign all the paperwork and whatnot.”

Harry let out a breath. “Okay. Let’s get it over with.”

“Harry.” John caught his sister by the arm. Harry looked back at him; something in her eyes caught John’s attention. Not fear or courage bolstered by drink. Not even grim resignation or half-hearted cheer. Just resolution and determination, and John began to think that maybe the week wouldn’t be so bad after all. "Thanks."

"Yeah, well," said Harry, suddenly uncomfortable. "Someone's got to charm this Holmes bloke, or he'll really plaster us as the worst fools in all of England. And you're bollocks with flirting."

John rolled his eyes. "No, really. Thanks."

"Don't suppose he's half bad, even if he's got a penis," mused Harry. "I might be able to ignore that."

"You can stop now," said John.

"Not really, no," said Harry, and went into the restaurant.

John groaned and threw his head back with another deep sigh. Across the street, Mrs Hudson looked out the window. She raised her hand in silent greeting and John waved back, hoping he looked a lot calmer than he suddenly felt.

"Boss!"

Artie was hanging out the doorway. John turned to look at him.

"Bloke with the French name says they're ready for you."

"Great," said John. "Let's get this over with."

*

"So," said Greg Lestrade as he straddled one of the chairs in the dining room. The employees of the Empire were sitting in a semi-circle facing him, some vaguely interested but trying not to look it (Artie), some with absolutely petrified expressions on their faces (Molly). John hoped he was somewhere in between the two of them.

"First, I want to thank you on behalf of the studio for agreeing to put yourselves and your business on the line for us. We know you're taking a huge risk by putting yourselves in the public eye, and we understand that you're going to have doubts, assuming you haven't had them already."

"Or having them now," muttered Harry, and Greg turned to smile at her.

"And that's fine. We're going to do our best to make sure you and the Empire come out looking good at the end of this week. We want the audience to root for you. Even Sherlock wants the audience to root for you, no matter what he says or does while he's here."

"When—" John's throat was dry, and the word was hardly a whisper. He swallowed and tried again. "When does he get here?"
"Later. I can't give you an exact time, because we like to keep that spontaneous, but he'll arrive sometime before the dinner rush."

There was a snort from someone; John thought it might have been Artie, but he wasn't sure.

"Hardly a 'rush,'" Artie told Greg.

Greg glanced down at his clipboard. "Average five tables on a Thursday night?"

"Hardly average, more like if we're very lucky," said Harry dryly.

"That's fine. That's why we're here." Greg cleared his throat. "I'm not going to lie to you. This week is going to suck. I'm assuming you've all seen the show, you know what Sherlock is like. He's going to come in, you're going to feed him, and he's going to dissect every little detail about this place and yourselves and explain to you why you're all crap and ought to throw in the towel and shop yourselves out as street-sweepers because you can't make it as so much as a dishwasher."

"Speak for yourself, I wash a mean dish," said Artie, but John heard the quaver behind the brave front.

"But then," continued Greg, as if he hadn't heard Artie, which only made John like Greg a little more, "he's going to show you how to put yourselves back together. And if you do everything he says, exactly the way he says it, it'll work. I've worked with him for five years. He's an absolute bastard but he's a great man and he can help you turn the Empire around and make this place a money-maker."

The dining room was silent; John didn't even dare breathe. Greg looked at each of them in turn; they stared back, as if waiting for benediction.

"I know you're scared. I'd be scared, too, if my dirty laundry was about to be aired on the telly. But it'll be okay. You signed up for this. Clearly you're a brave bunch. Stick together, be there for each other, keep an open mind, a sense of humor, and you'll come out all right in the end."

"Okay," whispered Molly, her voice trembling but strong, and John reached over to grab her hand and squeeze it hard.

“And as much as possible,” continued Greg, “try not to punch him.”

It was going to be a good day. Even if it killed him.

*  

God, he was bored.

Sherlock Holmes lay across the backseat of the studio-provided limo, his head on one end of the seat while his absurdly long legs were propped up at an angle, bare feet against the window pane. The car hurtled along the countryside (53 miles per hour along the A13, slightly above the speed limit, but still well within the rate of the rest of the traffic and not posing a hazard, unless a traffic officer noticed his feet and assumed he wasn’t wearing his seat belt. Which he wasn’t, but Sherlock was quicker with his fingers than a traffic officer was on his feet). The radio played Mozart. Sherlock moved his fingers automatically to follow the chords, despite his violin being back in London, and worked over the conversation he’d had with Lestrade that morning.

“Do me a favor and actually read this one,” Lestrade had said.
“I don’t read files,” Sherlock replied. He had been in the test kitchen at the studio, comparing the flammability of five different types of flours. So far, the American flour appeared to be oddly flame-resistant, which was at least annoyingly fitting. He would have just enough time to finish the experiment before needing to get on the road.

“It’s not the seafood restaurant in Birmingham.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “Oh my. Did they throw in the towel because of the massive debts incurred by running a seafood restaurant in Birmingham, or because my arrival was imminent?”

“Sherlock,” scolded Lestrade.

“So we’ve moved the seaside chippy up a week. How lovely for them.”

“It’s a new place, Sherlock. Last minute addition to the schedule.”

Sherlock paused. “Where?”

“Kent.”

“Excellent. An extra hour and a half to finish here.”

“Just read the file,” said Lestrade, and his tone was as near to pleading as Sherlock had ever heard it. “This one’s important.”

“They’re all important, Lestrade,” said Sherlock tersely. “Each one is someone’s hopes and dreams and the livelihood of half a dozen people who desperately need a job and believe that this is what they’re meant to do. This restaurant is no more important than any other – except, perhaps, to the fools who have run it into the ground and expect me to come in as their savior.”

“You know perfectly well I’m not talking about the restaurant.”

“Then I have no idea why you persist in talking, since the only important thing is the restaurant.”

“Oh, is that the party line these days? So glad to hear you’re back on track in terms of focus.”

Sherlock ignored him, and set fire to the next flour sample.

“Keep on doing that, Sherlock. Focus on the restaurant. You can’t afford another situation like at the Norbury Arms. Not with the studio heads on the budget-cutting warpath.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Sherlock calmly as he measured the heat and size of the flour-induced flames.

“Just be in the car on time today, all right? It’s coming up on the weekend, traffic out of London is going to be a nightmare if you wait too long.”

Traffic out of London proper had been horrendous, but once out of town, it flowed so well that Sherlock could use the bumps on the road as meter for playing the invisible violin. The file that Lestrade had left on the counter in the test kitchen remained on the counter in the test kitchen, unopened. Sherlock didn’t need it – in fact, he rather relished the idea of coming in completely blind. He hadn’t operated completely blind in years. He didn’t even know the name of the restaurant, which surely would have told him what sort of food to expect.

Much better to determine it all on the ground. It would be an interesting culinary and reactionary test, the sort he hadn’t had in the four years since he’d signed the contract for Restaurant
Reconstructed. And really, the entire show had been something of a lark. He’d always been able to go into a restaurant and tell the staff exactly what they needed to do to improve, and because he had his own string of restaurants and books, they’d listened to him. They’d all been small tweaks, of course – Sherlock rarely visited a restaurant that hadn’t been vetted by three or four of his own staff – but after a while, he gained a reputation within the food service community of being a guru when it came to restaurant management.

Perhaps he was. Sherlock didn’t much care for the title, couldn’t have cared less about the adulation, but he found that he rather enjoyed the challenge of determining what wasn’t quite right. Often it wasn’t what the owners or chefs had already determined to be wrong.

To his surprise, this continued with the show. He would rather have thought that any idiot with a restaurant would have at least known to keep a clean kitchen. Yet they always showed such surprise when he pointed out the grease splatters, the half-decayed chicken bones, and the refuse spilling out onto the scullery floor.

It was tedious, really, telling boring people how to fix their boring restaurants, and then having his advice be ignored. The reviews for the show were excellent, and his colleagues knew he spoke the truth when he tried to fix a failing restaurant. He’d made a career out of it, completely by accident. But watching fools bungle the business drove him mental, which in turns fueled his anger and caused him to let out the ripping deductions and insults that made his viewers squeal in glee. The public ate up every episode; there was always a small spike in book sales the day after one aired, not to mention the number of bookings at the restaurants.

It might have been worth it, if the restaurants he tried to help actually went on to do well. But that was the worst part: they didn’t. Most of the restaurants in the first series had folded already. A quarter of the restaurants from the second were within six months of failure, and only two or three could be said to be doing really well. Most often, the owners had shown a modicum of sense and had sold the restaurant to someone else, who used the somewhat notoriety of being one of Sherlock Holmes’s pet projects to revamp themselves and succeed under someone else’s tutelage.

The real problem was most of the restaurant owners Sherlock worked with didn’t have the necessary imagination to run a restaurant successfully, or the guts to implement what little they might have possessed. Without imagination or nerve, none of them could possibly succeed on their own, and Sherlock couldn’t look over their shoulders forever.

Except for the Norbury Arms, and Irene Adler, and a week which Sherlock had every intention of deleting from his memory. Once he was done with remembering it, anyway. For now, he kept it locked up safe in a convenient cupboard in his memory palace, and every so often took it out and examined it, trying to determine where it had all gone so inconveniently pear-shaped.

The Mozart ended, and, after a brief pause, switched to Handel. Sherlock groaned.

“Please, God, not the Handel!” he shouted, and the driver of the car reached over to skip the song on the CD. Rachmaninoff filled the car with dour notes.

“Why do you even have it on here, you always skip it,” she complained, glancing back at him in the rear view mirror.

“Because you like it.”

“I never listen to it, you always skip it!”

“Surely there are times when you’re in the car without me, Sally.”
“Yeah, and I listen to the radio. Not your poncy instrumental nonsense.”

“We’ve forty-five minutes left in our journey. Please try to refrain from insulting me or my musical selections for forty-four minutes of it.”

“Berk,” said Sally, and turned up the volume.

Sherlock curled his toes against the glass. “Have you been to Kent, Sally?”

“Yeah, that restaurant two years ago. Rained the whole time. Did you forget?”

“What restaurant?”

“Don’t tell me you deleted it! It was awful, some kind of vegan power-bar nutritional nonsense. I think they closed three months later.”

“I delete the closures. I have you to remind me of them.”

“Of course you do,” sighed Sally.

“Let’s hope this isn’t the same establishment.”

“Some historical location, I think.”

Sherlock frowned. “Don’t tell me, you’ll take all the fun out of it.”

“All right, I won’t tell you.”

“The historical ones are the worst,” added Sherlock. “Owners so impressed with their own longevity that they won’t be made to see reason. Menus full of aspics and heavy cream sauces and sticky toffee pudding that is neither sticky nor toffee.”

“Don’t knock the sticky toffee, it’s my favorite.”

“Lovely. You can have mine.”

“Nigella called me the other day.”

“Of course, she only calls you when I’m being particularly annoying.”

“I’m serious.”

“How much did she offer you this time?”

“I told her I wasn’t interested. That I actually enjoyed carting around a toffee-nosed berk with an ego larger than the Isle of Wight, and in no universe would the prospect of flying to fantastic location shoots in America and Ireland ever possibly lure me away from the glamour that is sleeping in two-bit hotel rooms and eating substandard fare which is my current life.”

“I’ll double it.”

“That’s not the point, Sherlock.”

“Then do enlighten me, Sally. I can’t see you when you’re driving and I’m doing my best to ignore you.”

“Save it for the cameras, Sherlock,” said Sally. “That’s all I’m saying. Save your vitriol for the
cameras, because it’s wasted on me. Cop.”

Sherlock clicked the seat belt around his waist. Sally continued to drive.

After a few moments, Sherlock spoke again. “Honestly, Sally. That was really rather childish.”

“I know,” said Sally, cheerfully, and kept driving.

Sherlock unfastened the seat belt and went back to thinking. Historical restaurants truly were the worst of the bunch; he tried to only work with one or two per series. The really despicable part was that the audience, which would naturally want to root for the restaurant, would become twice as invested if the restaurant had some kind of history to it, but Sherlock knew that the longer a restaurant survived, the less its history meant anything. No restaurant could remain stagnant and expect to survive; owners changed, chefs changed, times and tastes changed. Yet to the public, longevity always won out against common sense.

Sherlock sighed. Bored bored 
bored. He dropped one hand down to the floor, and his fingers landed on a pen. Idly, he picked it up and twirled it around, before switching it to the other hand, and began to stab the back of the seat with it.

“Bored, bored, bored,” he chanted, stabbing the fabric with each word.

Sally let out a squawk. “Sherlock Holmes, stop defacing studio property.”

“Bored,” repeated Sherlock. He finished the circle and gave it a cursory look, before clicking the pen open and drawing in two eyes and a smiling mouth.

“I signed for this car! I’m responsible for it!”

“I’ll pay for the repair,” said Sherlock, unrepentant, and he dropped the pen back to the floor.

“You bloody well will,” snorted Sally, and she turned the car off the highway.

Sherlock sat up instantly, looking around. “We’re there.”

“Yes,” said Sally.

“Wonderful,” said Sherlock. “Here we go again.”
Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

\[\text{I hate making TV documentaries.}\]

\[--\text{Jamie Oliver}\]

John couldn’t decide if knowing that Sherlock Holmes would be at the restaurant before the end of the day was a good thing or not. On one hand, it was somewhat comforting to know that within the next eight hours, the first day would be over and the Empire would be on its (painful, rocky, angst-and emotion-ridden) way back to solvency. On the other, the anticipation was killing him. Every time the front door opened, he felt his heart leap into his throat while his stomach dropped into his shoes, and he was too scared to even go and take a piss for fear that Sherlock would come into the restaurant halfway through.

“John,” said Harry from the bar. “\textit{Stop. Pacing.}”

“Can’t,” said John shortly, and leaned even more heavily on his cane.

“Then pace outside,” said Harry impatiently. “Or every time you walk another circuit, I’m going to have a shot of vodka.”

John glared at her. “Why are you behind the bar, anyway? I’m the one with the bloody cane, and you’re the alcoholic. I should be pouring the drinks and you should be seating the customers.”

“You’re nervous.”

“Too bloody right,” snapped John, and went back to pacing. He pulled up short when he saw Harry threaten to pour a shot, and he stared at the bottle, working his jaw, before sitting down with a thump on the bar stool.

“Two,” he said, and Harry lifted an eyebrow before pouring out two shots. John picked up one and held it up, waiting for her to clink her glass to his, and they both downed the shots simultaneously.

“It’s empty,” said Harry, coming up from the shot. “We should have asked people to come in and comped their meals, just so we didn’t look so pathetic.”

“Sarah offered,” said John glumly.

“You turned her \textit{down}?”

“Of course I turned her down, we might be that pathetic but I’m not going to admit it to her.”

“Fuck me,” said Harry, bolstered by the vodka, and she lunged for the phone. “I’ll be that pathetic, what’s her number?”

They scuffled over the phone, and after a moment, Harry gave up and looked longingly at the vodka bottle again.

“No, Harry,” said John automatically. “Then we really \textit{would} be pathetic.”

“Why do they call it Dutch courage, anyway?” asked Harry. “I never thought of the Dutch as a
particularly lushy lot.”

John didn’t have a chance to answer; the bell on the door rang as it opened, and he sprang to his feet, clutching the cane.

*It’s him.*

John didn’t know how he knew; the sunlight streaming in from outside made identification all but impossible, but John didn’t think it could possibly be anyone else. He wanted to glance at the camera installed in the corner, to see if the red light was on, indicating the camera was recording, but he couldn’t take his eyes off the tall, thin figure in the doorway. And then the figure stepped forward and the door shut behind him, and he walked into the dining room, looking around. Without the backlight of the sun, it became all too obvious that their expected customer had arrived.

“Hello,” said John, hoping his voice didn’t squeak. “Welcome to the Empire, Mr Holmes.”

“Sherlock, please,” said the man absently. He turned in slow circles, looking at the items on the walls, the fabric hanging in curtains, and finally resting on the quartet of portraits along the back wall. “Rather dark for lunch. The last redecoration was in 1983, wasn’t it? A fire in the kitchen, nothing that wasn’t extinguished fairly quickly or anything to cause structural damage, but caused a great deal of smoke which required replacement of the curtains.”

Harry and John glanced at each other; Harry’s eyebrows were already halfway up into her forehead.

“Er – yeah. My mum spent weeks trying to match the color. How—?”

“She did admirably, but it’s still rather obvious. These would be your father and grandfathers, I take it?”

“Yes,” said John, and walked over to join the man. Sherlock was younger in person than he seemed on the television screen; John wondered if it was makeup or lighting that accentuated the lines around his mouth or his eyes. But then, youth probably took away from the authoritative demeanor he was meant to have. Perhaps the reason so many of the restaurant owners and chefs were unwilling to implement his suggestions was because they were getting them from someone who barely looked old enough to have a mortgage.

Young, and not bad-looking, either, thought John. The purple shirt looked good on him, and John could tell how curly his hair was up close. He even looked taller in person, and John straightened up, somewhat conscious of his height. He pointed to the portraits of his father, and then his grandfathers in turn. “My dad, Hamish Watson. His father, James – he’s the one who opened the Empire in 1949. And then there’s the two Johns – John Watson, my great-grandfather, and his dad, John H. Watson.”

Sherlock nodded. “Then you would be some derivative of either James or John, I take it?”


“Patterns,” said Sherlock thoughtfully, and turned to look at John properly for the first time. “The name is Sherlock Holmes.” He stretched out his hand to shake, and John took it.

“John Watson,” said John, and gave Sherlock’s hand a brief shake. It was warm and dry, and felt oddly comfortable around John’s hand. John had the idea that Sherlock was sizing him up, but instead of feeling irritated, he waited patiently, and looked back without blinking. Finally, Sherlock
quirked his lips with a glance down at their clasped hands. John let go, self-conscious again. “You’ve met the Empire’s patriarchs; would you like to meet the rest of the staff?”

“Nothing would give me more pleasure,” said Sherlock, and John tried not to grin. He felt a little bit silly, play-acting for the camera in the corner, and when he glanced over, he saw Lestrade offer a thumbs up.

“Come on back, then,” said John. He led Sherlock into the kitchen, where Anderson was already waiting with another camera on his shoulder to supplement the three installed the day before. John prayed that the kitchen was still in reasonably decent order, and mostly, it was. Artie leaned in the doorway to the annex, chatting up Molly and laughing at some kind of joke, and Mary was perched up on the corner table, folding napkins again. She hopped off with a blush the moment she saw John enter the room, and tried to look innocent while he glared at her sternly. John was more worried about Molly, who was busy trying to look busy as she chopped an onion.

“Hi,” she squeaked, which made John feel marginally better for himself, and a lot worse for Molly, who turned bright red.

“Hello,” said Sherlock with a smile, and something about his low tone clearly put Molly at ease; her manic grin calmed down immediately to something a little less rabid, and she wiped her hands on her apron and reached out to take his offered hand. “And you are—?”

“Molly Hooper,” said Molly.

“The chef?” prompted Sherlock.

“Oh! Yes!” Molly rose up on her toes. “That’s me. The chef. I do the cooking.”

“I should hope so,” said Sherlock, looking around the kitchen. “I’m Sherlock Holmes, I’m here to do the eating.”

“I’m Artie,” said the boy from where he was leaning against the doorframe to the annex. “I’m here to wash the dishes. And be famous on the telly.”

“And this is Mary, she’s our waitress,” said John.

Mary grinned, not so widely as Artie, but confident in a way that John envied.

Sherlock shook Mary’s hand. “Just you, for twenty tables?”

“Well, it’d be more difficult if they were all full,” said Mary, and then glanced at John. “Oops. Should I have said that?”

“It’s all right,” John told her. “That’s why he’s here.”

“So I understand you’re to feed me lunch today?”
Molly nodded enthusiastically. “I’m all ready – what would you like to eat?”

Sherlock turned his gaze back to her. And then he smiled – a thousand watts, aimed directly at Molly, and even though John was on the sidelines and not in its direct path, he felt something inside him lurch. Bloody hell, he thought, and wanted to dive into the walk-in just to start digging for scallops wrapped in gold leaf and served on a bed of edible roses.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare presume – why don’t you bring me your best things, and I’ll come back when I’m done?” said Sherlock, and his purr sounded almost cheerful and friendly.

Molly’s eyes widened. “Oh…okay. Right away!”

“Excellent, looking forward to it,” said Sherlock, and he turned away to head back into the dining room.

John stayed behind, just a moment, and watched as Molly practically fell to pieces in front of him.

“Oh God,” she whimpered, and John limped past the warming table and took her by the shoulder.

“It’ll be fine,” he comforted her. “It’s just lunch. You can do this, Moll.”

“Course you can,” said Artie, unusually helpful. “What’s he, some rock-star celebrity bloke who’s going to put us all on telly and expose us to public ridicule? He still drops his pants when he goes to the loo.”

“Shut it, Artie,” said John, without looking away from Molly’s face. But Molly had already started to giggle, though whether it was out of nerves or amusement, he wasn’t sure. “Focus, Molly. What are you going to give him?”

“Salad,” said Molly, and took a deep breath. “And the chicken, and I thought the pan noodles? And…tiramisu, for dessert?”

“Bread first,” said Artie, and Molly nodded.

“Sound delicious, he’ll love it,” said John, and he gave Molly’s arm a slightly harder tap than he’d intended, and went back out to the dining room, only dimly aware of Anderson following him, the camera still recording.

Shite. This is really happening, isn’t it? There’s a bloke with a camera following my every move and in a few months, we’re all going to be on bloody television.

Sherlock had chosen a table near the front of the room, not next to the window, but a row back, close enough to still catch the light coming in, but not so close that he’d be susceptible to onlookers from the road. It was a wise choice, thought John, and he was even facing the windows, which meant the portraits were right over his shoulder, looking on. Lestrade was already sitting opposite him, chatting and going over some paperwork; John wondered if they were strategizing for their eventual plans for the restaurant – could Sherlock already have ideas? It took every ounce of willpower not to try wandering over to eavesdrop.

Anderson walked past John, dropping the camera to his side, and went to reposition the main camera so that it would record Sherlock as he ate. John watched him maneuver the camera and the accompanying equipment around the tables, and was beginning to wonder if he should offer to help when a voice at his elbow made him jump.

“Hi.”
John nearly fell into nearest table. “Sorry, didn’t know there was someone else,” he apologized, and turned to see a black woman with tight, curly hair standing at his side.

“S’alright, I didn’t mean to startle you,” said the woman, and she reached to shake his hand. “Sally Donovan, I’m the AD. Anyone who tells you I’m Sherlock’s dogsbody, you can pop ’em over the head with that cane of yours, I’d appreciate it.”

John chuckled. “John Watson, I’m the co-owner of the Empire. We’re glad he could make it.”

“So’s he, if he could stop to think about it, but catch him admitting it,” said Sally. “Here, I’ve got the schedule for the next few days, now’s a good time to go over it, while Greg and Sherlock are doing their confab.”

“Ah – I should really get them something to drink first—”

But Sally shook her head. “No, wait until Anderson’s set up, he’ll want to get any interactions with Sherlock on film. We won’t use half of them, but we’d rather have them just in case.” Sally grinned. “What if you tripped and spilled a glass of water on him? Shame to miss that.”

“Ah,” said John, and his eyes went wide. He started tapping his cane absently on the floor, imagining it. “Shite.”

Sally glanced at the cane, and her own eyes went wide. “Oh. Oh. Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s fine,” said John, distracted. “Mary does the serving.”

“Right,” said Sally. “Sorry. Here, do you want to sit down?”

John bristled a little at the insinuation, but pulled a nearby chair out anyway. “Wait – I’m sorry, should I have Molly prepare something for you as well? I should have thought—”

But Sally shook her head. “No, it’s fine. We’re all working, we wouldn’t have time to eat anything more than a quick sandwich, and I don’t think that’s the sort of food you’re serving. Okay, so today is all about first impressions – Sherlock will have lunch, and then he’ll come back and chat with you and your chef – Molly, right? – and that’ll be it. We’re going to take him out and do some establishing shots around town with him. Tomorrow we’ll come back and it’ll be about observation – Sherlock’s going to want to watch you during a regular day, see what’s going on in the front and back of house. No interference. I understand you’re having problems getting customers in the door?”

“Right,” said John.

“Well, we’re going to take care of that for you a little bit – we’ve sent out invitations to a few groups inviting them to come and eat here.”

“I’ve seen those nights,” said John. “Where people wait up to two hours for a glass of water? Who really wants to accept those invitations?”

Sally laughed. “You’d be surprised how many people jump at the chance to pay for a meal when it means they’ll be on telly in exchange. It’s all about bragging rights. We’ll make them sign waivers asking for confidentiality until the show airs, and half of them will keep their own notes so they can blog about it later.”

John didn’t doubt it. “What happens then?”
Sally shrugged. “Well, the third day is when the real work begins. It’s a bit touch-and-go at that point. Depends on what Sherlock decides at the end of the night, if it’s a problem with the food or the staff or the location or the décor. We try to play it by ear. One thing’s for sure, small town like this one, you’re not going to lack for customers over the next few days, everyone’s going to want a chance to eat here, just so they can say they did, and try to get a glimpse of his highness over there.”

John glanced back at Sherlock, who was already making notes in a large Moleskine notebook, nodding while Lestrade talked to him, and every so often looking up to make a point of his own. After another minute, Lestrade stood up and left the table, going over to the window where he could watch but not be seen by the camera. Anderson looked up and gave Sally a thumbs-up.

“That’s your cue,” said Sally. “Well, Mary’s cue, anyway.”

“Right,” said John and stood up, shaking a little bit. “You’ve done these shows for four years now, right?”

Sally smiled. “I don’t need to be Sherlock Holmes to know what you’re going to ask. Yes, this is the moment where every single owner has started to question their sanity.”

“Glad to hear it,” said John, and exhaled.

“Hey,” said Sally suddenly. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” said John, and went to tell Mary that it was time for service to begin.

*

Transcript
The Empire, Upper Brickley, Kent
Proposed Air Date: March 27, 2010

[Establishing shot: Kent countryside. It’s idyllic and lovely, with green fields and gently bubbling brooks. Through the voice over, the countryside slowly morphs into something more urban, gradually focusing in on the town of Upper Brickley, Kent, and its streets, storefronts, and residents.]

SHERLOCK VOICE OVER: Everything has a shelf-life. With enough time, even a Kendal Mint Cake will grow stale, to the point that no one will want to eat it anymore, including the cockroach. Of course, there are always those who claim that they’d eat the mint cake after a few decades, but then, they’re the ones who would have been willing to eat it in the first place, so you may take their opinions accordingly.

[Establishing shot: The Empire, exterior.]

SHERLOCK V.O. cont.: The Empire is hardly the culinary world’s answer to the Kendal Mint cake, but it’s certainly outlived its shelf-life. Established in 1949 in Upper Brickley, Kent, just outside of Canterbury, by former Naval officer James Watson, against advice from all his friends for actually daring to open a restaurant at the height of rationing, the Empire was a pioneer in its day of hearty ethnic cuisine, the first of its kind in a fifty-mile radius. For many Kentish folk, the Empire provided the first exposure to food outside of the normal British fare of meat and potatoes.

[INTERIOR, The Empire. Shots of James Watson, the empty dining room, the various paintings and photographs that line the walls.]
SHERLOCK V.O. cont.: But the world has grown smaller, and now ethnic restaurants, real ethnic restaurants, dot the high streets in Upper Brickley and its neighbors.

[EXTERIOR, Quick shots of the various Thai, Indian, Indonesian, Chinese, Peruvian, etc. restaurants, all bustling and busy.]

SHERLOCK V.O. cont.: It shouldn’t be a surprise to anyone that The Empire’s time has passed. Except, of course, it is a surprise to those who own it and are unwilling to recognize that all curtains fade, all fads pass. All empires fall. And all restaurants, eventually, close.

[EXTERIOR, Sherlock standing in the center of the road just outside the Empire, staring directly at the camera, hands in his pockets. There’s a good wind blowing so that his coat billows behind him, and the pavement and cobblestones on the road are glistening; dark clouds overhead. It is clearly meant to be an extremely sexy shot, and it works.]

SHERLOCK V.O. cont.: Insert your own tortured metaphor about empires, suns, and what must rise and fall. I’ve got a restaurant to save.

[TITLES: RESTAURANT RECONSTRUCTED]

[SHERLOCK HOLMES]

[Smash cut: INTERIOR: The Empire. The dining room is empty. In the back, a man is at the bar. The bottles clink as he rearranges them.]

[Smash cut: INTERIOR: The Empire kitchen. Close-up on an onion being chopped, somewhat roughly, and the knife slips, comes a bit too close to the fingers holding the vegetable.]

MOLLY HOOPER: Ouch. That was close.

[Smash cut: INTERIOR: The Empire dining room. The man behind the bar has stopped rearranging bottles, and is now sitting on one of the stools, his head against the wall, staring up at the ceiling. He’s not all that old, but there’s a cane resting against the wall nearby. Slowly, he starts banging his head against the wall, probably out of boredom.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: The Empire is now owned by James Watson’s grandchildren, Harriet and John, but the restaurant has been in a slow decline for the better part of two decades. It’s only in the last few years that things have been extremely dire.

[Smash cut: EXTERIOR: Sherlock walks up to the Empire, pushes the door, and enters.]

[Smash cut: INTERIOR: Sherlock crosses the dining room and is greeted by the man, who has gotten to his feet.]

*

John Watson was not unfamiliar with pressured situations. Nor was he a stranger to stress. First in medical school, when he’d been studying emergency medicine, and speed and accuracy went hand in hand, John had excelled, never once dropping a bedpan or missing a stitch or worse yet, forgetting a diagnosis. Later, in basic training, he’d done his pushups and laps and chin-ups with the best of them, while the sergeants shouted abuse. He’d even tromped through the mud and the rain with good graces. It was enough to make the rest of his unit hate him, except that no one actually hated John Watson, because he was friendly and affable enough and never actually lorded over anyone that he was, in fact, better than they were, mostly because he never really believed he was.
John didn’t mind the really wretched parts of medical school or the Army, because he’d grown up washing dishes for hours on end, and in his mind, there wasn’t much worse that a person could do. Mud could wash off; bedpans made a racket but the mess could be cleaned up. Dishpan hands were forever, especially when they were six days a week.

But sitting in the back of the Empire’s dining room, watching the cameras roll while Anderson made adjustments and Lestrade spoke to Sherlock in between courses – John found that he couldn’t sit still. Harry had long since fled, John had no idea where, and the first time that John saw Mary fleeing the table for the safety of the kitchen, sans bread basket, he’d decided he couldn’t sit another minute and watch the destruction.

As soon as Lestrade looked in his direction, John gave a little wave. The man came over a few minutes later.

“I’m not on camera, am I?” asked John.

Lestrade frowned. “Did you sign the release?”

“Yes, but that’s not what I meant. If I – ah—”

Lestrade grinned. “Scarper? Don’t go far, he’ll want a word when he’s done.”

John nodded, and hoped his retreat was more dignified than Mary’s.

The kitchen was in upheaval. Molly was wailing over the range, while Mary beat Artie about the head with a dishtowel.

“Oh my fucking Christ,” groaned John. “Do I even want to know?”

“I burned the chicken!” wailed Molly.

“I tried to tell you!” yelped Artie from under the dishtowel.

“Go back to the annex and stay there,” said Mary, hitting Artie anew with each word.

John grabbed the nearest wooden spoon and began to bang it on the warming table. “CHILDREN!” he yelled, and the shouting stopped. John dropped the spoon at glared at them. “Mary. Are we giving him salad or soup?”

“Salad.”

“Wonderful. Prep it.”

Mary scurried to the walk-in.

“How burnt is the chicken?”

“Not much,” said Molly.

“Charcoal,” said Artie helpfully.

“How long for a new one?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Plenty of time. Do it.”
Molly sniffed, and reached into the freezer drawer.

“Artie. Is there anything, anything, in this building that you could possibly be doing other than standing in this room right now? And please for the love of Christ don’t tell me what it is, but just answer in the affirmative.”

“Sure, boss.”

“As long as it doesn’t involve the dining room or the kitchen, go and do it and don’t show your face until there are dishes to wash.”

“Bollocks, I’m out of yoghurt,” said Molly, peering up at her mise-en-place.

“It’s Omani chicken, you don’t need yoghurt.”

“Then I’m out of cream!”

“You don’t need – oh, fine.” John gave up on Molly and went to join Mary in the walk-in. The moment the door shut behind him, however, Mary was on him, trapping him against the door. John let out a surprised squawk.

“You can make that noise?” asked Mary, bemused.

“Mary, what the bloody fuck?”

“The Army has not improved your language,” said Mary.

“Mary.”

“You know what else the Army didn’t improve? Your flirtation technique.”

John stared at Mary. “I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

“Flirtation,” said Mary. “It’s when one person who likes another person sidles up to them and participates in playful banter to show interest. You and I used to do it nearly all the time, and as I recall you were smashing at it. Granted, we were usually talking about ridiculous things, like the weather or how many people ask for a second basket of bread but never actually eat it, but I don’t know, it could work when talking about great-great-grandfathers.”

John stared at Mary, mouth agape.

“Close your mouth, you look like a codfish,” said Mary.

“You honestly think I was flirting with Sherlock Holmes?”

“He is rather dishy,” said Mary. “How’d it go? Do you think he was interested? ‘Cause if not, can I have a go?”

“No!”

“So he was interested?”

“No!”

“And you don’t know whether or not to be insulted or relieved,” said Mary thoughtfully. “Interesting. Yoghurt’s on the right-hand side.”
“How do you know—?”

“Oh, please,” scoffed Mary. “You’re blocking the door.”

John ducked under Mary’s arms and marched to the yoghurt. By the time he returned to the kitchen, Mary had already disappeared.

“Where’s Mary?” he asked Molly, still annoyed.

“Salad course,” said Molly.

“What salad?”

“Russian herring.”

John froze. “Oh, God. Why?”

Molly burst into tears.

“Oh, for—” groaned John, and fled.

* *

John found Harry in the alley behind the restaurant. She was smoking a cigarette, and when she saw John, she tried to hide it behind her back.

“Oh, give over,” sighed John, and leaned against the wall next to her.

Harry waited a moment, and then reached into her pocket and handed the pack to John.

“Coward,” said Harry.

“Yes,” said John, and lit the cigarette.

* *

[INTERIOR, The Empire dining room. Sherlock sits at a table, taps his pencil in a rhythmic pattern. Behind him, we see the four portraits of the Empire patriarchs. The door to the kitchen opens, and a waitress comes out. She’s in her late 20s, blonde hair pulled back in a short, curly ponytail, and she wears a bright, cheerful, brave expression. She’s carrying a tray with a glass of water and a basket of bread. Her name, we’ll learn later, is MARY MORSTAN.]

MARY: Water, twist of lemon, and one of our bread baskets.

SHERLOCK: Thank you. Can you tell me about the bread?

MARY: Sure! It’s pretty straight forward. Brown, white, and breadsticks.

[SHERLOCK looks at MARY and blinks slowly. MARY winks.]

MARY: So the white bread is naan, it’s a traditional flatbread found in much of the East. We’ve studded ours with sesame seeds—

SHERLOCK: So it’s made on premises.

MARY: Well, no, not exactly…
SHERLOCK: And the brown?

MARY: A Russian sweetbread. It’s technically more of a dessert bread, but everyone kept demanding it before the meal—

[SHERLOCK glances pointedly around the empty dining room.]

SHERLOCK: Everyone?

MARY: Well, when it was first put on the menu.

SHERLOCK: Which was…

MARY: In 1957.

SHERLOCK: Right. What about the breadsticks?

MARY: Oh, they’re just breadsticks.

SHERLOCK: Ah.

MARY: They’re really good breadsticks, though.

SHERLOCK: I’m sure.

[MARY doesn’t move; neither does SHERLOCK. Instead they just kind of look at each other for a moment.]

MARY: I’ll just go back into the kitchen now, shall I?

SHERLOCK: Please do.

[MARY flees. SHERLOCK picks up a breadstick, eyes it suspiciously, sighs, and goes for the naan instead. He takes a bit, mouths it a little, and swallows with a shrug.]

SHERLOCK: Mostly tasteless. I’m not sure why the sesame seeds are added, perhaps for additional roughage?

[He takes a drink of water and then goes for the Russian bread. He spits it out almost immediately.]

SHERLOCK: Good God. When did she say this was put on the menu? I think it was baked at the same time.

SHERLOCK V.O.: The Kendal Mint cake would be an improvement.

[Smash cut: INTERIOR, Empire Kitchen. MARY enters.]

MOLLY: Well?

MARY: I don’t think he has a sense of humor.

MOLLY: You didn’t try to flirt with him?

MARY: Well, he’s cute.

MOLLY: He’s a psychopath.
ARTIE: Molly, the psychopath’s chicken is burning.

MOLLY: Shite!

[Cut to: INTERIOR, Dining room. MARY delivers the first course to Sherlock.]

MARY: Russian Herring Salad.

SHERLOCK: Oh, more Russian dishes.

MARY: It’s very popular.

SHERLOCK: In 1957?

MARY: Uh…

SHERLOCK: (pointedly) Thank you.

MARY: You’re welcome.

[MARY flees. You can practically see her ponytail go horizontal with the speed of her retreat. Sherlock eyes the salad. He eyes it so dramatically that he’s practically even with it.]

[The camera angle changes. Now we’re eyeing the salad, too. It’s…intriguing. And layered with contrasting colored items. It’s kind of frightening, in a Technicolor sort of way.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: There are times when I very much wish I had gone into another line of work entirely. Solving crimes, for instance. Such as The Mystery of Whoever Thought Putting Herrings In a Salad Would Be A Good Idea.

[Back to the original camera angle. Sherlock takes a bite. Well, sort of – he doesn’t even close his mouth around the fork when he takes the food back out, drops it on the plate, and starts chugging his water.]

SHERLOCK: Bloody hell.

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. Mary peeks through the window into the dining room.]

MOLLY: Well?

MARY: Well. I think he’s ready for the next course.

[INTERIOR, Dining room. Mary delivers the next course. There’s a rather sad looking chicken breast sitting atop a somewhat shiny-looking mound of white potatoes, mashed to a fare-thee-well, with faded yellow and green discs on the side. A lonesome sprig of parsley is set into the potatoes, as if they’re wearing a hat.]

MARY: Omani Chicken and Tomatoes, served on a bed of mash with mixed veg on the side.

SHERLOCK: Tomatoes?

MARY: Yes.

SHERLOCK: Where?

MARY: Under the chicken?
SHERLOCK: And mixed veg.

MARY: Yes.

SHERLOCK: Green and yellow courgettes are mixed veg.

MARY: Well…they’re…mixed. Together. And different colors.

SHERLOCK: They’re both courgettes.

MARY: Different colors!

SHERLOCK: Obviously. Thank you!

[MARY flees. The ponytail is definitely horizontal.]

SHERLOCK: Oh dear oh dear oh dear.

[He toys with the chicken for a moment, looking underneath.]

SHERLOCK: No tomatoes. Left behind in 1957, perhaps.

[He cuts a piece and tries it. He chews. And chews. And chews.]

SHERLOCK: The tomatoes had the right idea. Cooked, then frozen, then cooked again.

[SHERLOCK spits out the chicken, and takes a bite of mash, then spits it out.]

SHERLOCK: Cold.

[On to the veg! Which receives the same fate.]

SHERLOCK: Oily and overseasoned. But the plain naan is looking better and better.

[A quick series of cuts of an overhead of the bread basket. In the first shot, the naan and the breadsticks are largely untouched; with each half-second shot, however, there are bites taken out of both of them, until the only thing that remains in the basket is the Russian bread.]

[INTERIOR, Dining room. MARY delivers another plate, this one piled high with noodles.]

SHERLOCK: Oh, dear, more food.

MARY: Japanese pan-fried noodles.

SHERLOCK: Russian salad, Omani chicken, British mash and veg, and Japanese noodles?

MARY: Yes.

SHERLOCK: Just checking. You can flee now.

[MARY flees.]

SHERLOCK: I can’t wait to see where the pudding is from.

[He takes a bite of the noodles, and his eyes widen in surprise.]

SHERLOCK: Now that’s a surprise.
SHERLOCK V.O.: The Japanese pan-fried noodles are not bad. The noodles aren’t authentic, nor are they freshly made, but the flavor is spot on and well-balanced. I manage to eat four bites.

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. MARY returns with the plate of noodles, barely touched. The door closes behind her, and MOLLY and the dishwasher, ARTIE WIGGINS, stare at her.]

*SHERLOCK chews, swallows – and takes another bite.*

“‘He hates it,‘ said Molly, staring at the plate. ‘Oh my God. He hates it. He hates everything.’

“He ate the naan,” said Mary, but Molly slumped over the kitchen block and covered her head with her arms.

“I don’t think that helped,” said Artie.

“What were you going to give him for pudding?” asked Mary.

“Tiramisu.”

“Well, we’re toast,” said Artie.

“No, we’re not,” said Mary grimly, and she dropped the plate of noodles on the warming table and marched into the kitchen. She picked Molly up by the shoulders and gave her a shake. “There has to be something in this kitchen that is not bloody awful and we can give him for pudding.”

“I’ve got chocolate sauce,” offered Artie. “And whipping cream.”

“Bugger off, Artie.”

“Fine,” said Artie. “It’s just I think those would go really well with the pie in the back of the fridge.”

The kitchen went silent.

“Pie?” asked Mary.

“That’s for later,” sniffed Molly.

Mary’s hands tightened on Molly’s shoulders. “There is pie?”

“Ouch! When was the last time you cut your nails?”


“Chocolate,” said Molly, and her eyes widened. “No. That’s for us, I knew today would be horrible, and I thought we’d need something nice at the end of it—”

“Molly, I love you, now shut up,” said Mary. “Artie. Get the pie. Leave the tiramisu.”

“What about the gun and the cannolis?”

“GET THE PIE, ARTIE.”

*
INTERIOR, Dining room. MARY brings the last course, and if anyone could set a pie down dramatically, she does it. She doesn’t say a word, she just waits.

SHERLOCK: Well?

MARY: Seriously? You can’t figure this one out?

SHERLOCK: It’s a pie.

MARY: Very good! Bon appétit!

MARY does not flee. She practically skips back to the kitchen.

INTERIOR, Kitchen. MARY, MOLLY, and ARTIE are all clustered around the window, looking out into the dining room, jockeying for position.

MARY: Quit it!

ARTIE: Ow, someone’s elbow is in my ribs.

MOLLY: It’s my pie, I should get to watch.

MARY: I SAID QUIT IT!

ARTIE: Your elbow is in my ribs.

SHERLOCK is eyeing the pie. It’s a dark pie, chocolate, with a flaky pastry crust, a dollop of fresh whipped cream sliding off the side, and a swirl of chocolate sauce decorating the plate. It looks... well, appetizing, actually, and SHERLOCK is clearly suspicious.

SHERLOCK: One bite.

He takes a bite, and his eyes widen, just a tiny bit, just for a moment. And then swallows. And then he takes another bite.]

[SPEED UP: SHERLOCK eating the pie.]

[SLOW DOWN: SHERLOCK’S fork scraping against the plate. The pie is gone.]

INTERIOR: Kitchen. MARY, MOLLY and ARTIE spring from the window, scrambling to return to their normal positions. Just as they’re settling themselves into looking nonchalant (and failing miserably), the door to the dining room opens and SHERLOCK comes in, carrying the pie plate.

SHERLOCK: Who made the pie?

MOLLY: Uh. Me.

SHERLOCK: Then who made the rest of the food? The dishwasher?

ARTIE: Oi!

MOLLY: Uh. Still me.

SHERLOCK: You... aren’t lying to me.

MOLLY: No.
Sherlock had met many chefs in the four years he’d been filming Restaurant Reconstructed. Good chefs, bad chefs, neurotic chefs, paranoid chefs, egotistical chefs, self-delusional chefs (who were often the same as the egotistical ones), and even the odd fantastic chef who had no self-confidence whatsoever.

Those were the chefs he pulled aside, off-camera, and told them that yes, he really meant it, when the restaurant folded – because Sherlock Holmes was nothing if not realistic about any restaurant’s chances – to please apply at any of his kitchens. Sometimes they did, and they were always hired on the spot, though not always at the same level they’d expected. No one ever regretted hiring them, and none of the chefs ever regretted the (often temporary) demotion.

But Molly was a different breed of chef altogether, because looking at her, really looking at her, Sherlock realized something.

“Soft hands, lack of calluses, pencil indention on your right forefinger, flushed face, hair falling out of your ponytail, chef’s coat a half size too large, trainers on your feet,” he said, staring at her.

“Dirty sleeves. You’re not a chef at all.”

“I am!” cried Molly, but it was too late. “Well, now!”

“For how long? No, don’t tell me. A month? Two? It’s very recent, this shift. Not even long enough for you to grow out your fringe properly.”

“Almost three,” said Mary, when it became obvious that Molly was preoccupied with trying to fix her hair.

“I thought it was odd, one waitress for twenty tables,” said Sherlock thoughtfully. “That’s what you did before, wasn’t it?”

“I can cook,” said Molly forcefully. “I can.”

“Of course you can cook, any idiot can boil water,” said Sherlock, though he didn’t sound impressed. “And you made the pie. But everything else – the recipes aren’t yours. They weren’t even the previous chef’s, unless the reason he’s no longer here is because he died of old age. Ah – but, no. Too young for that. Don’t tell me the rest, let’s see how I do. Previous chef was taller than you, the shelf for the mise is just a bit too high for you, Molly, you can’t see half of what’s there. He was rather fond of cast-iron and flat wooden spoons. He worked here for seven years, made some small changes to the menu, notably including the sesame seeds on the naan, had a fondness for listening to upbeat instrumental jazz while working, and favored blue Crocs. He wasn’t a smoker, likely wasn’t much of a drinker, though I suspect he’d have a bit of a tipple at the end of the night, not enough to make him drunk or even tipsy, just enough to push through to the end of service and then sleep well once at home. He relied on pasta dishes for your family dinners, boxed pastas but fresh sauces, and you all adored him. How’d I do?”

Artie whistled. “Crikey, mate.”

“Thank you,” said Sherlock Holmes.

Molly sniffed. “I made the pie.”

“Of course you made the pie. It’s written all over you, and it’s not on the menu. I suspect it also wasn’t what you intended to serve me.”
“Tiramisu,” said Mary. “The pie’s better.”

“Thank you,” said Sherlock, without looking at her. “Useful to have a clever and observant waitress. That’s one of the very few points in the Empire’s favor.”

“Cheers,” said Mary. “Mind telling us the rest so we can lick our wounds in peace?”

“The décor is regrettable, the menu is abhorrent, the food is largely inedible. The noodles were passable. The pie was divine.”

“No one for mincing words, are you?” asked Artie dryly.

“Hardly any time for that. Thank you for lunch, ladies and gentleman. I shall see you in the morning.”

Sherlock turned to go, but just as his hand touched the door leading to the dining room, Molly lifted her chin. “You had one thing wrong.”

Sherlock paused and looked over his shoulder. “Oh?”

“The previous chef’s name was Clara.”

Sherlock groaned and threw his head back. “Clara, of course. The chef was female.”

And he left, the door swinging behind him. The moment he was gone, Molly collapsed over the table, and let out a heaving sigh.

“Well,” said Mary, when no one managed to say anything. “That wasn’t completely awful.”

“I don’t think he left a tip,” said Artie.

“Good thing, I’d throw it in his face,” said Mary, and went to put her arm around Molly while she cried. “Come on, sweetie. Sod him, I want some of your delicious pie.”

“Is that lesbian code for something fun?” asked Artie, perking up.

“Sod off, Artie,” said Mary automatically. “And get the whipped cream.”

Chapter End Notes

Recipe for Japanese Pan-Fried Noodles.
Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

Thanks to ladyprydian, who made the Japanese noodles last week and graciously supplied me with a GORGEOUS photograph for it, which you can see here. (She also said they were yummy.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Our first lunch together, in cold, gray December, was at a bistro near the Now offices on the rue Saint-Honore. Seeing boudin blanc listed on the menu, we asked what it was, and the waiter gave us a detailed description of this special holiday sausage made with white poultry meat, veal, cream, and bits of black truffle. We both thought it tasted marvelous, delicate and succulent, and somehow it sealed bond between us. Taste can do that.*

—Judith Jones

John and Harry didn’t realize that filming was over until Artie came out with the rubbish.

“What do you mean, *done*?” demanded John. “Why didn’t anyone come to *get* me?”

“It happened fast, boss! One minute Mary’s giving him pie and the next minute he’s telling us Clara’s whole life story!”


“Molly brought it in for us to eat after service – Mary gave it to Sherlock instead of the tiramisu.”

Harry sat up. “Is there any left?”

“Two pieces,” said Artie, and Harry was off and inside like a shot.

John watched her go. “Pie?”

“It’s really good pie,” said Artie.

“What’d he think of the rest of the meal?”

“Largely awful. He liked the pie, though. He said he’d be back in the morning. I think Molly’s going to try to drown herself in the whipped cream.”

John groaned, and hit the back of his head against the brick wall.

“Don’t do that,” said Artie. “I’ve seen what the rubbish collectors do back here.”

John covered his face with his hands. Artie was probably right, but John didn’t want to move or think too hard about it. “Artie, go away.”

“I can bring you pie.”
“That’d be great, thanks.”

Artie went back into the kitchen; John let out a deep sigh.

Well, it wasn’t as though the news was a surprise. Sherlock Holmes made his living from rebuilding restaurants, and if he had actually liked anything about the Empire (the pie, being Molly’s, didn’t count), then John wouldn’t have needed his help.

But all the same. Knowing it was one thing. Knowing he was going to hear it was something else. Actually hearing that the restaurant was complete crap was a thousand times worse than John had imagined.

“Oh, fuck me,” said John, and dropped his hands to stare Sherlock Holmes in the face. “Oh, fuck. Me.”

“If you insist, but you’ll have to buy me a decent dinner first,” said Sherlock Holmes. The man had the audacity to look comfortable, dressed in clothes that had to cost more than John had earned in half a year in Afghanistan, while standing in a pungent and rather disgusting alleyway. “I’d ask if you knew any good places to eat here, but…well…” He shrugged. “At the moment, your opinion is somewhat suspect as you’re running the worst restaurant in town.”

“Oh,” said John, sitting up. “No one ever said the Empire is the worst restaurant in town.”

“Yes, and your customers are so quick to say otherwise,” countered Sherlock. “On the other hand, I fancy Chinese. There’s a good place in Shappley, I don’t suppose you have a car?”

John began to laugh. “You’re…you’re asking me out?”

“If you like. I’m feeling rather peckish, and Sally doesn’t let me drive the studio’s car. I have no idea why; I’m far less destructive when my hands are busy, but she seems to think I would be a menace to society, or at least to those on the pavement.”

“Why on earth would I go out to dinner with you? You just ate at my restaurant, decided it’s the worst one in the town – which, by the way, you’ve been in for less than two hours, so that’s quite the statement – and made my chef cry. I should be kicking your arse from here to Yorkshire.”

Sherlock frowned. “I gave her a compliment.”

“What compliment was that? Congratulations, you didn’t poison me?”

“A perfectly reasonable compliment, and also true in this case, but not what I said.”

The kitchen door opened, and Artie appeared, carrying the pie plate, heaped with whipped cream. “Here you are, boss, last piece of pie. Hope you don’t mind the pie plate, that’s one less dish for me to wash.”

“Thank you, Artie,” said John, and reached for the pie.

“Oho,” said Sherlock, and was faster.

“Oi!” shouted Artie as Sherlock took the pie plate and walked to the end of the alley. “That’s not your pie!”

“John!” called Sherlock, turning around. He held the pie plate over his head, where neither John nor Artie had any hope of actually reaching it. “I find myself in possession of the last piece of your
chef’s quite delicious pie. Do you want it?”

“As it’s my piece, yes!”

“Come along, then, John. Can’t have you spoiling your dinner by eating the pie first.”

“What?”

“You can have the pie after we’ve had Chinese.”

Artie turned to John. “Chinese?”

“It’s a long story,” said John grimly.

“Hardly long, John,” scolded Sherlock gently. “I’ve asked you to accompany me to Chinese. You’ve been dithering about it for five minutes, without actually refusing. I’m simply making my offer more attractive by use of Mary’s—”

“Molly’s.”

“Ah, yes, Molly is the chef, Mary is the waitress. Bit similar, aren’t they?”

“Maybe he’s blind,” said Artie. “Or deaf.”

“Pie, John!”

“I could tackle him,” said Artie.

“You’d knock the pie on the ground,” said John. “And you know what the rubbish collection men do to the ground.”

“You might be worth it,” said Artie.

“I could eat the pie myself,” said Sherlock, thoughtfully.

John stood up. “Fine. I have a car. And there’s a better Chinese in Brompton.”

“Oh, good,” said Sherlock. “You saw reason.”

“You’re honestly going out to dinner with that wanker?” asked Artie.

“Only because he doesn’t deserve a second slice of Molly’s pie,” said John grimly, and tugged on his shirt sleeves.

“What should I tell them inside?” asked Artie.

“Tell them anything and you’re fired, Artie.”

“I was fired yesterday.”

“I won’t rehire you this time.” John turned to follow Sherlock out of the alley.

“Boss—” Artie shifted from foot to foot. “You sure this is a good idea?”

“Artie,” said John patiently, “it’s just dinner. We’ll probably talk about his plan for the Empire. I’ll pay my half, he’ll pay his, I’ll drop him off at his hotel. There is nothing untoward going on here.”
“It’s just he’s a handsome bloke, and you’re recently back from the war, and I think I’ve seen some porn that starts that way…”

John sighed. “Artie.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, boss.”

“Go away, Artie,” said John firmly, and hoped his ears weren’t burning. He turned and walked back to Sherlock, the cane tapping on the ground.

“I want that pie plate back in pristine condition!” Artie yelled at Sherlock. “Do you hear me? Pristine. I see one scratch that I didn’t put there myself, and I’m pushing you over a fucking waterfall.”


“My car.”

Sherlock sighed. “Fine.”

“No means no!” yelled Artie as they turned the corner, and John stifled the groan.

“Fired. He is absolutely fired,” said John. “I will do the bloody washing up myself, but I’m not paying him for another day.”

“He may be the best employee you have,” said Sherlock.

John gave him a sideways glare. “Insult my restaurant and my food, but don’t you dare insult Molly or Mary.”

“I haven’t seen evidence of their loyalty, apart from Mary’s desire to feed me the better dessert,” said Sherlock. “Artie, however, is quite attached to you, and merely doesn’t wish you to be hurt or risk being taken advantage of by me.”

John laughed. “You, take advantage of me? Doubtful. Strong wind could knock you over.”

“Let us hope I’m not standing by Artie’s proverbial waterfall at the time,” said Sherlock dryly. “You said you had a car?”

“I do. But it’s parked at the house. I walk to the restaurant. Or couldn’t you tell?”

Sherlock frowned. “I must be off my game today. I thought you’d been back from Iraq for longer. Or was it Afghanistan? If you walk to the restaurant and back – it can’t have been long. A month? Two?”

“Two months in England, five and a half weeks in Upper Brickley,” said John carefully. “Was that in the restaurant profile?”

“I never read the profiles,” said Sherlock. “Afghanistan or Iraq?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Repeating history,” said Sherlock. “Your great-great-grandfather, the original John Watson, he was in Afghanistan, of course.”

“How did you—?”
"The portrait, John, the portrait! A thousand and one little clues that indicate the Anglo-Afghan War. Likely the second one, in the late 1870s, based on the date of the portrait and the age of the subject. Married shortly after returning to England and produced your great-grandfather, who followed in his father’s footsteps and also joined the Army, likely at the outbreak of the Great War, but he must have done well because he also participated in the Russian Civil War just afterward, to some degree, before being invalided home and producing your grandfather, the patriarch of the restaurant. James, is that right? Now, James bucked the trend and joined the Navy, perhaps to annoy his father, more likely because he was fascinated with travel and wanted to see more of the world than Europe, and spent most of his time in the Pacific Theater, narrowly escaped being caught in Singapore when it fell, and was unlucky enough to help with the cleanup following Nagasaki and Hiroshima. I say unlucky because of course the radiation he received is what may have caused the cancer that killed him in the end. Your father—"

"That’s enough,” said John, and stopped walking. He closed his eyes and listened as Sherlock stopped next to him, and heard his shoes grind the pavement slightly as the man turned to face him. “I know about my father’s history, you don’t need to repeat it.”

"Of course,” said Sherlock, and the voice which had sounded so self-assured and confident only moments before now sounded awkward and uncomfortable. John opened his eyes.

"That…that was incredible. Amazing, really.”

Sherlock looked away, and then back at John, full-force, with a half smile on his face. “That’s not what people usually say.”

“Oh? What do they say?”

“Piss off.”

John waited to see if Sherlock was joking; but the man was utterly and completely serious. He couldn’t help it; he began to laugh.

“Well,” he said, “that too. Come on, the house is just down this road.”

John walked past Sherlock, ignoring the somewhat surprised expression on the other man’s face. He’d gone several paces past him when he heard Sherlock’s footsteps pick back up again, and he kept his pace slower than usual to let him catch up. Not that slow was difficult; John’s leg was beginning to throb. The idea of Sherlock driving didn’t sound half bad, suddenly.

"Where were you injured?” asked Sherlock suddenly.

John glanced at him. “Don’t tell me you didn’t notice the cane.”

“No, but I know your leg pain is psychosomatic. Clearly not the reason you were invalided out of the Army.”

“Right,” muttered John. “Shoulder. There was a firefight.”

Sherlock nodded thoughtfully. “You weren’t always a soldier.”

“You weren’t always a television celebrity,” countered John.

“And the nightmares?”

John stopped dead on the pavement. “Excuse me?”
Sherlock turned to face him. “Bags under your eyes. You aren’t sleeping well. Combined with the wartime experience and the injuries, not to mention the imagined pain in your leg, it stands to reason you have nightmares.”

“You know what I said earlier? I take it back. Piss off.” John shoved past Sherlock and tried to pick up the pace, leaning heavily on his cane.

“John—”

“Meant it!”

“John,” said Sherlock, and kept up a steady pace behind him.

“No,” said John, crossly. “Don’t you have establishing shots to take around town?”

“No,” said Sherlock, but his phone beeped out an incoming message.

John rolled his eyes. He stopped walking and turned to face Sherlock, trying to hold in his annoyance. “Look. I have two hours to not think about the restaurant before I have to go back and deal with dinner service. So I’d very much appreciate it if you would kindly shove off.”

“No,” repeated Sherlock.

“Why not?” John kept his gaze firm and steady on Sherlock. It was what Harry called his Do-Not-Mess-With-Me look, the sort he gave the subordinates in his unit when they were being particularly cheeky, or when customers tried to argue the final cheque. It nearly always worked.

“I…” Sherlock glanced away from the gaze, and John smirked just a little. “I want to know more.”

“More?”

“About the restaurant. It’s necessary, for background information, to learn as much as I can about its origins and history and what it means to the people who work there as well as the occupants of Upper Brickley.”

“All right,” said John slowly. “The Empire was opened by my grandfather in 1949. It’s operated out of the same location for the last sixty years, has always had a small staff, and was thought to be one of the best restaurants in the 1960s and 1970s. I don’t want to see it die.”

“Why not?” asked Sherlock.

“Why—?” John stared at him. “If you can’t deduce that, after everything else you’ve figured out on your own, then fuck me if I’ll just tell you.”

John turned and started to walk away. He managed two paces before he turned and went back again. “And I want my pie.”

Sherlock handed him the pie plate without saying a word.

“Thank you,” said John, with as much dignity as he could muster while holding a pie plate with a single piece of pie. He turned again, as sharply as he could manage, and walked briskly away, and despite trying to pretend to himself that he didn’t care, listened for Sherlock’s footsteps to either follow or turn away.

He never heard a sound.
Sherlock Holmes watched John Watson walk down the pavement, thinking hard.

Military, of course. Psychosomatic injury to his leg, of course. Those things were evident from the perfect about-face that John had executed on his retreat. No man with an actual leg injury could have performed it half as well, not without losing balance, at least. John walked to the end of the pavement and then turned down one of the smaller side streets and was lost to view, but Sherlock Holmes remained standing on the pavement, his mind still calculating and swirling through the facts that he could determine about John Watson.

The man was fit. His injuries were several months old, and yet there was no sign of accumulated weight from time spent convalescing. He valued traditions, history, accuracy, and above all, family. All of these would be reasons enough to want the Empire to succeed – Sherlock had the idea of the four, it was family that meant the most to him, and specifically, his grandfather James Watson, the WW2 veteran who began it all.

Family. Sherlock didn’t know what to think of that. It wasn’t as though family was an unfamiliar concept, just the idea that anyone could be so devoted to them that they would ignore all other points of reason.

Because the Empire was failing, and spectacularly so. Sherlock may have arrived at the end of the lunch hour, but he had no illusions that there had been anyone there before him. The kitchen had been too jittery, too anxious for his arrival. The mise had been untouched; the chef’s apron had been clean and pressed, and the dishwasher’s shirt had been dry. They had not changed between customers, of that Sherlock was certain, because while the recent spat of cleaning had been quite obvious (and in truth, Sherlock had been somewhat relieved to see that he wouldn’t need to berate the staff on cleaning habits, even if they had been warned of his arrival and thus been out of their normal routine), he’d still noticed the perfectly clean and cool range. The chef had leaned against it, and no chef would lean against a range that was still hot to the touch.

It was the small things, really: the way that John held tightly to his cane, and kept his left hand clenched or in his pocket, out of view. The firmness to his handshake, the intense gaze – and the nervousness he’d shown when service began. That he couldn’t watch Sherlock taste the food.

And the sister – Harry. Who refused to be on camera, who had left the dining room shortly after greeting him, to slip outside and drink her booze in peace, unable to stay but unable to go far.

John was willing to shield her from the public’s scrutiny by taking sole managerial responsibility on himself, when he could not have been more unused to the position. Any restaurant manager worth his salt would never have left the building between lunch and dinner services.

Oh, yes. John was invested in this week. Heavily. Family, tradition, history.

Sherlock had no doubt that Harry was equally invested – and for entirely different reasons.

His mouth quirked, and Sherlock turned back to the restaurant. It wasn’t the perfect turn of John Watson’s military training, but it was no less graceful. Sherlock continued to smile to himself as he walked, thinking of Harry Watson, in the flat waiting for them all to leave, and he began to plan his strategy.

He noticed the man who stepped out in front of him just before he ran him over.

“Sorry,” said Sherlock automatically, was about to move past him when the man spoke.
“Sherlock Holmes,” said the man, delighted, and inwardly, Sherlock groaned. A fan, no doubt. There were two sorts, he’d found. The kind who were desperate to prove themselves worthy, to be the one chef who could make him eat an entire meal and compliment them afterwards; and then there were the type who just wanted him, preferably naked, preferably soon.

This one was dressed in a well-fitted grey suit and tie, with a dark black overcoat. He was thin, nearly reed-like, and beneath the pleasant smile, Sherlock sensed something manic about his eyes. It put him on guard, instantly.

“Yes,” said Sherlock shortly. “I suppose you’ll want me to sign something.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely offer, but perhaps later,” said the man. He couldn’t stop moving, and Sherlock watched him, already growing tired of the man’s incessant energy. After the quiet, calm stoicism of John, the man seemed like an annoying mosquito.

“Then I’m sorry to inform you that I don’t sign photographs in public,” said Sherlock. “If you contact my studio, they’ll be more than happy to provide you a signed photograph.”

“Really? How disappointing.” The man made a little moue, very much the false pout. “Here to save a restaurant? The Empire, I imagine. Well, I don’t imagine, but that can keep. Do you really think you can do it? The great Sherlock Holmes, whose opinion is never heeded by those who ought to engrave his words on their hearts?”

Sherlock frowned. “I never comment on a restaurant’s viability before I have all the facts at my disposal.”

“Very wise, very wise,” said the man, pulling back just a bit. “Well, I’ll be watching. With bated breath and a great amount of interest.”

The man set off down the pavement, back into the town, and Sherlock, after a moment, began to follow – less because he wanted to know where the man was going, and more because it was in the same direction as the Empire.

The beep from the mobile in his pocket caught him off guard; Sherlock pulled it out and opened the incoming text.

*Where the bloody fuck are you? We needed to get the establishing shots today! GL.*

Sherlock frowned, and glanced back up. The man was gone from view, and Sherlock swore under his breath and began to type his reply.

*Returning now. Establishing shots tomorrow. SH.*

*When? Ten minutes to midnight? GL.*

*If necessary. SH*

*The dishwasher says you went to dinner with the manager. What the bloody fuck are you trying to pull, Sherlock? Don’t you dare do this again. GL*

*Please stop texting, I’m quite busy. SH.*

Sherlock dropped the mobile into his pocket; mercifully, it stayed silent. Probably because Lestrade had long since determined that telling Sherlock he was a wanker wasn’t worth the texting fee, particularly since Sherlock didn’t care what Lestrade thought of him.
The Empire’s windows were dark; there was a dim light in the flat above, obviously from a low lamp in the back of the room. Sherlock found the entrance to the upstairs flats easily, and was pleasantly pleased to discover that a gentle shove was all it took to open the door. The staircase was steep and plain, and Sherlock closed the door carefully before ascending. The door leading to the first-storey flat boasted a peephole and a buzzer, but Sherlock knocked anyway.

After a few minutes, and without the tell-tale sound of locks being unfastened, Harry Watson opened the door. Her eyes were bloodshot, her hair hung in damp ropes, and over her shoulder, Sherlock could see the now empty bottle of brandy next to the tumbler. She stared up at him, not surprised or shocked, but looking exactly as if she’d expected him five minutes before.

“Hello,” said Sherlock. “I think there are some things you want to tell me, aren’t there?”

“Yes,” said Harry, and stepped aside to let him in.

*

John was exhausted. It had been a ridiculously long dinner service, on top of the lunch service that had culminated in Sherlock Holmes’ first visit and consequent dismantling of his staff’s egos. Well, egos in the case of Artie; John doubted Molly had any ego to damage. She had spent the evening on the verge of tears, Mary had spent the evening glaring at anyone who looked at her cross-eyed, and Artie had…well, Artie had inspected the pie plate as though it were a diamond he was buying on spec.

John’s leg hurt, his shoulder hurt, his head hurt, his feet hurt. All of this paled to the fact that his heart wasn’t in the keenest shape either; he’s spent the entire dismal evening trying to walk eggshells around Molly, dodge Harry’s unbridled wrath, deflect Mary’s obvious attempts at match-making, remind Artie that he held the power of life or unemployment over him, and what was worse, avoid the gaze of his father and grandfathers from their bird’s-eye view of the dining room.

Ridiculous, to be avoiding the stares of men long dead. John didn’t tend to think that anyone was looking over him; he was sure his forefathers had better things to do. But all the same, every time he glanced at the portraits of the Johns, James, and Hamish, he felt as though they were watching him with equal parts expectation and disappointment.

It didn’t help that Harry was avoiding him as well. John spent an hour trying to corner her to find out what she’d thought of the afternoon, before finally giving up and just concentrating on making sure the four people who showed up for dinner were treated well. Mary actually had a ten-quid tip, so it couldn’t have been half bad.

Or maybe it was pity. John couldn’t really decide.

It wasn’t raining on the walk home, that was something. And Harry had disappeared again, probably to the upstairs flat. John left her to it. If she wanted to wallow in memories of Clara, he wasn’t going to stop her. He planned to do some wallowing back at home himself, or at least some kind of distraction with the hopes of going to sleep without nightmares. Wasn’t much of a hope, but it might have been nice.

John saw the lights in the kitchen the moment he opened the gate, and for a moment, he thought it might have been Harry, drinking herself into a stupor most likely. John swore under his breath, and closed the gate behind him. He didn’t make any effort to keep quiet, even though it would have been good to surprise Harry and maybe shock her into realizing she had a problem. John was past caring about it, frankly. The front door was unlocked; he pushed in, and was about to hang his coat on the hook when he saw it.
A long wool coat that looked oddly familiar, and a blue scarf peeking out from under the collar. Not to mention the music playing on the kitchen radio; instrumental, something classical that John recognized but wouldn’t have been able to name at gunpoint, And the scent – rich and comforting. The sharp scent of ginger, the round comfort of tomatoes, and the tickle in the back of his throat that hinted at onions recently chopped. It was absolutely mouth-watering. Not Harry’s coat; not Harry’s choice in musical selections; definitely not Harry’s cooking. John stilled, instantly on guard.

“Hello?” he called out, and there was a clatter from the kitchen. Motion, and then a tall, slender figure appeared in the doorway.

“Hello,” said Sherlock Holmes, drying his hands on a dishtowel. “I’ve prepared dinner.”

“Excuse me?” asked John, blinking in confusion. He might have been dreaming – Sherlock Holmes, in his kitchen, obviously having cooked something. In his kitchen. Backlit and looking fantastic.

In his kitchen.

“Dinner. A meal one has at the end of the day,” said Sherlock. “It’ll be ready in a moment, I’ve set a place for you at the kitchen table.”

Sherlock disappeared into the kitchen again; John followed him, unsure what else he was supposed to do. The smells intensified when he entered the kitchen, the heady aroma of something appetizing mixing with the sudden realization that John was, in fact, rather hungry. When Sherlock dropped a steaming hot plate of food on the table, between the knife and fork and glasses of water and wine, John correspondingly dropped onto the chair in front of them, and without another word, began to eat.

The chicken had been marinated in the ginger and the onions, sprinkled with salt and pepper and some combination of spices that included cinnamon and cloves. The sweetness of the cinnamon and cloves worked with the tang of the ginger at the back of his tongue, and the skin crackled as he bit into it. Broiled; it would have been better grilled, but John knew the limitations of cooking in late January. The skin kept the meat moist, and it was so tender, it nearly melted in his mouth. John closed his eyes and swallowed.

“Wow,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Sherlock, and when John opened his eyes, Sherlock was sitting on his right, a pleased expression on his face.

“You’re not eating?” asked John as he cut another piece of chicken.

“I tasted as I cooked,” said Sherlock. “Rather complicated little dish, and I wasn’t entirely certain of the tomato to ginger ratio.”

John frowned. “Wait. Tomatoes and ginger?” He looked down at the meal. “This isn’t the Omani chicken from earlier, is it?”

“I would hope not. Mine is better.”

John was about to defend Molly’s cooking, except he realized that there wasn’t much point, Sherlock was right. He shook his head and had another bite. “Well, it’s fantastic. I haven’t had it this good since—well, in a few years. Did Molly give you the recipe?”
“Please,” said Sherlock crossly. “I do know my craft, thank you, John.”

“You barely had one bite this afternoon!”

Sherlock shrugged. “I didn’t need to try any more to determine what was involved. And I wasn’t going to take another bite merely to be polite.”

John shook his head. “How can anyone be such a good cook if they don’t like food?”

“You think I don’t like food?”

“Well, you certainly don’t seem to eat much of it.”

“Because most of the time, it’s not worth eating,” said Sherlock. “I’m hardly going to waste energy on digesting something subpar. Some people might like chips that are coated in oil and salt to the point that it’s all you can taste. Some people might not mind having an overcooked chicken smothered in sauce. If I’m going to eat something, I want it to be worth the effort.”

“If you don’t love it, you don’t swallow?” asked John dryly.

“Precisely,” said Sherlock, and frowned when John snorted. “What?”

“The critic? From the movie?”

“What movie?”

“About the rat who cooks?”

“John. Rats can’t cook.”

John let out a peal of laughter. “You’ve never seen Ratatouille?”

Sherlock frowned. “Is it French?”

John chuckled and turned back to his chicken dinner. “Not exactly. We’ll watch it later.”

“Oh.”

John shifted in his seat. “Or I’ll lend it to you.”

“That’s all right,” said Sherlock, and his voice sounded a bit strained, and strangely bright. “That would…yes.” He swallowed. “I purchased the ingredients for your meal before I came over. So you needn’t worry that I took anything from your larder.”

“Considering the quality of the meal, I wouldn’t have minded if you did.”

“I wasn’t sure what you would have on hand.”

“I do cook, you know,” said John. “I’ve got the basics.”

“There are a surprising number of frozen meals in your deep freeze for a man who can cook.”

“Well, I also work late,” said John.

“Hardly an excuse.”

“Right, sorry, didn’t realize I had to live up to your expectations,” said John, setting down his fork.
“No, John, I—” Sherlock closed his eyes and sighed, exasperated. “Let me try again. I’m sure you are a perfectly adequate cook who does not burn the rice or leave the lasagne to bubble over in the oven.”

John gave Sherlock a careful look; the man did appear to be trying to make amends. “I’ve been known to over-salt the porridge, too.”

“As have we all,” said Sherlock gravely, and John chuckled, and picked up his fork again.

“So you went through my pots and pans, did you?”

“I admit, I did not purchase a new set this evening. I assumed you would have something useable here.”

“And you found it – adequate?”

“Quite.”

“And how did you find the house, anyway?” asked John suddenly, looking up. “Pretty sure you didn’t follow me home earlier.”

Sherlock had a good poker face; John couldn’t read it at all. “The address was in the restaurant profile, of course.”

John cocked his head and gave Sherlock a stern look. “I thought you didn’t read the profile?”

“Then I knocked on doors until I found your house,” said Sherlock, rather irritably. “An image which will undoubtedly give you plenty of amusement, I’m sure.”

John thought it would – if it were true. He didn’t believe it, but he let Sherlock think he did and went back to eating the dinner before it grew cold. The silence that fell over the table was comfortable and companionable, and John was hungry. It didn’t take long before he’d finished the meal, drunk the rest of the wine and the water, and stood, pushing the chair back as he stretched.

“That was delicious. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Sherlock, and he reached for the plate. John was faster.

“No, I’ll do the washing up – that was always the rule when I was growing up. Whoever doesn’t cook, cleans.”

“You started as a dishwasher,” said Sherlock, watching John as he crossed to the sink.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“I didn’t.”

“I’m not surprised. Bit too posh to be washing up pots and pans while learning your way.” The hot water splashed as it filled up the sink. John upended the soap into the water for a moment, and started in on the utensils. “Anyway, if you’d been a dishwasher, you’d have known to start soaking or at least rinse out the pans.”

“Well done,” said Sherlock, and John caught the admiration in his tone.

“I might not be as brilliant as you are, but I’m not stupid,” said John.
“Indeed not.” John heard him shift the chair. “I assume Lestrade or Sally went over tomorrow’s schedule with you?”

“Yes. Observation Day – you’ll watch us cook and serve and we’ll presumably not flub anyone’s orders or serve undercooked chicken. Which is of course what the audience is hoping to see, the better to make our miraculous turn-around at the end of the week.”

“Yes,” said Sherlock with some amount of disdain.

“It can’t be any worse than today,” continued John. “We had Anderson with the camera in the corner and we did all right. And most of the customers will be regulars, or at least will be familiar with us, so it’s not as though we’re serving food to celebrities. We’ll just have one in the corner judging our every move.”

“That can be quite the challenge as well.”

“Yes, well, I’m trying to look on the positive. We’re over the worst part.”

“The worst part?”

“Well—” John turned to look at Sherlock, and flashed him a cheeky grin. “Meeting you, of course. But your bark’s worse than your bite, so I think we’ll be all right.”

John turned back to the dishes and began scrubbing at the pan. He heard Sherlock clear his throat. “I hate the observation days.”

“Oh?” asked John, almost absently as he worked at the burnt bits of sauce on the side of the pan. “I suppose they’re a little boring.”

“Not boring,” said Sherlock. “Infuriating.”

John turned to look at him again. There was something about the tone that made him think Sherlock was almost lonesome in the way he said it. Looking at Sherlock’s face confirmed it. The man looked pained.

“Infuriating?”

“Seeing other people try to cook dishes which ought to be simple, and yet they make them complex to the point of inedibility. It’s all I can do not to jump in and show them the proper way to chop vegetables or dress a salad, to present a hot meal on heated plates, to plate a dish so that someone might actually want to eat it and not think it’s a pile of shoe leather. The sheer of amount of idiocy I see on the observation day drives me to distraction, John. Lestrade has had to restrain me countless times from simply walking out and never returning, because there is always a point in which I realize that the restaurant I’m observing has no hope whatsoever of being any good, no matter what I do, because everyone in it is irredeemable. Before the lunchtime service is over, I want to bash my head in – a few times, I’ve wanted it before service even began. And worse is knowing that it’ll happen again tomorrow, and there is nothing I can do except sit there and suffer and know I cannot do anything to make it better.”

John leaned against the counter, a bit stunned at the force of Sherlock’s admission. He had absolutely no doubt that the man meant every word of it; he could see the pain and unsettled feelings on Sherlock’s face.

“But you are going to do something about it,” he said quietly. “You’re going to tell us how to improve. You’re going to fix the Empire.”
“You can’t know that,” said Sherlock. “And you may not like what I’m going to say about it.”

John shrugged. “Does anyone? I trust you, Sherlock. God knows you know more about it than I do. I’ve got to trust you, or I’m lost.”

“You trust me?”

Sherlock’s voice was tentative, and the surprise was etched on his face. John instantly felt small and rather stupid himself, and he turned back to the sink, and began to scrub at the sides of the basin with the sponge. “It’s late.”

“Yes.” Sherlock stood, not entirely sure what to do with his arms or hands. He folded them, then let them drop to his sides, then clasped his hands behind his back. “I should get to my hotel.” He paused. “I should probably find out what hotel I’m in.”

John’s chuckle was amused. “The Tremont, on the High Street. It’s not too far from the Empire. I overheard Sally and Anderson talking about it.”

“Ah. Thank you.” Sherlock paused. “If I do not talk to you tomorrow, you mustn’t be concerned. I’m not good on days like tomorrow. I’ll be rather in a dark mood. Don’t pay me any attention, I’ll come around when the day is over soon enough.”

“Right,” said John, and he turned back to Sherlock. “Well. Thank you for dinner.”

“Of course,” said Sherlock.

There was a half second when John saw the kiss coming, when he knew what was going to happen the moment before it did, when he might have had a chance to stop and think about it – except he didn’t. His mind was blissfully off considering water lilies or something equally ridiculous, and John decided that had to be the reason that one moment, Sherlock was at least four steps away, and the next, they were in each other’s arms, his lips under Sherlock’s. Sherlock’s lips were just a bit cool, but soft on his, and even though Sherlock hadn’t eaten anything, still tasted of pepper and tomatoes and ginger.

Sherlock’s hands were gentle on John’s face, and John’s arms wrapped around him of their own volition – maybe because that’s what arms did, maybe because John was holding him closer, wanting to draw in Sherlock’s cool calm. One thing John did not feel, of all the things he felt, was calm. His head swam, he couldn’t think of anything but the feel of Sherlock against him, in the kitchen with the scent of chicken still hanging in the air. Warm, and comforting, and perfectly delicious and right.

Sherlock’s lips paused, just over his. Millimeters; they still breathed the same air, and John opened his eyes, watched Sherlock’s closed lids pulse, his eyes darting beneath them. Almost as if Sherlock was afraid to open them, afraid of what he’d see. Sherlock’s muscles were tense; John could feel the man’s breath hitch in his chest. John didn’t move, and despite having just kissed a man he’d only seen on television until today, wasn’t tense or nervous or self-conscious. But Sherlock – Sherlock could well have been a skittish pony he was trying to tame, and the idea that Sherlock, self-possessed, egotistical Sherlock could be nervous was absurd. When he finally felt Sherlock relax in his arms, just a bit, the pleased laughter bubbled up inside of John. He chuckled, softly, in the back of his throat.

The chuckle changed everything. Sherlock tensed, opened his eyes, and stepped away. John watched him, and felt the tingle in his skin where Sherlock no longer touched him. His stomach sank as he watched Sherlock became conscious of his limbs and his height.
“Goodnight,” said Sherlock tersely, and the word was the slam of a door, quick and short. Sherlock left the kitchen abruptly, and a moment later, the door to the house echoed the word, with Sherlock’s step on the pavement outside fading into the distance.

John watched Sherlock’s retreat from the kitchen window. It had hardly been the most amazing or intense kiss he’d ever had – but somehow that hadn’t diminished the fact that somehow, John had the idea it might be the most important.

The look on Sherlock’s face when he pulled away, when John had laughed – it hadn’t been horror or regret. It’d been disappointment. John felt the small pang in his chest, and shoved ruthlessly at whatever joy still remained – because as wonderful as it had felt, it had sent Sherlock packing, as if…John groaned. As if he’d been laughing at Sherlock, and not because of the very fact of Sherlock. John wanted to run after him, tell him he was a fucking idiot, drag him back into the house and…

Bugger. Because shagging the man meant to save his restaurant wouldn’t end at all well.

John wondered if he could just stay home the next day. It wasn’t as though he was needed – Harry would just have to step up and run the front of the house. Mary was a good egg, she’d be fine. Molly was capable of running things in the back of the house. John trusted them.

Yes. Stupid notion, kissing Sherlock Holmes, the man meant to save them from ruin. John turned from the window, already planning to go straight to bed, to burrow under the covers and try to forget the kiss even happened, and immediately saw the blue scarf on the floor by the door.

John picked it up and held it in his hands. It was soft and cool, and as John moved the fabric in his hands, he caught the faint whiff of musk and sweat and something sharper and razor-thin, something that brought the gentle pressure of a stolen kiss to the forefront of his mind instantly.

Oh, no. He wasn’t going to make it that easy.

John smiled, folded the scarf, and put it on the kitchen table. He went to bed, and went to sleep, waiting for the nightmares to come.

Chapter End Notes

Recipe for Molly’s Chocolate Pie.
Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

Huge shout-out to dduane on Tumblr who modified Molly’s pie recipe for non-American cooks. Be sure to check out her posts [here](#) and [here](#) to see what she did (and some truly scrumptious pictures of pie. Mmm, pie.

Thanks to lady_of_clunn, who has volunteered to serve as hospitality!picker for the remainder of the fic. Those who despaired of the creeping Americanisms with stovetops and napkins and oh-my-goodness-no-restaurant-manager-would-do-that, fear no longer. (I’ve also made minor alterations to previously posted chapters, for those of you who are reading this in one big gulp.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Chefs are nutters. They're all self-obsessed, delicate, dainty, insecure little souls and absolute psychopaths. Every last one of them._

--Gordon Ramsay

[EXTERIOR, Upper Brickley, sunrise. It is a gorgeous wintery day. The sky is a bit hazy, but nothing that won’t burn off by lunchtime, the frost is thin and sparkling on the ground. It’s the sort of shot that you expect on a postcard.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: Friday, Observation Day. A good restaurant manager will always see what goes on both in the front and the back of his house. But seeing is not the same thing as observing, and so I’ll spend the day observing how the Empire kitchen and staff cope with something they don’t have much experience in having: customers.

[EXTERIOR, Training Field. A group of Army recruits, hair recently shorn, wearing combat uniform, stands in formation. A single word, and they shout in unison as they move to parade rest. The camera swoops alongside them, showing sturdy young men staring resolutely ahead of them.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: The Empire provides the food, we’ll provide the customers. Considering the history of the Empire’s owners, it’s only appropriate that the guests are some of the British Army’s newest recruits, who have been eating Army grub for the last two weeks. Certainly anything the Empire has to give them, they’ll appreciate, which is good, because I’m not entirely sure anyone else would.

* John was awake at sunrise. He had, much to his surprise, slept incredibly well, and was strangely buoyant when his eyes opened.

“It’s going to be a good day,” he said, and he almost believed it.

“Bloody hell,” said Harry when she found John in the kitchen cooking breakfast an hour later.

“What _is_ that?”

“Sausages,” said John, and tipped the sausages onto a waiting plate. “When did you come home? I
thought you were at the flat?”

Harry sat at the kitchen table and looked somewhat green as she stared at the plate of sausages. “Too many ghosts, not enough alcohol. Do you have to be so cheerful in the mornings?”

“It’s going to be a good day,” John told her, and put the plate, piled with sausages, eggs, and toast, in front of her.

Harry stared at the breakfast before pushing the plate away. “Did we jump in time?”

“No.”

“Because today’s the day that Sherlock Holmes is going to rip our hearts out and eat them while a film crew cheers him along. Or did you miss that memo?”

“Well, yeah,” said John. “I meant before that. We’re going to have customers today, Harry.”

“Christ,” said Harry.

“Hopefully not.”

Harry reached for the toast. “Customers. Do we even know who they’re springing on us?”

“No idea,” said John. “Just that we’ll have sixteen tables of four for lunch.”

Harry dropped the toast. “Sixteen tables of…Christ, John! That’s…” Harry’s face wrinkled for a moment before she gave up on trying to do the maths. “Bloody hell, that’s a lot of people!”

“Sixty-four.”

“We can’t serve sixty-four people! We can barely serve six people! The biggest service we’ve had in the last four months was twenty people, and that was before Clara left!”

“It’ll be fine. I have complete faith that we can rise to the challenge.”

Harry snorted.

“What did Mum always say? ‘Be a soufflé, not an omelet’?”

“Soufflés fall,” said Harry darkly, and ate her toast.

*

John’s bravado began to slip the closer he got to the Empire. He had started the day feeling good, feeling positive, and he folded the blue scarf and tucked it under his arm as he set out. Just touching the soft weave, he thought of Sherlock, of soft, hesitant lips – and the almost content expression on Sherlock’s face folding into the hurt before every shield was hastily raised against him. Something else to fix, thought John. Assuming he wanted it fixed at all. John supposed it would depend on what Sherlock said, when he arrived at the Empire that day. Would he carry on as if nothing had happened? Would he increase the snide and snotty remarks? Or would be pander and put on the pleasant veneer that he used for those he truly could not stand?

He waved to the neighbors, exchanged smiles and pleasant greetings, but he noticed that they were giving him closer looks, their gazes lingering just a little bit too long.

“Exciting weekend plans?” asked Tom on the corner, far too casually, and John realized that he
knew. About Sherlock Holmes, about the film crew, about everything.

“Ah, a bit,” said John, disconcerted. “Sorry, have to run, we’ll catch up later, right, Tom?”

“Of course, always look forward to a bit of gossip,” said Tom, and John tried to pick up the pace and avoid anyone else. He was almost successful; everyone seemed to want to drop not entirely veiled innuendo about him, the Empire, or his upcoming plans for the weekend.

He was nearly there when he ran into Jim Moriarty from the bank.

“John,” said Jim, so smoothly and pleasantly, the vowel drawn out in a purr. “So exciting, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said John, tired of playing that he had no idea what anyone was talking about. “We’ve got some high hopes, at least.”

“Good to hear,” said Jim, but the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Imagine. Earning – what was it, seven hundred thousand pounds—”

“Six hundred.”

“Plus interest, don’t forget. Do you think Sherlock can get you that much in three weeks? That’ll make for some absolutely compelling telly, wouldn’t it? I’ll be pulling for you, of course.”

“Ta, appreciate it,” said John. “If you don’t mind—”

“Oh, of course, don’t mean to impede you,” said Jim, and stepped aside. “My best to your sister!”

“Right,” said John, more of a mutter under his breath, and he kept walking.

He was exhausted by the time he reached the restaurant, and instead of going in the back, John fumbled with the keys and entered through the front door. The blinds were still closed; he made no move to open them, and instead collapsed on the nearest chair, and rubbed his leg where it was stiff.

“Christ,” he said under his breath, and glanced at the blue scarf where he’d dropped it on the table.

_Could_ Sherlock turn the Empire around well enough that they’d be able to raise the six hundred thousand pounds? John counted the tables, tried to work out the math, and gave up. It’d take filling the restaurant nearly every night, if not several times over, in order to make that much. Working Mary and Molly and even Artie to the bone, maybe even refraining from hiring additional staff. They’d need lunches like today. Lunches with customers, lunches where the food was enjoyed, the bills were paid, the kitchen ran smoothly and they were able to close before the dinner rush with smiles on their admittedly exhausted faces.

Today _had_ to be a good day. Because if John was going to save the Empire – if Sherlock _Holmes_ was going to save the bloody Empire – today was going to be the template. If it was anything less than a good day, John didn’t stand a chance.

John hadn’t prayed often in his life, not since he was small and his mother watched his prayers before bed. Once or twice when James had died, and his world was falling apart. When Mary had split with him, and he wasn’t sure where to go next.

Once, in the desert, bleeding out onto the sand.

And now, his heart in this throat, his hands on the rough wooden desk where James and Hamish
had once ruled the empire John was trying desperately to save.

“Please, God. Let it be a good day.”

“Boss?”

John opened his eyes. Artie stood at the door to the kitchen, a curious and worried expression on his young face. John wondered if Artie had heard him, and couldn’t meet his eyes. Instead, he struggled to reach his cane, which had fallen to the floor, and tried to stand.

“Artie. Sorry, I – ah – thought I was alone.”

“Veg order is here,” said Artie, somewhat awkwardly. “They shorted us tomatoes.”

John sighed, and he picked up the scarf from the table. “Right. Ta. I’ll be there in a moment.”

Artie nodded, his eyes still on the scarf. “That yours?”

“No. Just returning it.”

“It’s his, isn’t it?” asked Artie, quite calmly.

“Yes,” said John, and tucked it under his arm. “He left it behind last night.”

Artie nodded, bit his lip, and went back into the kitchen.

“Artie!”

“Veg order!” shouted Artie, not returning, and John sighed and followed him.

He put the scarf in the bottom drawer of the desk in the manager’s office, before anyone else saw it and jumped to a conclusion he wasn’t ready to reach himself.

*

[INTERIOR: The Empire Kitchen. The staff of the Empire stands in the kitchen, looking apprehensive and a little bit brave, listening to SHERLOCK.]

SHERLOCK: So today I’m going to be watching your lunch service. I know that customers can be a bit problematic, so we’ve taken the liberty of inviting the most recent batch of Army recruits to have their first non-Army provided meal here.

[Mouths drop open. In particular, the manager, JOHN, looks most affected; he wheels back a bit, but then stands solid, almost at attention, as he tries to conceal his surprise.]

SHERLOCK cont.: They’ll be hungry and they’ll need to be in and out in two hours, and to make it a little bit easier, we’re only going to offer them a choice of soup or salad, and one of three entrees.

MARY: Not the Russian Herring Salad?

SHERLOCK: Well, we’d rather not kill them.

[Nervous laughter.]


[SMASH CUT to the Manager’s Office, where SHERLOCK changes from his shirt to a chef’s
white button-up jersey. He talks directly to the camera.]

SHERLOCK: Cutting the menu only made sense; Molly is untested as a chef and out of her element at the best of times. And without any help in the kitchen, I believe even three entrees might be too much for her. This bodes to be the worst Observation Day I’ve ever seen.

* 

“Ibuprofen,” said Sherlock as Anderson lowered the camera from his shoulder.

“Sorry?”

“Or paracetamol. Christ, I’ll take Lemsip if you have it.”

Lestrade frowned at him. “Are you getting sick?”

“No. I’m going to have a headache.”

“G **o** ing to have?”

“She’s not ready for this,” said Sherlock firmly. “None of them are. Sixty-four customers and one chef, one waitress, and one dishwasher? This is a joke. This is an insult.”

Lestrade shrugged. “This is good television.”

“I never thought of you as heartless,” snapped Sherlock as he continued to button his shirt.

“We could have had more than that,” said Lestrade. “You know we don’t pack more in the restaurant than we’re told it can hold, and when Watson signed up, he said they could fit eighty.”

“I need to get into the kitchen,” said Anderson.

“Go,” Lestrade told him, and as soon as he was gone, he lowered his voice. “Look, Sherlock – I don’t like Observation Day any more than you do. But they’ve seen the show. They know what they’re getting into. This isn’t like the first series, when it came as a shock.”

“It’s always a shock,” muttered Sherlock, unable to look at Lestrade. “The managers and chefs – they think they know. But you can’t really until you’re in it.”

“Here,” said Lestrade, and dug into his pocket. “Take these.”

He shoved the half-crumpled box to Sherlock, who peered at the lettering.


“Not since I’ve known you, no,” said Lestrade, and pulled his sleeve up to show the patch on his forearm. “Go on. I can have Sally run to Boots and pick you up some ibuprofen later, but these should take the edge off.”

Sherlock tore into the box, pulled out the remaining patches, and slapped all three on his arm in a row.

“Ah, Sherlock?”

“I’ll still want the ibuprofen,” said Sherlock, tossing the wrappings.
“Three?”

“I suspect today is going to be a three-patch problem,” said Sherlock dryly.

*

[INTERIOR, Empire dining room. The young recruits are all at their tables, laughing and talking and being very cheerful. Every so often one will shout something and the others will respond, and MARY moves between the tables, trying desperately to serve the various drink orders. And then she lets out a squawk and leaps into the air.]

MARY: Oi!

[The recruits hold up their water glasses like beer steins, jovial and cheerful as can be.]

CUSTOMERS: OI!

MARY: Touch my bum again and I’ll wipe you all from here to Sunday!

CUSTOMER #1: To Sunday!

CUSTOMERS: TO SUNDAY!

*

“I’m going to kill them,” Mary hissed to John when she returned to the bar for more drinks.

“What?”

“He pinched my bum!”

“Rise above it,” said John. “They’re Army, they haven’t seen a bird in weeks.”

“You were in the Army, and you hadn’t seen me in weeks, and you never pinched my bum.”

“Mary…”

“Why was that, anyway?”

“Mary, now is not the time.”

“If another one pinches my bum, I’m going to whack him over the head with my tray,” said Mary, and went to deliver more drinks.

“By all means,” said John, and let his forehead hit the bar.

*

[INTERIOR, Empire Kitchen. Bowls of soup and plates of salad are sitting on the warming table, waiting.]

[Smash cut to SHERLOCK, standing in the corner and looking pained.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: Salad on the warming table. Cold salad on the warming table, which is meant to heat things up. Should I tell the soldiers to be thankful it isn’t herring?

*
Mary flew into the kitchen, her eyes wild. “Help,” she gasped. “Artie, help.”

Artie poked his head out of the annex. “What?”

“Artie, I will give you ten percent of my tips, but please, take four bowls of soup to the idiots at Table Four.”

“You can’t have him!” cried Molly. “I need him to dress the salad!”

“You’re the chef!”

“I’m trying to make the Omani chicken!”

“It’s Omani chicken, it’s tomatoes and ginger, how complicated can it be?”

“It’s complicated!” wailed Molly.

Mary glared at Molly. “The idiots at Table Four tried to put their hands up my skirt.”

Molly sucked in her breath. “But they’re on television!”

“I don’t think that’s stopping them,” said Mary crossly. “But they won’t put their hands up Artie’s skirt.”

“I’m not wearing a skirt,” said Artie.

“Exactly.”

“Molly has me dressing salad,” said Artie.

“I’ll give you ten percent of my tips!”

“Fifty,” said Artie.

“Oh, piss off,” said Mary, and flew out the door with four plates of salad in her arms.

“Artie, I need tomatoes.”

“I brought you tomatoes.”

“I need more tomatoes.”

“Why do you need more tomatoes?”

“It’s chicken with tomatoes, that generally implies that there are tomatoes.”

“I can’t bring you more tomatoes, I’m dressing the salad.”

“Then stop dressing the salad and get me more tomatoes.”

“Why can’t you get the tomatoes?”

“I’m grating ginger.”

“Weren’t you meant to grate ginger earlier?”

“I ran out. Everyone wanted the chicken, no one wanted the noodles.”
Mary flew back into the kitchen.

“Twenty percent.”

“Fifty,” said Artie. “And no skirt.”

Mary made a face, took four salads, and stormed out again.

“I need another pan,” gasped Molly, and reached up for one of the hanging pots. “Artie, where’s my chicken pan?”

“I washed it and put it away.”

“Then why isn’t it here?”

Mary flew back in. “Artie! Forty percent.”

“Fifty!”

Mary let out a groan, grabbed two soups and two salads, and went back out.

“Artie, tomatoes.”

“I can’t get you tomatoes, we’re out of tomatoes.”

Molly turned and stared at him. “Say. That. Again.”

“The veg order was short!” shouted Artie. “And everyone wanted salad and tomatoes go on the salad!”

Molly began to shake. Her face grew red and her hands flexed, and it might have gone badly from there, except Mary raced back in, fit to burst.

“Artie!”

“Forty percent!” said Artie, grabbed four soups, and raced out to deliver them to Table Four.

*

[INTERIOR, Dining room. ARTIE delivers soup to the jovial customers at Table Four, who shout happily at his arrival and slap him on the back, nearly knocking ARTIE off his feet and into the next table, where four customers are eating salad. The water glasses tumble, and spill over one of the soldiers, who is pleasant and doesn’t seem to mind too much. JOHN comes over, leaning on his cane, carrying some of the towels from behind the bar.]

JOHN: Sorry, so sorry, corporal.

WET CUSTOMER: It’s all right. Army man?

JOHN: Demobbed a few weeks ago.

WET CUSTOMER: Afghanistan or Iraq?

[The question throws JOHN for a moment and he blinks, and almost smiles, clearly thinking of something else.]

JOHN: Afghanistan. You headed there?
WET CUSTOMER: If we’re lucky!

[Smash cut: the Kitchen. SHERLOCK’s face is contorted, as if he’s struggling against both a headache, and intense need for either nicotine of the non-patch variety, or a gun to shoot himself in the foot. MOLLY whimpers to herself, trying desperately to split one tomato among ten dishes, while at the same time trying to fry the noodles.]

MOLLY (desperately): Tinned tomatoes are all right, aren’t they? Tinned tomatoes. Everyone loves tinned tomatoes. Hurrah tinned tomatoes!

*

John, back at the bar, caught Artie by the arm as he headed into the kitchen. “What the hell are you doing out here, Artie?”

“What needed help.”

“What about the dishes?”

“Molly said to leave them, she needed me to dress the salads.”

John frowned. “Then why aren’t you helping Molly?”

“Molly needed tomatoes.”

“Tomatoes?”

John was about to ask what tomatoes had to do with anything when the explosion from the kitchen caught them off guard. For a moment, John forgot where he was, and dropped to the ground, taking Artie with him, as well as the half a dozen empty dishes and bowls, which fell to the floor with a clatter. The resulting crash brought John firmly back to the present.

A moment later, Sherlock put his head through the window.

“Perfectly all right,” he said calmly. “Molly’s noodles simply fried too long. Fire extinguisher?”

“By the annex door,” said John dully, already picking himself off the of the ground.

“Oh, thank you.” Sherlock disappeared again.

“I thought he wasn’t meant to help,” said Artie.

“I don’t think that rule stands when there’s a fire,” said John. He stood cautiously; his leg throbbed, but held as well as it ever did. “Sorry about that.”

“S’alright,” said Artie. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” said John, and shook it off. No time for it, not with a room full of green recruits and a camera watching his every move. “How many more salads and soups to deliver?”

“No idea.”

“Find out and deliver them.”

“What about the tomatoes?”
“Hang the bloody tomatoes.”

John reached under the bar and found the phone, already forming a plan.

*

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. MOLLY continues to spin like a top, stirring a large pot of noodles while watching the chicken dishes with an eagle eye. ARTIE is behind her, chopping onions and carrots, and every so often opening a tin of tomatoes. Just visible through the annex door is JOHN, who is already fast at work, emptying and refilling the industrial dishwasher to keep up with the kitchen’s demands. He is sweating, though that’s likely the heat in the annex.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: The first course is not the disaster I anticipated, but it was a close thing. The few mishaps in the dining room were accompanied by the train wreck in the kitchen, topped off by Molly’s exploding pasta.

MOLLY: I’m all right!

SHERLOCK: Ah, does this happen often? Exploding pasta?

MOLLY: Oh, not very.

ARTIE: Once or twice a week.

JOHN: Shut up, Artie.

SHERLOCK V.O.: It’s all hands on deck now, as Mary has been completely swamped with more customers than she can handle, and reserves have been called in. John, due to his war injury, cannot handle the trips back and forth and is doing his best with the washing up, while the dishwasher, Artie, has been temporarily promoted to sous.

[Smash cut to ARTIE, chopping carrots quickly. He’s not half bad at it.]

SHERLOCK V.O. cont.: It might be a permanent change, if he’s not fired first.

ARTIE: Bloody hell.

SHERLOCK V.O.: Or permanently injured.

[ARTIE holds his hand, blood already streaming down his arm and through his fingers. MOLLY turns to look and stares for a moment, oddly fascinated, until a small pop from the range catcher her attention again, and she whips her head back to the noodles.]

MOLLY: John!

JOHN: Bloody fuck, Artie.

ARTIE: I don’t feel very...

[ARTIE drops like a rock. MOLLY and JOHN scramble to him.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: So much for the sous.

*

“We can’t actually leave him in the alley,” said Molly, worried. “He’ll freeze.”
“Well, we can’t take him into the manager’s office, he’s out cold. The customers will think we’ve poisoned him,” said John grimly. “I’ve bound up his finger, the cold will slow down his circulation anyway.”

“Mrs Hudson,” gasped Molly. “She could take him for a bit, couldn’t she?”

John grabbed Molly’s face between his hands and kissed her square on the mouth. “Molly Hooper, you’re a genius.”

Molly’s eyes were wide. “I…”

“How do we get him there?”

“I’ll take him,” said Sherlock from the doorway, and John jumped to his feet.

“I forgot you were here,” he said, eyes wide, and realized how stupid that was. Sherlock Holmes was the entire reason for the crowd inside the restaurant.

“I’m sorry we didn’t have a chance to talk this morning.”

“No, it’s all right, I know we were a bit busy—”

“I was running late, the establishing shots—”

“Gorgeous morning for them, though, not too terribly cold either—”

“You weren’t trudging up a deserted country road pretending to be a weary traveler!”

“Just trudging to work, but it was hardly deserted, I think the whole town knows you’re here now—”

“Boys,” said Molly sweetly, “but if you don’t mind, Artie’s bleeding out on the snow.”

“Bugger,” said John, and bent over to grab at Artie’s bandages. “Look, I know you’re not meant to help. We can get this.”

“Nonsense,” said Sherlock, and he walked into the snow and knelt by Artie. “Molly needs to cook lunches and you can hardly carry him yourself. I’ll only be a few minutes, and believe me, it’s a few minutes out of the kitchen that I will well appreciate, as I cannot help in any other way.”

As Sherlock spoke, he lifted Artie’s arms and pulled him into a sitting position. Then, with a practiced ease, he lifted Artie onto his shoulder and stood, carrying the young man in a fireman’s hold.

“Wow,” said Molly, eyes wide.

“Mrs Hudson’s establishment is close by, I assume?”

“The bakery across the street,” said John, his mouth dry.

“Please leave the door unlocked, I’ll return presently,” said Sherlock, and left, Artie’s arms dangling behind him.

“Wow,” breathed Molly again. “He picked up Artie like he didn’t weigh anything.”

“Artie doesn’t weigh anything,” said John, but he couldn’t take his mind of the image of Sherlock,
lifting the young man so effortlessly. He was still knelt on the ground where Artie had been. Despite his damp knees, John thought it was probably a very good thing that he was in a position where certain bulges were less noticeable.

“He’ll be all right?”

“Yes, Mrs Hudson will take care of him.”

“All right.” Molly moved back to the door. “John? Are you coming?”

“Oh, in a minute,” said John, and waited for Molly to go back inside before he covered his face with his hands.

“Well, fuck me,” he said to the empty alleyway, and couldn’t help the giggle that escaped.

* 

Mary was in the kitchen when Molly came in.


“Sherlock’s carrying Artie to Mrs Hudson,” said Molly. “John is taking care of the resulting hard-on.”

Mary stared at Molly. “You…I…Molly. And here I thought you were innocent.”

Molly turned beet red.

* 

[INTERIOR, Dining room. Lunch service continues, with the main courses now being delivered. MARY is whipping through tables, setting down plates as fast as she can; she’s assisted by a woman whose face is fuzzed out, clearly someone who did not want to be seen on camera.]

* 

“Thanks, Harry,” gasped Mary on her fourth return to the kitchen. “I would never have been able to do this without you.”

“Fine,” said Harry, glancing at the camera nervously. “You’re not filming me, right?”

“I can’t exactly avoid you,” said Anderson.

“Molly! I need more chicken!”

“Five minutes!”

“I don’t want to be on camera!” shrieked Harry.

“I need more chicken now!”

“Deliver noodles instead!”

“I need more noodles, too!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll fuzz out your face. No one will know it’s you.”
“I’ll know it’s me!”

“Well, then don’t tell anyone it’s you!”

“Harry, less chatter, more service!” gasped Mary, and flew out the door and into the dining room again.

“Film me and I will eat your liver for a bedtime snack,” Harry told Anderson, and followed Mary, ducking as she passed in front of the camera.

“She’s a bit tetchy,” said Lestrade, and Molly snorted, peering at the chicken still cooking in the pan.

“You should see her on a bad day.”

“She’s worse?”

“She’s drunker.” Molly stood up, eyes wide. “Oh, wait. I didn’t say that. Don’t put that in.”

Lestrade thought he probably wouldn’t – a drunk manager didn’t much lend itself to gaining the sympathy of the audience. “I won’t,” he promised Molly, and she beamed at him, entirely trusting that he was telling her the truth.

Bit heady, that.

One of the alarms on the oven starting chiming, and Molly jumped to it, quickly moving back into the swing of it. “You’re getting the hang of it,” Lestrade said, watching her.

“Am I? It doesn’t feel like it.”

“Well, I’m not Sherlock, but it looks to me like you’re doing all right. I’ve seen enough kitchens where the chef has broken into tears by this point.”

“Oh,” said Molly, “there’s still a lot of week left.”

Lestrade laughed as the back door opened and John came in. He glanced at Molly. “Did I miss something?”

“Harry’s helping Mary,” said Molly. “Is Sherlock back?”

“You’d know before I would,” said John, entirely too defensive, and he gathered some of the dirty pans and went back to the sink.

Molly glanced at Lestrade, and gave out a small squeak when she realized that Lestrade was watching her, too. His mouth quirked, just a bit, and he turned his gaze on John again, and lost himself in thought.

*

[INTERIOR, Dining room. MARY and the mysterious waitress are dashing around with full trays of food. Every time the mysterious waitress comes anywhere near the camera, she ducks and bends, and turns her face away from the camera, clearly untrusting that the fuzz will hide her identity.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: Kitchen fire, spilled water, chopped off finger, lack of key ingredients. Could the kitchen’s day be any worse?
[Desperate to remain anonymous, the mysterious server doesn’t see MARY coming right for her. They crash together, plates of chicken and noodles go flying, sending the food over the pair of them as well as the nearest table and its occupants.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: Oh dear. Yes. It could.

[The recruits burst into cheers, catcalls, and laughter. The soldier who has received the brunt of the food stands and gallantly helps MARY and the mysterious server to their feet. The camera zooms in a little on him. He’s got an impressive array of medals on his chest.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: Is that…why, yes it is. The Unit Sergeant Major of Chavasse Company from ATC Pirbright. Oh, dear, indeed.

*

“I can’t go back out there,” said Harry in the kitchen. She sat on the stool next to the warming table and wailed. Mary had her arm around her, and was patiently picking noodles out of her hair. “I can’t.”

“Harry, you have to go, there’s no one else!” John had abandoned the washing up in favor of trying to bolster his sister’s confidence. He wasn’t sure which was the more ridiculous task. “It’s just dessert left, very easy, they’re not even being given options.”

“What is dessert?” asked Mary.

“Tiramisu,” said Molly, coming out of the walk-in. She was carrying plates of the dessert in both arms and looked both relieved and completely knackered. “Already plated and ready to go. Best dessert ever.”

“Sherlock liked the pie yesterday,” said Mary, eyeing the tiramisu apprehensively. It wobbled a little on the plate; she could see the water already beginning to form a puddle around the base.

“Well, I can’t make eight pies in one night. But the tiramisu has been defrosting since this morning, it’ll be fine.”

Harry looked up. “This morning?”

“I took it out just before we opened the doors,” said Molly.

“That was two hours ago,” said Harry. “Tiramisu doesn’t defrost that quickly. It needs at least six.”

The kitchen fell silent.

“Oh,” said Molly, faintly. “Well.”

“I’ll tell them it’s a frozen version,” said Mary. “Can we give them beer? Maybe if they’re pissed enough, they won’t notice the ice crystals.”

“No beer,” said John. “But I plan on getting absolutely sloshed when service is over.”

“Oh, good,” said Mary. “I’ll join you.”

*

Sherlock returned, Artie in tow, while Mary slung half-frozen tiramisus at the soldiers. He glanced at Molly, elbow-deep in the sink, and then at Lestrade, who was leaning against the doorframe,
“Hi,” said Artie cheerfully. “I’m on Percocet.”

“Are you now?” asked Lestrade, amused.

“Artie!” said Molly, relieved and concerned all at once; she didn’t see the jealous dismay on Lestrade’s face. “Are you all right?”

“Stitches,” said Sherlock, and dropped Artie to lean on the prep table. He raised his eyebrows at Lestrade, who instantly schooled his expression to something more even-keel. “There’s a walk-in clinic around the corner, as it turns out.”

“Sarah fixed me up,” said Artie, with a goofy grin on his face. “Took me right in front of half the town, she did. Sarah’s lovely.” He sighed, and dropped his head to the table. “The prep table smells like tinned tomatoes.”

“Thank you,” Molly said to Sherlock.

“Did I miss anything?” Sherlock asked Lestrade.

“Bit of a crash while serving out the chicken and noodles, but it’s all cleaned up now,” said Lestrade. “Serving out dessert at the mo. Do you want to review the footage before the all-hands?”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, I think I’ve seen enough. Where’s John?”

“Behind the bar,” said Lestrade.

Sherlock nodded absently, and then turned and went back out into the alley. Lestrade frowned, watching him go.

“Do you know what else is lovely? Percocet’s lovely,” said Artie to the prep table. “I think I’ll have it for breakfast from now on. Whoever invented Percocet is lovely.”

“How long have you known John Watson?” Lestrade asked Molly.

“I invented John Watson,” said Artie behind them. “Or maybe the Percocet did.”

“Only since he’s come back from Afghanistan,” said Molly.


“Good bloke? Solid head? Willing to listen to reason, or stubborn as an old goat?” asked Lestrade.

“He’s very focused. I think…he was a bit lost, when he came back. And then he found out the Empire was in trouble, and it’s like every bit of his concentration has been centered here.” Molly strained up on her toes to put one of the pots on the hooks above her station. “It’s a bit intense, sometimes. I think he wants the Empire to succeed more than anything.”

The pot began to slip; Lestrade stepped forward and caught it before it could crash to the floor. He grinned at Molly; she smiled shyly back, and handed him another pot to hang.

“Do anything to achieve that, will he?” asked Lestrade.

Molly glanced at him. “Not very good at casual snooping, are you?”
“Not very, no.”

“He wants to save the Empire, but I don’t think he’s willing to hurt anyone to do it,” said Molly. “He was a doctor, you know. Before he was in the Army.”

“I think I did know, yeah.”

“Well, there you are. Hippocratic oath and all that.”

Lestrade smiled. “I don’t think the Hippocratic oath extends to hurting someone’s feelings.”

Molly frowned. “Sorry?”

“Never mind,” said Lestrade, and he reached for a skillet. “Where’s this go?”

“On a hook by the stove,” said Molly. “You don’t have to help, I know you’re busy.”

“It’s all right,” said Lestrade. “I don’t mind.”

Lestrade glanced at Artie on the prep table as he passed. The boy was giving him something of a manic grin.

“Sherlock’s lovely. So’s John. Think they’re in love yet?” asked Artie, dreamily.

“Hopefully not,” said Lestrade. He hung the pot on its hook, and went back to help Molly with the rest of the pots and pans.

Chapter End Notes

No personal recipe to share today, but you all had such fun with the chocolate pie last week that I couldn’t help including these two. I made this tiramisu recipe once about two years ago, and it was delicious and worked perfectly. Then about six months ago I gave the recipe to a friend for a dinner party, and despite following the instructions to the letter, for some reason the custard didn’t set. (Neither of us know why.) We improvised by shoving the whole concoction into the freezer: and presto, frozen tiramisu. YUM! I think it actually tasted better this way!

If you’re looking for tiramisu with a twist – this recipe for peanut butter and jelly tiramisu is also pretty easy and tasty. I made it for my sister-in-law who’s a huge fan of pb&j sandwiches, and it was a hit.

Happy cooking, everyone!
Chapter Six

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. The staff of the Empire is exhausted, slumped over tables and next to doorframes. They all look grim and slightly nervous, and only ARTIE, whose hand is bandaged, looks happy, although it’s more of a goofy expression than a really cheerful one.]

SHERLOCK: Well. That was…not exactly tolerable. The salads were wilted, the soup was lukewarm, the drink service lagged, we aren’t going to mention the lack of tomatoes in the chicken, and thank God you didn’t serve me the tiramisu yesterday, I would never have come back. However, you seem to handle the pressure well, are incredibly flexible when working together as a group, particularly between the front and back of house. You’re to be commended for that; I’ve seen plenty of good restaurants that can’t manage that much.

[Close-up on JOHN’s face; he winces at the “good restaurant” line, and we can tell he knows that SHERLOCK isn’t including the Empire in that assessment.]

SHERLOCK cont.: I understand you have reservations for your dinner service?

JOHN: Seven tables. That’s about the average. There’s usually some walk-ins as well.

SHERLOCK: So there will be some prepwork now.

JOHN: Actually, I usually give everyone an hour to regroup, and then yeah.

SHERLOCK: Well then. Regroup, if that’s what you do.

* 

The moment the red light on Anderson’s camera went off, John left the kitchen. He had no doubt that Sherlock’s eyes were following him out, but the other man made no move or sound to stop him. Just as well; the last thing John wanted in that moment was to try to talk to Sherlock Holmes – either about the lunch service, or the upcoming dinner service – or God forbid, the kiss they’d shared the night before, and the uncomfortable and strange conversation they’d had over Artie in the snow. John didn’t even stop walking long enough to put on his coat. He kept his face down, not wanting to so much as notice anyone he would pass on the pavement, much less recognize them.

Walking, his mind was allowed to wander. John let it, his feet pounding the pavement as he circled the block of buildings.

He used to be like them, the young men, excited about their service, eager to go to far-flung places. He’d bought into the hype of serving Queen and country, being a better man, standing up for what was right and fighting what was wrong. He’d heard all the motivational speeches, felt his heart swell with pride, let himself be carried on the thankful prayers and cards and wishes of a grateful nation.

He’d forgotten, in the intervening years, about those initial days, before he’d gone anywhere with the pips on his shoulders, before he’d seen war and death and blood and tears and pain and the nauseous feeling when the man who’d just offered you a light didn’t exist anymore. When it was just chance that you hadn’t leaned in a centimeter further to take it, and you were alive with scratches and he was atoms and dust.

John leaned heavily on the cane, and cursed it. His shoulder ached in the cold; he cursed that, too.
John let himself wander in the memories: basic training, the exhaustion from a hard day’s running and carrying and fetching and climbing. The feel of the pillow, pounded thin, under his head, the scratch of the blanket rubbing against his cheek. The sounds of other men groaning and farting and wanking in the room they shared, the creak of bedsprings as they shifted in their sleep, or for reasons John didn’t much contemplate. His bed in Basic had been made comfortable by exhaustion, and sometimes he missed both.

It took him a minute to realize that he wasn’t walking alone; a quick glance showed that Mary was walking alongside him now, hands in her pockets. She didn’t look at the ground. Mary looked straight ahead, thoughtful, as if she were just another pedestrian whose stride happened to match his.

Walking in formation, that was another thing he missed. John unconsciously matched his steps to Mary’s, and heard the resolute clip clip clip as they continued. He saw Mary’s mouth quirk a little, and then looked back down to the ground.

“Do you remember what we were like together?” asked Mary suddenly, as they were closing in on their second lap.

John looked up from the pavement, briefly. Mary wasn’t looking at him; she was still focused on the pavement ahead.

“Yeah,” he said, cautiously. “I thought we were good.”

“Well, you would,” said Mary pleasantly. “I’m not saying it wasn’t good, mind you, but there were lots of reasons why we wouldn’t have lasted, you know.”

John frowned. “I know you never really said why you broke it off.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Right man, wrong time, I think.”

John shoved his hands further into his pockets. “Right man?”

“Of course.” Mary stopped walking and looked up to the sky. John turned to face her. “I was so in love with you, I couldn’t see straight. Took me ages to realize you didn’t feel the same.”

“Mary—”

“No, let me finish. I know you loved me. I don’t doubt it for a minute. And we were good together, in a way. Except – you know how when you’re putting together a puzzle, and two pieces hook up so very nearly, but you can tell there’s little gaps because the fit isn’t quite right? You could probably let them sit there, and it almost looks right, and the lines are nearly linking, but as much as you want those pieces to fit, they’re never really meant to be together? That was you and me, John. We were so, so close, but there were always those little gaps between us that I couldn’t cross. And I thought – maybe if I just give you a bit of time, I can turn you around to the other side and we’ll fit just perfectly.”

“Right man, wrong time,” repeated John.

“Exactly.” Mary smiled at him. It was a sad smile, but there weren’t tears in her eyes.

“We could have waited for the right time, you know,” said John. “It would have come around, eventually.”

Mary laughed. “Do you know what I love most about you, John Watson?”
“My charm? My boyish good looks? My irrefutable ability to always find the telly remote?”

Mary grinned and shook her head. “Your tenacity.”

John had no idea how to take that. “Ah.”

“One thing about you, you’re not a quitter. You set yourself in a direction and you just keep going – won’t stop for anything. No matter how bad we were, you wouldn’t even think of breaking it off.”

“We weren’t bad.”

“No, but we were getting there. You would have kept on trying to make our relationship work, long after it was over, if I hadn’t let you go. If I hadn’t made you go. That’s one of the things I love about you, John. You are so wonderfully, fantastically stubborn, you can’t see when something you love is over.”

Oh.

John laughed bitterly. “Right. I get it. I’ll just throw in the towel and send home the camera crew, shall I? Since the Empire is finished. What’s the point?”

“John.” Mary touched his arm. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

“It’s what everyone else is saying. The Empire’s finished, it’s past its time, put it down before it bleeds out on the pavement anymore. Might as well call it a day and sell up the decorations.”

“You’re twisting my words.”

“You can’t tell me you don’t agree.”

“All right then,” said Mary, a bit angry now. “I don’t believe in the Empire. But I believe in John Watson, and I know you won’t give up on it. Look what you’ve done already! People are actually curious about the Empire, there were people looking in the windows all afternoon, and I’ll be surprised if we aren’t half full tonight.”

“People looking for Sherlock,” dismissed John.

“And who brought Sherlock here? If there’s any way to save the Empire, it’s going to be you who finds it. Not Sherlock Bloody Holmes.”

John swallowed; he had to blink hard to keep his vision clear. “Mary Morstan. Is this your way of saying you’re still in love with me?”

“Wouldn’t matter if I was,” said Mary. “You might be the right man, but it’s still not the right time. Not for us, anyway.”

John nodded, wondering at the mix of relief and sadness he suddenly felt, and hoping it didn’t show on his face.

Perhaps it didn’t, because Mary reached up and kissed his cheek. “Love you, you daft soldier.”

John listened to Mary’s footsteps fade into the alleyway behind the Empire, clear and crisp. After a moment, he followed, thinking of the pile of paperwork on the desk in the manager’s office, the phone calls to place for orders, the veg order to track down. Too much to do, not enough time to do it, and John stopped about five feet away from the door, staring at it, wondering if Sherlock was on
the other side.

Thinking of Sherlock brought the kiss they’d shared the night before immediately to mind. The taste of the tea and tomatoes on Sherlock’s lips, the way his body had pressed up against John, the warmth from his hands on the back of his neck. John felt his chest contract just thinking about it, and his breathing hitched.

“Christ,” he muttered. This was stupid, this was childish, he was a grown man and not a sodding teenage girl, he would bloody well hold himself together and not lose his senses over a bloke who looked too damn good in a purple shirt for his own good. It was his kitchen, and his restaurant, and he wasn’t going to let some arsehole of a celebrity keep him too afraid to walk into his own kitchen and his own restaurant. Like hell.

John didn’t move.

Eventually, the door opened, and Harry’s head poked out. “Are you coming in?”

“Yes,” said John.

“All right.” Harry paused. “Is it true?”

“What?”

“That Sherlock spent the night at the house.”

“Harry, you spent the night at the house, you know he wasn’t there this morning.”

“Because Artie said—”

“Artie is high on Percocet, Artie can’t be trusted.”

“He’s not here,” added Harry. “Sherlock, I mean – he went off to do some sort of publicity thing with Anderson and Sally.”

John’s stomach settled. “Your point?”

“The fact that Artie can’t be trusted has nothing to do with his being high on Percocet.”

“Shove over,” said John, and limped through the door and into the kitchen, where he came face to face with the Empire staff, all lined up and staring expectantly at him. “Ah. Hello?”

“Are we toast?” asked Molly. Her eyes were still faintly pink, but otherwise she looked as though she was trying very hard to be brave.

“We’re not toast,” said John gently. “It was just one service. You did fine. We had a few mishaps —”

Artie coughed. “Disasters.”

“Irregularities,” said John, a bit louder. “And everyone worked together and we got through them and everyone was fed and no one died. I think that’s what you count as a success, don’t you?”

“Well, if no one died,” said Mary dryly. “Because then we’ve always been successful.”

“I think someone had a heart attack during dinner in 1993,” said Harry.
“No deaths in the workplace since 1993,” said Artie. “We could make a poster.”

“Enough,” said John firmly. “There’s two hours before dinner service and there’s four hours of work to do. We’re going to focus on dinner, right? It’s what, seven reservations?”

“Twelve,” said Harry, and everyone’s heads swiveled. She shrugged. “People have been ringing! You really want me to turn them away?”

“I almost think we should, in light of what happened this afternoon,” said John.

“Oi!” said Mary. “I can handle twelve tables.”

“Mary—”

“Artie’s not going to chop his finger off again, is he? So he can help clear the tables and serve the drinks, and I’ll do the heavy lifting, and John can wash and Harry can be sous.”

“Who’s going to seat people?” asked John.

“Artie can fit that in,” said Mary, stubbornly. “John, we’ll be fine. It’ll be a brilliant dinner and we can handle anything they throw at us. Lunch might have been horrible but really? What else could go wrong?”

Molly let out a squeak. “You did not just say that.”


“Artie,” says John, wearily, and then he paused. “Zombie attack?”

“It could happen,” said Artie.

John blinked and stared at Artie for a long minute. He looked at the rest of the crew: Molly, still halfway to tears; Harry, apprehensive and inching for the bottle of brandy; Mary, stubbornly optimistic and still believing in him, as though he were some sort of higher power with the ability to fix everything with a single swipe of his hand.

And Artie. Always Artie, who along with the cockroaches and the Kendal Mint Cake, would manage to persevere. There was only one way to ever deal with Artie, and remembering this, John began to smile.

Of course. “Artie, you’re fired.”

Artie grinned right back at John. “Right, boss. Want I should finish the washing up?”

“Yes, do,” said John. “Mary, can you do a bit of shopping and fetch more tomatoes for the dinner service?”

“Aye, aye, captain,” said Mary cheerily, and went to fetch her coat.

“Harry, do you think you can be frightening enough to put the fear of God into the veg man, or should I?”

“Oh, I’ll do it,” said Harry, and her eyes flashed.

“What about me?” asked Molly, small.
John took her by the shoulders and bent down just enough to look into her eyes. “Molly Hooper. I need you to bake a pie.”

Molly’s smile was small, but perfect, and balance to the universe was restored.

* 

John honestly meant to work on the accounts, to place orders for the following week, to pay some of the bills which continued to be delivered with red ink and in staggering amounts. Concentration proved to be difficult, and not just because of the scarf folded on the corner of the desk. Normally the Empire staff made themselves scarce during the break between lunch and dinner, desperate for a place to go that wouldn’t remind them of work. Today, however, energized and excited, none of them seemed to be willing to let go – and their enthusiasm meant constant interruptions and questions and requests for acknowledgement.

John wished he’d have thought to lock the door, or at least escape to the upstairs flat, where he might have been able to work in peace.

“Hullo, John, wondering if I could have a word?” asked Gregory Lestrade, knocking on the doorframe. John looked up from the chequebook, his head still swimming in numbers, the frown already set on his face. Lestrade didn’t look perturbed. “Am I disturbing you?”

“No,” said John, somewhat irritable. “At least, no more so than Mary ringing about the exact type of tomato, or Artie wanting to look on the internet for a new way to fold napkins.”

“Bit busy today?”

“I don’t understand it,” said John as Lestrade stepped inside and sat on the chair wedged in between the door and the desk. “Sherlock gave them a dressing down, but it’s as though it was water off a duck’s back – they might not have even heard it. And I know they did, I saw their faces after. Like someone kicked their puppies.”

“You dressed them back up again, that’s why,” said Lestrade. “They’d sooner listen to you than to Sherlock.”

“He’s the expert.”

“But you’re the captain.” John snorted. “Don’t know why they’d listen to me. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”

“Saving their jobs, that’s what.”

“Again, Sherlock,” said John.

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Lestrade. “Come on, John, you know as well as I do. Half the restaurants we’ve profiled in the last four years are closed already. A quarter of the ones still open won’t last another six months. What Sherlock says is true, and it makes for excellent television, but it only goes so far as what the owners are willing to do. And most of the time, they’re not.”

“Christ,” sighed John, and gave up on the paperwork to rub his face with his hands. “So I should give up now? Is that what you’re saying?”

John snorted. “Right. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Good man,” said Lestrade, and got to his feet. “Oh. Your chef, Molly—”

John didn’t look up from the paperwork. “She’ll be fine, she’s just a bit nervous with the cameras.”

“I know. I was…do you know if she’s seeing anyone? Boyfriend? Girlfriend? Frighteningly large husband with a set of brass knuckles?”

John glanced up. “Ah…no. I don’t believe she is.”

“Good,” said Lestrade, perking up. “Excellent. Thank you. She goes on about you, I wasn’t sure if you and she weren’t – ah – together.”

“I dated Mary, not Molly,” said John carefully. “Molly’s a sensitive one, and you’re only here a week. Don’t break her heart, I don’t think the Omani chicken can handle it.”

“You dated Mary?”

“It was a long time ago and best forgotten,” said John firmly.

“It’s just…never mind.”

“What?”

“Well,” said Lestrade, and looked pointedly at the blue scarf on the corner of the desk. John looked at it, too, and quickly picked up the scarf and shoved it in a drawer. It didn’t seem to help; the feel of the fabric lingered on his skin, and John was sure he’d open the drawer to touch it again as soon as Lestrade left the room. “Look, mate, normally I wouldn’t say anything—”

“Then don’t.”

“But,” continued Lestrade, “Sherlock Holmes might be a great man. That doesn’t mean he’s a good one. I’ll be careful with Molly. You be careful with yourself.”

*

Sherlock stood outside the manager’s office, just looking in. John hadn’t seen him yet; he had a frown on his face while he worked through some bills, writing out cheques and punching numbers into a calculator. Every so often he rolled his shoulders or rubbed the back of his neck, and Sherlock wondered how long he’d been at it. A while, most likely.

Sherlock ought to have been in the kitchen, watching what Molly was doing to prepare for the dinner service, and honestly, he had stopped in when he came back from shooting the promos with Anderson. But now, Sherlock still wanted the brief respite from observing. Well, observing Molly, anyway. Observing John Watson proved to be something else entirely.

John closed his eyes and rolled his head back in a large arc, clearly taking his time with the process. Sherlock watched as his neck stretched out of his collar, long lines disappearing into his hairline. He held his breath, and when John lifted his head again, he opened his eyes and stared right at him.

“Hi,” said John, cautiously, and Sherlock exhaled. “You’re back.”

“Yes.” Sherlock stepped into the office. “I thought I would – is that my scarf?”
John glanced at the pile of blue knitting on the corner of the desk, as if surprised to see it there. “Ah, yes. You left it last night. I should have mentioned it this morning, sorry.”

“Quite all right. I thought I’d dropped it along the road.” Sherlock’s hand hovered over the scarf, but picking it up would mean needing to find a place to put it, which would mean leaving John’s office, and he wasn’t ready to do that just yet. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” John paused. “Ah – about last—”

“I thought lunch went very well,” said Sherlock quickly. “Apart from the obvious mishaps.”

“Couldn’t have gone worse,” said John.

“Poison. Pestilence. Conflagration,” said Sherlock absently. He turned to look at the photographs and framed items along the wall, but glanced back when he heard John’s chuckle.

“Funny, that’s about what Artie said.”

“Is he all right?”

“About as fine as anyone can expect Artie to be, anyway. Bit high on Percocet, I’m hoping he comes down before the dinner service. Thank you again for taking him, by the way.”

Sherlock shrugged. “It was nothing. I needed a bit of fresh air, and you couldn’t afford to be two men down.”

“You’re not meant to be carting my injured employees around.”

“It was hardly that. You know the doctor on duty at the clinic?”


“She recognized your bandaging. I suppose you worked there as a doctor at one time?”

“Yes, for a while,” said John cautiously.

“Ah,” said Sherlock suddenly, stopping in front of a framed recipe. “This is intriguing.”

“Hmm? Oh. That. One of the recipes the original John brought back from Afghanistan.”

Sherlock peered at the weathered page; it was torn at one edge, as if pulled out of a notebook, and the faint blue paper was lined and faded with age. The letters might have been in black, but were now faded to brown, and the handwriting was the highly stylized form of the 1880s, fancy script with thin curves and deep straight lines. “His handwriting?”

“Yes.” John’s chair scraped against the floor, and he joined Sherlock by the recipe. “Qabili pilau – basically rice and carrots. The story goes that he got the recipe from his batman. Every year on the anniversary of his return home, he’d take over the kitchen and make it. It was one of the first things on the Empire’s menu back in 1949.”

“It’s not on the menu now.”

“Dad stopped making it when I was still a kid. I haven’t had it in years – thought I’d get to try some when I went to Afghanistan, but only Army slop for me.” John smiled. “Anyway, when my great-grandfather John went to Russia, he brought back these—”
John pointed to two other framed recipes, in a more modern hand on less aged paper. Sherlock scanned the recipes quickly.

“The bread from the basket,” he said. “And something with red peppers?”

“The peppers never took off,” said John. “But the bread’s all right.”

Sherlock read the recipe and frowned. “Somewhat unconventional baking method.”

John shrugged. “It works.”

“How.”

“You don’t think so?”

“It shouldn’t, not with the yeast you have in your kitchen,” Sherlock said, cautiously. “With active dry yeast, you need to proof in lukewarm water to start the process of fermentation. Without that initial heat, the yeast isn’t activated until the actual baking process, which means the dough likely doesn’t rise. That would result in the somewhat heavy consistency of the bread I was given yesterday.”

“People seem to like it well enough.”

“Well enough in comparison is hardly liking in practice,” said Sherlock.

“So I suppose that’s something you’re going to want to tell us later tonight, is it?”

Sherlock glanced at John. “You dated Mary for a time.”

John shrugged. “I did, a few years back. We’re still friends, or she wouldn’t be working here.”

“It ended amicably, of course. She broke it off with you.”

“Ghosts everywhere today,” said John grimly. “She did. We’re both better off. If you’re looking for dramatic tension, you won’t find any there. She’s had boyfriends since, not sure if she has one now.” John hesitated. “You’re not asking for any particular reason, are you? Or person?”

Sherlock stiffened, and turned back to the recipes on the wall. “No, of course not,” he said, hoping he sounded nonchalant. “Though I believe Anderson was ogling her at various points yesterday. The footage is rather... close.”

John chuckled; it was somewhat high pitched. Sherlock went through half a dozen reasons for the pitch in his mind. “Your director was in here, asking about Molly. Half wonder if the lot of you aren’t on the pull.”

“We’re only here a week. Barely long enough to learn someone’s name,” said Sherlock, conscious of John shifting somewhat closer to him.

“Suppose not.”

“And Lestrade is married.” Sherlock turned to look at John, half out of curiosity what the man might think of his chef becoming involved with a married man.

John didn’t seem overly concerned. His eyes were focused directly on Sherlock; the pupils were so wide that Sherlock could barely make out the fringe of blue around them. “Ah.”
Sherlock struggled to keep up with the conversation. *Stay on track, stay on track, don’t think about how close John is standing to you. “She’s cheating on him.”*

John made a non-committal sound in the back of his throat. “And you? Do you have a girlfriend? Boyfriend?”

“No,” whispered Sherlock, barely able to speak. He could feel the heat from John’s body through his clothes. “Rather too busy to really concentrate on a commitment to anyone. Married to my work, you might say.”

“Ah,” said John, low. “Good. That’s good. You’re single. Like me.”

“Yes,” breathed Sherlock, and kissed him. His hands found their way to John’s hips; he could feel John wrap his fingers around his biceps, holding him in. John’s mouth opened under his; it was the natural extension of the kiss they’d broken off the night before, as if the hours in between hadn’t actually happened. The only real change was the flavor – still John, but now mixed with alcohol – *a beer, German in origin, dark brew* – and carrots – *raw sticks, nibbled during the service because they don’t require cooking or undue attention* – and something else. Sherlock worked the flavor over, tried to pinpoint it, but none of the databases in his head were working, quite. Every part of his mind was on standby, far too interested in the feel of John’s lips under his, the scent of his skin, the warmth that seeped through the cotton shirt to his palms.

This was wrong, this was delicious, this was a monumentally bad idea, this was the most fantastic feeling, this was going to haunt him in another six days, if that long. This was a working relationship and he had to remain a professional, and it felt so. Damn. Good, and Sherlock decided that he’d just have to keep kissing John, if that was what it took to determine the identity of the unique flavor in his mouth. Because Sherlock was a *professional*, and determining flavors was what he did.

“Fuck,” whispered John into Sherlock’s mouth, and he murmured an agreement. His hands started to work John’s shirt from his trousers, pulling on the fabric until he could slip his fingers under to touch his skin. He could feel John pulling at his collar, working his fingers into his hair, tugging at the curls at the back of his neck.

Sherlock turned John against the closed door, and lifted his arms above his head, pinning them against the painted wood. John’s pupils were completely blown out now, and Sherlock abandoned his exploration of John’s mouth to work on his neck. If the taste of John’s mouth was elusive, maybe there would be clues along the skin below his ear, and Sherlock suckled the indentation he found there. *Salt and soap and sweat,* and a somewhat different flavor as well, a bit like the scent of cinnamon and cloves, or maybe tomatoes and onions, as though John had been marinating in a fantastic brew for several hours. John let out a quiet, moaning gasp, and Sherlock moved his mouth down, working his nose into the collar of John’s shirt, until there was space enough to lick at his collarbone.

Same delicious, delectable flavor. Same wonderful mystery to be solved. Sherlock sucked on John’s skin, wondering how much pressure would make John scream. Enough to make the entire building rattle, maybe.

Or perhaps that was just the door.

“John?” called Harry from the other side of the door, and the door rattled against John again. John bucked, trying to push Sherlock away, but Sherlock held his wrists firm. “John, are you in there? I wanted to go over the menu, did you want to do a full menu as normal or a shortened version like we did for lunch?”

“Answer her,” murmured Sherlock against his skin. “I’m busy.”

“Bit busy, Harry, one moment,” called John, and his voice was strained.

“No, I’m busy,” said Sherlock patiently, but pleased about the strain in John’s voice; that was progress, at least. “You answer her. Tell her the full menu, I want to see your staff at its best.”

“Full menu, Harry, please,” said John, and his voice went up to nearly a squeak at the end as Sherlock’s tongue did something enormously clever and ticklish against John’s earlobe.

“Right,” said Harry.

John’s muscles relaxed a little, but his pulse raced against Sherlock’s cheek. Sherlock worked at the skin, waiting for Harry’s footsteps to signal her departure.

“Are you all right?” called Harry, and Sherlock cursed against John’s neck.

“Fine, just fine! Go on back to whatever you were doing.”

“Because the menus are in your office.”

“Bollocks,” said John, and burst into giggles. He shoved his chest against Sherlock again, harder this time, and Sherlock broke away. He looked at John’s flushed skin, his disheveled shirt, and the dark mark on his neck, and found himself joining John in delighted laughter.

“Bollocks, John?” asked Sherlock, and John tugged at his arms. Sherlock swooped in for one last kiss on the lips, and let him go, stepping away to straighten his own shirt.

“One moment, Harry,” called John, as he hastily tucked his shirt back into his trousers. He turned to Sherlock. “That was the most ridiculous thing—”

“You invaded Afghanistan,” said Sherlock, smug.

“Family tradition,” retorted John. “Hand me the menus there?”

Sherlock lifted the stack of menus and handed them to John. John grinned at him, a bit lopsided, and turned to open the door on Harry, who stood on the other side, her arms crossed and her mouth pursed. “Here you are, Harry. Anything else?”

“Mmm,” said Harry, and her eyes darted to Sherlock leaning against the desk. “Strategy meeting?”

“Of a sort,” said Sherlock.

“Sarah called. She wanted to know if you’d given any more thought to her offer.”

Sherlock’s ears perked up. John sighed, and ran his hand through his hair.

“Right, thanks, Harry. If that’s—”

“Have you?” Harry asked, insistent.

“No, I haven’t, and now isn’t the time—”

“I think it is,” persisted Harry. “I mean, lunch wasn’t exactly a success, and if Sarah’s willing to
have you back, maybe you should just cut your losses and go.”

“No,” said John shortly. “Sarah doesn’t want me back at the clinic, she’s just being friendly.”

“I wasn’t talking about the clinic,” said Harry, and she looked pointedly at Sherlock. “But that too.”

“Harry. Leave it.”

“If you like. She’s pretty, Sarah. I wouldn’t leave it too long.”

“Harry!” shouted John, and Harry clutched the menus to her chest.

“Going,” she said. “Dinner’s in an hour.”

Harry disappeared. The dining room was empty beyond her, but John didn’t turn around again. Instead he stood in the doorway, his shoulders sagging, and he lowered his head.

Sherlock’s heart pounded. “Sarah?” he heard himself say, thinking of the pretty, mouse-like woman at the clinic, who had recognized John’s handiwork, and known immediately who Artie was, and didn’t question about what Sherlock was doing there. “Your…ex?”

“No exactly,” said John.

Sherlock stood. “You said you were single. Like me.”

“I am,” said John. “Sarah’s a friend.”

He turned, and now able to see his face, Sherlock was able to read him. The slump of the shoulders, the guilty turn of the mouth, the darkness to the eyes, the fidgeting in the hands.

“Oh,” said Sherlock, seeing it. “Friends. With benefits. I see.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Excuse me,” said Sherlock, almost blindly, and brushed past John without another word, left the restaurant. On the pavement, he glanced down the road to the clinic, and with a tug of his coat, determinedly went in the other direction.
Chapter Seven

*Women, however charming, have this disadvantage: They distract the mind from food!*  
--Agatha Christie (Death on the Nile)

[Interior, Dining Room, Friday night service. It’s busy and loud and energetic. MARY is talking to some guests.]

MARY: The chicken is very good, I had it myself tonight.

CUSTOMER #1: And no stomach aches yet?

[Laughter, but MARY’s is somewhat strained. Cut to the bar, where JOHN is serving up drinks. His hands are steady, but his grin is a bit brittle, and he keeps glancing behind him, into the kitchen.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: The dinner rush is somewhat more rushed than normal; word is out in town that there’s someone at the Empire, and people are coming in droves. Which for the Empire, means there are more customers in one night than they’ve seen in a week.

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. MOLLY is already spinning like a top, eyes wide, hair falling from her ponytail, five things on the stove and four in the oven and she spins so quickly, she runs into ARTIE and sends a tray of puddings flying.]

MOLLY: Ack!

SHERLOCK V.O.: Par for the course, actually.

[Montage. MOLLY drops a pan of chicken onto the floor. MOLLY spills olive oil onto the range. MOLLY backs into ARTIE, knocking the prep table, and a half dozen eggs roll off.]

MOLLY: Can I go home now?

[INTERIOR, Dining room. People are looking somewhat impatient. Other people are trying their first bites of dinner.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: It takes well over an hour before anyone is given food to eat. The reactions are predictable.

CUSTOMER #2: Eugh. Was this a shoe once?

[One person puts a forkful of food in their mouth, and removes the fork a moment later, the food still intact. Another person takes a bite, and immediately chugs their glass of wine.]

CUSTOMER #3 (to the camera, red-faced and cheery): How do I like the meal? Well, with enough alcohol, anything’s possible.

* 

Dinner went somewhat more smoothly than lunch, despite the return of the full menu. At least, John thought so, but he was kept busy either at the bar, serving up drinks, or showing the rush of customers to their seats. Apart from the tables who’d actually bothered to make their reservations for the night, there were another couple of dozen diners who just showed up, either familiar
enough with the Empire’s track record that they didn’t believe a reservation was necessary (and in
truth, it seldom was anymore), or they noticed the busy dining room and decided to drop in and see
what was going on.

Or at least try for a glimpse of Sherlock. Everyone was made to sign a waiver before so much as
entering the restaurant, and John saw nearly everyone twist and turn and vie for seats with better
views of the kitchen doors, eager for a look of the celebrity in town.

“Sell more booze,” Harry muttered to John from the kitchen, where she was taking Artie place in
the annex. It was a safer location than the bar, where she’d continue to be dodging the cameras,
and also kept her away from the alcohol – although John wasn’t about to admit that was a reason to
keep Harry in the back. At least by the sink, her back was to the camera, and Artie, whose hand
was still bandaged, was at least useful in clearing tables, and helping Molly from time to time.

“Why do I need to sell more booze?” asked John. “The kitchen’s a bit slow, but it’s not that bad.”

“We get great markup on the booze,” said Harry. “If there’s customers, we might as well make
some money off of them.”

John opened his mouth to object, but rolled his eyes instead. He gathered all the tumblers he could
carry and went back out to the front of house.

The other advantage to being behind the bar was that it gave John a good view of the dining room,
as well as the kitchen through the window. It didn’t hurt that Sherlock sat on the other side of the
window, quietly observing the evening’s action from a stool in the corner. John was too busy to
really sit and look at him, but every time he caught a glimpse, Sherlock looked lost in thought, his
fingers steepled beneath his nose. Every so often, he would wince, somewhat pained, and let out a
paper-thin elongated sigh.

“What?” asked John finally, unable to keep the question bottled in. It was barely an hour into the
dinner service; the first tables seated were only now getting their main courses, and nearly
everyone was perfectly happy to booze it up while they waited, though John could see plenty of
people glancing at their watches with amused looks, and digging into their purses or pockets for
snacks. Well, at least they’d come prepared. Molly was in the weeds, and John wasn’t all that
confident she’d find her way out before midnight, even with Artie’s assistance. “What did you
see?”

“Please don’t disturb me,” was all Sherlock said, and John turned his back on him and
concentrated on making a whiskey sour.

It was a long night, and when John finally closed the door on the last customer, it was gone eleven,
and Molly was a crying wreck on the kitchen floor. The dining room was a shambles, Artie was
nowhere to be seen, Mary was trying to comfort Molly, and Harry was doggedly determined to
wash every last dish before anyone went home to sleep.

John threw the lock on the door, and let his forehead rest against the glass. Somewhere behind him,
the camera recorded him doing this. It seemed natural, somehow, to remain standing and let
Anderson get the footage he needed, and John waited patiently, wondering what the shot would
look like in the end. He could almost hear Sherlock’s voice-over, saying something in that dry and
barely amused voice which would make him look rather pitiful and hopeless. John felt almost
pitiful and hopeless, and that was stupid, because it’d been a good night, the restaurant had been
full, Mary had been working her very best, they’d brought in well over four thousand quid on
alcohol alone.
It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t even close enough. Four thousand a night, times twenty nights – they might make a dent in what they owed the bank, but it wouldn’t be enough, not with the type of loan Harry had been stupid enough to negotiate.

Molly might have been in the weeds. But John and Harry were in the fucking swamp.

“Sod it all,” said John to the doorknob, and reached up to turn the sign to “closed”. He lowered the blinds and went to strip the tables of the tablecloths.

Over to the side, Anderson switched off the stationary camera. “That went well.”

“Did it?” asked John evenly. He didn’t know what sort of “well” Anderson meant, and didn’t much care.

“Got a lot of good footage,” said Anderson. “Always hard to get the right reaction shot, you have to really pick who you’re going to try for, who might make the best expression when they taste something vile. Half the time it’s over the top, because everyone wants to be on the telly, so they play up their disgust, you know? But your customers like you, they kept their disgust pretty natural. It’ll look great on telly.”

John sighed. “Thanks for that.”

“Big day tomorrow,” said Anderson, as he packed the shoulder-mounted camera away.

“Oh?”

“Sure,” said Anderson. “Tomorrow’s when the real work starts. You think today was hard? Wait until Sherlock gets his hands on you.”

John flashed back to the manager’s office, and the feel of Sherlock’s hands against his skin.

“Ah,” he said, and it came out somewhat mangled. Anderson gave him an odd look, but went back to packing the camera.

“Don’t know what they see in him,” continued Anderson. “Right tosser, but he’s never wanting for someone to warm his bed, wherever we go. Guess that’s what comes with celebrity.”

John held himself still. “Is that right.”

“I remember this one bird in Edinburgh – or was it a bloke? No, the bloke was Truro, the bird in Edinburgh, though she was—”

“Sam.” Sally Donovan’s voice cut through just as Anderson was clearly getting warmed up to his story, and Anderson turned back to his camera equipment. “Are you about done? I’m knackered.”

“Right, sorry,” said Anderson, and he slung the bag of tapes over his shoulder. “See you in the morning mate.”

“Right,” said John, and he watched Anderson unlock the front door and head out into the street, the bell on the door tinkling merrily as it swung closed. Sally stayed behind a moment, biting her lip. “Was there anything you needed?”

“No,” said Sally, but she didn’t sound certain. And then she dove right in. “Look…I don’t want to interfere, but – stay away from him.”

“Anderson?”
“Sherlock. You know why he does this, right? He doesn’t really want to help you or the Empire. He doesn’t care about any of the restaurants he visits. He doesn’t even get paid all that much. He gets off on it, on everyone else’s failure. And the worse the restaurant, the more he gets off. One day there’s a restaurant what’s going to actually go up in flames, and he’s going to be the one telling us where to point the camera.”

John held the cane tightly in his hand. Sally’s face was quiet and serious, and he knew without having to ask that she wasn’t joking.

“He’d let a restaurant fail? Just…for the telly ratings?”

There was a sharp rap against the window; Anderson, carrying the bag, and looking cold and impatient. He tapped his watch and looked pointedly at Sally.

“Just…be careful,” said Sally, and she turned to go.

The bell tinkled her departure; John limped slowly over to throw the lock again. His leg ached; his shoulder throbbed, and he felt like sitting down on the closest chair and going to sleep on the spot.

Instead, John pushed through to the kitchen, his arms full of discarded napkins and stained tablecloths. Molly was at least no longer sitting on the kitchen floor; she was leaning against the prep table now, wiping the last of the tears away while Mary talked to her in low, almost furiously serious tones.

“All right, Molly?” called John.

“Yes,” said Molly, sniffling. “Just…not looking forward to tomorrow.”

“It’ll be fine. Whatever Sherlock’s got planned, I’m sure he means well.”

Mary gave him an odd look. “John, we know what he’s got planned, he’s giving Molly a master-class in cooking.”

John frowned. “What? When—?”

“About an hour ago. He left right after. I thought you knew?”

The tablecloths were slipped, and John struggled to get a better hold. “Ah – no. I didn’t. He left?”

“Yeah. You all right?”

“Yeah, of course, don’t be stupid,” said John, and he turned to the stairs leading up to the first floor flat. “I’ve got to get this in the wash – Mary, can you get the Hoovering tonight? Ta.”

John shoved the wash into the machines and upended the soap. It was probably too much soap, but he didn’t care, and he set the wash to go, and leaned against the washer, rubbing his eyes.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” John muttered to himself. It was ridiculous, really, the way John felt abandoned, that Sherlock had left the restaurant an hour before, without saying goodbye, without so much as a word or a wave or anything to acknowledge him. Stupid because honestly, what did he expect? The man was a fucking celebrity, he probably tried to hit up all the managers of all the restaurants, and certainly the number of pretty young birds in the dining room, he could have had his pick of them and gone home with any of them. Stupid to think he’d actually want John, a middle-aged near-broke gimpy restaurant manager who couldn’t even keep his business in the black.
No. John was not going to stand about and moon over Sherlock Bloody Holmes.

John dropped his arms and took a deep breath. There was too much to do to get ready for the next day, and then he was going to walk home, pour himself a fucking large snifter of brandy, and sleep until morning, and if he was lucky, he wasn’t going to think anymore about Sherlock Bloody Holmes.

With this decided, John went back down the stairs, and set to work.

* 

[Interior, Kitchen. MOLLY looks tired and bright-eyed. ARTIE looks pained and exhausted and half-asleep. MARY has her arms crossed and her lips are pursed. She keeps glancing back and forth between the door to the dining room and MOLLY. SHERLOCK leans on the warming table (which is happily turned off) and speaks.]

SHERLOCK: Right, so. I think we know where we’re headed.

MOLLY: I need help.

SHERLOCK: Yes.

ARTIE: Me?

SHERLOCK: I believe you’re the only Artie in this establishment, so yes, Artie, you. I’ll see you here. Bring coffee.

ARTIE: Oh, and how do you like it?

SHERLOCK: You’re supposedly a clever lad, deduce it.

* 

When Sherlock opened his eyes, he found himself in the park, sitting on a bench under a tree. The world was silent, still, and cold, and the stars shone overhead like bits of sparkling sugar on a dark chocolate biscuit.

It took him several minutes to realize where he was. Cold, faint hint of sea in the air, so near the coast. Birdsong and clear view of the stars, not in the city. The sky is dark but there are traces of light on the horizon to the…northwest, a city of some sort, but not quite as bright as London, and certainly the air is fresher. Kent. A bench, a path – I’m in a park. Ah yes.

He remembered now. He’d gone for a walk, blindly leaving the Empire, his head pounding and his stomach in knots, all of the thoughts and deductions and observations running into themselves. It was always the same at the end of an Observation Day, there was too much information to sift through, too many things that had gone wrong and too many times he’d wanted to jump in, shout at the people who were destroying food which ought to have been sublime, or at the very least, edible. And yet, he was forced to sit in the corner and watch, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing.

Sherlock hated Observation Day. What was the point of observing if he couldn’t use what he learned? Except, of course, he would use it – the following two days. That didn’t keep his skin from crawling, his fingers from itching, desperate to do something about it now.

The first year, he’d tried calming the itch with cocaine. That hadn’t worked very well; it’d calmed him, yes, but it also meant that he couldn’t have given a fuck the rest of the week, and the minute
Lestrade had realized what he was doing, he’d put a stop to it.

Sherlock barely remembered what he’d said to the staff before he left the restaurant. Some sort of platitude, commending them on finishing the night, telling them he’d see them in the morning, ready to work. He’d review it later. Anderson was useless about many things; he was never in quite the right place at the right time, never had the angle Sherlock would have preferred to show the food or the technique in quite the right light, but one thing he was very good at was having the daily footage in Sherlock’s hotel room, ready for viewing.

And anyway, the hours spent on the park bench, mentally reviewing every scrap of information he’d observed over the last day and a half, had made one thing abundantly clear: the Empire, as it was now, didn’t stand a chance of lasting the month. It was bleeding money, the food was horrible, the chef was incompetent, and its owner was blind.

**Owner, John.**

Sherlock frowned. John wasn’t blind. John might be many things, but stupid wasn’t one of them. He had the wherewithal to call in Sherlock, for one thing, and the stomach to stand up and demand assistance. There weren’t a hundred restaurant owners with the courage to do that.

There was something else about John, too, something that set him apart from any other restaurant owner who’d called on Sherlock for help. Because at the end of the day, anyone calling for Sherlock Holmes had some amount of courage. But John...it wasn’t desperation, because John didn’t strike Sherlock as desperate. It wasn’t the fear of impending financial loss. There was something else entirely, something missing in John, and Sherlock wanted to figure out what it was.

“Out for a midnight stroll?”

Sherlock stopped on the pathway. The speaker was behind him, the silky voice recognizable and smooth. He tensed, and waited.

“I give them…oh, a month at best, don’t you?” continued the man, and Sherlock heard his shoes clip-clip along the pavement as he drew closer.

“I don’t make predictions about the longevity of restaurants,” said Sherlock quietly. “It’s a foolhardy practice at best.”

“And a worthless pastime, to be sure, when no one listens to your advice,” continued the man, and drew up next to Sherlock. He let out a withering sigh. “No idea why they didn’t just cut and run when they could have, those Watson siblings, but intelligence and good-looks never go hand-in-hand. Well, not *always.***

Sherlock held himself still, but he could feel the man’s eyes graze over him, head to toe. “Are you going to start with the little chef?” asked the man casually. “Or the owner?”

Sherlock turned to look at the man, to really look at him, despite the thin light from the streetlamps and the moon. “Why do you – oh. *Oh.* I see. This is professional, isn’t it, your interest in the Empire. A suit, trousers more wrinkled than the jacket, tie loosened and tightened in turns over the course of a day, shoes worn for several months but still exhibiting signs of a squeak, indicating that you walk very little in them. All of which are signs of sitting for long periods at a desk, such as one who works in a bank. Mr Moriarty, I presume?”

Moriarty made a small, snorting sort of noise, and glared at Sherlock. “A chef? *Really?* That sort of deductive power and you chose to play with your food all day?”
“Rather more interesting than sitting at a computer terminal, I should think.”

“But far less productive. You eat what you make. I spend it.”

Somehow, Sherlock had the idea that Moriarty wasn’t talking about his paycheck. He waited while Moriarty began to circle around him.

“So what are your big plans for the Empire, Sherlock Holmes? Going to revamp their menu? Teach their mouse of a chef to cook? A simple redecoration, maybe change the name to something a little less overbearing and everything will be fixed, fine and dandy, carry on to the next problem to be solved? You and I both know there’s no hope for the Empire. They could have a hundred nights like this one, and they’d still be lost. And they don’t even have that many. It’s a lost cause, Mr Holmes. Throw in the towel before you waste any more film.”

“Rather certain of that, aren’t you?”

“I know that John Watson is going to fail.”

“Is he?”

Moriarty practically wiggled with amusement. “That’s what people do, Mr Holmes. I just pick up the pieces. To the victor go to spoils, and all that.”

“Curious,” said Sherlock carefully. “Your clients are about to default on a loan, costing your bank hundreds of thousands of pounds, and you’re quite gleeful about it.”

Moriarty stiffened. “Late for you to be out, I should think. Early days for both of us, Mr Holmes. The chef or the manager?”

“The show will air in two months; you’ll have to wait to see,” replied Sherlock.

“The chef, then,” said the man thoughtfully. “Well, the restaurant won’t be around in two months’ time, so I suppose it doesn’t matter either way. Best get some rest, it’ll be quite the interesting day, teaching that child to boil water. Toodles!”

The man set off through the grass at a brisk pace, and Sherlock watched him go, halfway tempted to follow him, just to see where he would go. A fan, he’d called himself the night before. Sherlock didn’t quite believe it.

But one thing he said was correct: it was near midnight. Sherlock glanced up at the moon and the stars, felt the cold air on his freshly exposed neck, and continued walking, letting his feet set the pace. The road at the edge of the park was quiet, and Sherlock took a guess and turned right. Within moments he was on a somewhat busier road, and quickly hailed a taxi.

“Late night,” said the cabbie, conversationally. “Where to, guv?”

The hotel and Anderson’s tapes beckoned. But.

“Baker Street,” said Sherlock, and shut the door.

*  

There was something ironic, of course, about a restaurant owner living on Baker Street. Sherlock supposed John had heard every incarnation of every possible joke, and decided to say nothing at all. However, it still made him smile when he saw the street sign and walked the last few feet to
the front gate.

It was probably one of the more ridiculous things he’d ever done, but Sherlock Holmes tended not to think in those measures, so he couldn’t be certain. The fact that the house on Baker Street was dark was surely a sign that John was asleep, and not elsewhere, because Sherlock didn’t want John to be elsewhere. He’d never find John if John was elsewhere, because Sherlock very much doubted that John was still at the Empire.

And besides; he’d made the cabbie drive by the restaurant, and it was dark too.

The gate was unlocked; Sherlock walked right in. The front door, however, was bolted tight against him, and inspection of the windows and back door proved a similar situation. Sherlock stood as far back to the hedge in the narrow front garden as he could, and looked up. There were three windows on the first floor, all of which were likely to be bedrooms, given the layout of the ground floor. Sherlock put some thought into it, and decided on the bedroom on the right. The center bedroom was sure to be the smallest, and the bedroom on the left looked as though the curtains hadn’t been shifted in weeks. But there was a small chink in the curtains on the bedroom on the right, showing they’d been moved aside at some point recently. It was the safest bet.

Sherlock didn’t stop to consider if a “safe bet” included climbing a somewhat questionable trellis and breaking into the room of a sleeping man. He probably should have done.

Sherlock scaled the trellis easily, grateful for the leather gloves that protected his hands from the rough wood and the sharp ivy. It was a bit precarious, leaning over to jostle the window, but eventually he was able to pull it open. There was one rather frightening moment when he thought he would fall, and was halfway braced to take the fall in his knees rather than his back, but eventually his fingers caught on the other side of the sill, and he managed to work his way into the room, where he tumbled onto the floor with a thump and a faint “Ow”.

Two seconds later, he found himself pinned to the ground by his waist, with an arm snaked around his neck, pulling him up and choking the breath out of him.

“Who are you?” demanded his assailant, the voice gritty and low and nearly not recognizable, but even if the blood flow to his brain wasn’t quite what it had been when he started the evening, Sherlock was at least able to determine who was meant to be in the bedroom he’d just infiltrated.

“John,” gasped Sherlock, and the arm loosened a little.

“Sherlock?!” And then John tightened the arm again. “What the bloody hell are you doing sneaking into my bedroom window?”

“Wanted a word.”


“You were a doctor!”

“I had bad days!”

“I can’t breathe.”

John let him go, and Sherlock fell back to the floor with a thump. He coughed; the cold air against his throat hurt, and he felt the blood flood into his brain. “What sort of idiot leaves his windows unlocked?”
“It’s the first floor.”

“There’s a trellis.”

“You climbed the trellis?” John started to laugh, and Sherlock sat up, rubbing his throat sulkily. “I’m amazed you didn’t pull the whole thing into the garden, that trellis is at least as old as I am.”

“John, I’m insulted. I’m very nimble.”

“You’re very egotistical, is what you mean,” said John, and he reached over to turn on the bedside lamp. Sherlock winced at the sudden flood of light; by the time his eyes had adjusted, John was struggling into a terry-cloth bathrobe over his pajamas, and Sherlock took his distraction as opportunity to examine the room. It was somewhat plain, with tan walls and some generic artwork. But there were touches that had to be John as well – a poster of Iron Maiden, edges curled with age. A framed photograph of John and what was presumably his family, with John dressed in a graduation robe. Another of John wearing Army uniform, and a few plaques with his name and various ranks in front of it. The bookshelves held a mix of medical journals and spy novels. John’s room, clearly – but not one he’d lived in for any great length of time.

“You were – sixteen, seventeen, when you moved into this room?” asked Sherlock, looking around.

“Sixteen. Used to be Harry’s, but when she went to uni, I moved in. She kips out in the flat above the restaurant most nights now.” John pulled the chair out from the desk and sat down, rubbing his leg. “Christ, I’m too old to be crawling around on the floor.”

“It’s not real,” said Sherlock. “The leg pain. Or you wouldn’t have been able to move as quickly as you did.”

“Great,” said John dryly. “That’s what I’ll tell myself when I try to go down the stairs without the cane, and land flat on my face.”

“You wouldn’t,” said Sherlock.

“Why are you here? It’s not to tell me what injuries I don’t have.”

“I was in the park—” But Sherlock swallowed the rest of the sentence. The conversation with Harry, still only 24 hours old, rang in the back of his head.

“All right,” said John, who hadn’t noticed the odd pause in Sherlock’s voice. “You were in the park?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You broke into my house for nothing?”

“I hardly broke anything, your window was already unlocked.”

“You could have broken my trellis.”

“I didn’t.”

“This is completely mental,” sighed John, and rubbed his face. “Look, I’m done with this conversation, so if you don’t mind, since you’re being spectacularly uncommunicative for someone who is talking so much, I’d like to get some sleep now.”
“Right,” said Sherlock, and he stumbled up to his feet. “I’ll just go then.”

“Window or door?” asked John when Sherlock didn’t move.

“Door,” said Sherlock, uncertain.

“Right then,” sighed John, and stood to show him out. Sherlock held his breath; John likely hadn’t meant to stand so close to him, but having stood, only hand’s width of distance between them, John didn’t move. Sherlock held his breath, and when he blinked, he found John looking up at him, his eyes darting between his mouth and his chest, and his breath caught in his throat.

“I—” said John, and didn’t say anything else.

They fell together, their lips crushing against each other. Their hands moved quickly to divest Sherlock of his clothing; John’s bathrobe fell to the floor with a soft thump. They broke their kiss only long enough pull John’s t-shirt over his head, and then it was back to tongue against tongue. John’s mouth was oddly dry and tasted of peppermint toothpaste, and Sherlock growled in frustration at the flavor that masked everything that was actually John. He felt John pull lightly on his hair, and squeezed the back of John’s neck in response.

John’s eyes were closed, squeezed tight as if in pain, but Sherlock didn’t want to stop looking at him, not for anything, not for a single second. John’s chest was compact and tight, still sleep-warm and heaving with his rapid breath; the scar on his shoulder was a puckered bit of skin in the shape of a multi-pointed star. Sherlock rested the pad of his thumb in the indention, and he heard John’s breath hitch.

“No,” said John, but if Sherlock heard, he didn’t pay attention. He moved his kisses away from John’s mouth, down his neck to his throat. John was shorter, it meant having to bend at the waist, crouch down a little, and it might have been uncomfortable, if it weren’t for John’s hands in his hair, holding him steady, and then drifting to his shirt, and yanking at the front. One button went flying, and Sherlock heard the ping when it hit the wall.

“Yes,” said Sherlock, and moved his thumb to kiss the scar. His tongue worked into the indent; the skin tasted different there, smooth and plastic, not quite like skin at all, but that might have been the peppermint lingering on his lips. The ridges of the scar scraped against his tongue, and Sherlock was going in for another taste when John shoved his hands against his bare chest, knocking Sherlock off his feet, and back against the bed.

“No,” repeated John, firmly, and his face looked angry in the dim light. He straddled Sherlock, pushed against Sherlock again, pinning him against the mattress. And then plunged in again, a deep kiss while he held Sherlock’s wrists against the increasingly rumpled bedclothes. Sherlock arched his back in time with the moan in the back of his throat. John didn’t protest, and after a second arch, Sherlock pushed again, and almost flipped John over to his back.

“Idiot,” said John. “I was in the Army.”

“Fuck,” gasped Sherlock, and fought again. This time he managed to free one of his hands, but he wasn’t entirely sure it wasn’t because John didn’t let him have the win. It wasn’t much of a win. Sherlock pushed against John’s scar, and John let out a hiss and fell to his side. Sherlock reached down, into John’s pajama pants, and found his cock hard and hot and already leaking. He ran the tips of his fingers over the soft head to wet them with the precum, and as John’s hiss of pleasure filled his ear, wrapped his palm around the base of John’s cock. The soft satin of the skin slid easily over the hard length of him, just long enough for Sherlock’s hand to fit easily. Sherlock worked John’s cock, felt the muscles and sinew and veins pulsing under the skin, soft and damp
and so wonderfully, perfectly warm.

John’s eyes sprang open, any sort of protest dying on his lips. Sherlock leaned in to kiss him again—Oh, God, don’t say anything, don’t take me out of this moment— but John pulled away. His hands pushed Sherlock’s trousers down from his hips, and then it was John’s hands on his cock, wrapping around him and covering him with hot, dry warmth, and Sherlock bucked into them, almost forgot he held John in his hand. They were kissing again, mouths open and pressed together, too shocked in each other to even touch their tongues.

Sherlock’s eyes closed, briefly, and when they did, he heard John’s strangled cry, felt the dampness on his wrist. Sherlock moved quickly, caught the semen in his hand, and when John was spent, moved his prize to his own cock. John seemed to catch on, or maybe was still riding his own release, because Sherlock was able to replace one of John’s dry hands with his wet one, and with John’s hand covering his, quickly pulled his own orgasm out.

The room went still as they breathed together, heads inches apart on the single pillow, hands still twisted as they lightly held each other. Sherlock opened his eyes, saw John looking back at him.

“Hi,” said John, and Sherlock let the corners of his mouth turn up, just a little, to acknowledge him. His heart pounded in his chest.

John’s hair was grown out enough to look a mess; his chest rose and fell, the scar stood out in the yellow light of the bedside lamp.

“You were in the Army,” said Sherlock, unable to keep it in. “You were wounded in the chest, badly; the bullet was dug out in the field but the wound was repaired much later. Nicked a bone, severe muscle trauma and damage, the operation was probably ten or twelve hours long, with no guarantee of full mobility afterward. Recuperation three months with heavy physical therapy, which you’ve been ignoring. You could have it, you know.”

“Have what?” asked John evenly. Sherlock didn’t know him well enough to read if he was angry or upset.

“Full mobility. The strength is there, but not the control.”

“Who’s to say I don’t have it already?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to free my hand if you had been able to control your strength,” said Sherlock.

“Yeah, because I didn’t actually want your hand on me, thanks,” said John.

“How’d I do with the rest?”

“The sex or the analysis of my medical history?”

“Either,” said Sherlock after a moment’s thought. “Though it’s rather obvious this was your first sexual encounter since returning to England.”

“Piss off,” said John, but he was smiling, and Sherlock began to laugh. After a moment, John joined him, and rolled to his back. He pulled his hand away from Sherlock and covered his face with his arm. Sherlock got a good look at the tan line still visible on his wrist, and saw to his surprise that John’s skin wasn’t as fair as he’d thought originally.

“Several tours of duty,” he said, and John looked at him from under his arm.

“It’s a good assignment,” he said. “And me going meant some bloke with a wife and kids didn’t
have to go in my place.”

“I didn’t think doctors served on the front lines.”

“They don’t,” said John. “But I wasn’t in the Army as a doctor. How’d you know – oh. Sarah at the clinic.”

“I assume she didn’t want you back as a receptionist.”

John was quiet for a moment. “No. I imagine she doesn’t.”

It was a good opening; Sherlock could have asked, prodded John into telling him about Sarah, to put that particular question to rest. But Sherlock thought he already knew the answer; besides, he had no reason to be jealous; it wasn’t as if he actually loved John Watson. “Why didn’t you join up as a doctor?”

“You tell me,” said John.

Sherlock sat up and crossed his legs. John rearranged himself to cross his arms behind his head, and watched him with an even gaze. But everything about John was even, apart from his still messed-up hair and asymmetrical scar patterns. His eyes, his mouth, even the way he held himself was as though he were balanced on a wire, trying not to teeter too far to either side.

Even sex, realized Sherlock. John had dated Mary, once.

“You had sex with Mary,” he said, and John’s eyebrows rose.

“You think that’s why I joined the Army?”

“No,” said Sherlock. “I think you had sex with Mary after you joined the Army. I’m just confirming a hypothesis.”

“I don’t think that’s really any of your business,” said John.

Sherlock raised his eyebrows.

“Under the circumstances…”

“Fine, I had sex with Mary. We dated for a year and she broke it off with me but we’re still good friends. Your point?”

Sherlock nodded. Even keel, in every way. “You went to medical school, became a doctor. You clearly worked at the clinic with Sarah in some capacity for some time before joining the Army. You may have dated her. It ended before you joined up. It may have ended because you joined up. Maybe you told everyone you wanted something more exciting, that you wanted to make an actual difference. Stitching up wounds gained on the battlefield is more exciting than diagnosing UTIs for bored housewives, but that wasn’t what you did – you didn’t join the medical corps, you joined as a soldier. Maybe you carried a medical kit with you as part of your uniform, but you weren’t in the RAMC. It wasn’t so much the excitement or the danger you were seeking. It was the half of yourself you were missing. The darker half of the healer, the one who posed a real danger to those around you.”

“How would you know that?” asked John, his voice still even, still unreadable.

“I don’t know, I notice,” said Sherlock.
“You’re a bit of a pompous git, you know.”

“So I’ve been told.”

John shifted on the bed, propping one leg up. “You never said why you came here.”

“No,” said Sherlock. He swung his legs off the bed and sat on the edge, back to John. The mattress shifted as John moved again. He thought of Sarah at the clinic, chuckling over John’s handiwork, a soft look in her eyes. Moriarty in the park, the thin leer on his face. The despair and distress in Harry’s voice, the curl of her fingers around the bottle of vodka.

Don’t tell John that you know, she’d begged him. He could see how much she hated herself for pleading, for telling him, for having anything to tell at all. You can’t tell him. He doesn’t need your pity.

“Right,” said John after a moment. “If it’s about the Empire—”

“It’s not important,” said Sherlock quickly.

“Sherlock. It’s my restaurant.”

“It’ll keep until morning.”

More shifting; Sherlock could tell that John had moved further away.

John frowned. “Going to tell me saving the Empire is a fool’s errand? That I should just throw in the towel and close the doors for good?”

“It might not be a bad idea,” said Sherlock cautiously.

“Fuck you,” said John, and got to his feet. “I didn’t ask for your opinion. I asked for your help.”

“Same thing.”

“No, it’s not. Tell me how to make the Empire work.”

“It can’t. Not the way it has.”

“It’s worked fine before.”

“That was before,” snapped Sherlock, and he got to his feet to pace the room. “It can’t any longer. Times have changed, the food people want has changed. The food people expect has changed. Fifty years ago, no one knew kebab from hamburger. Now they’re ordering curries in twenty different styles from five different countries. The Empire isn’t dying, John. It’s already dead, you just weren’t paying attention.”

John stood up. “Get out.”

“John—”

“No. You’re honestly going to sneak into my bedroom past midnight and tell me that I’m supposed to let my grandfather’s restaurant just close, not even try to save it in any form? No. Get out. Take your fucking high horse and get out of here.” John picked up Sherlock’s coat and threw it at him.

“John, I—”
“Get out!” shouted John, and Sherlock went to the door. He paused as his hand touched the doorknob, and turned to see if John was watching. He wasn’t; he’d already climbed back into the bed, and was lying on his side, back to Sherlock. His breathing was heavy, and he was clearly awake and unwilling to discuss the matter further.

Sherlock decided to humor him. It wasn’t as though there was anything he could tell, anyway. He turned the knob, opened the door, and closed the door softly behind him.

The house was still and silent; Sherlock let his eyes adjust to the dark before he ventured to the steps and down to the ground floor. The stairwell was lined with photographs, and Sherlock squinted at them, trying to see in the dim moonlight, but all he could make out were shapes of people standing, or running, or playing in the sand. John’s family, his sister and parents and grandparents, and somehow, without even seeing them, Sherlock could imagine them smiling at the camera, smiling at each other, a happy little familial unit.

Sherlock knew, from the evening before, that there were additional pictures lining the wall of the foyer, including one of James Watson, the founder of the Empire. He wanted to see it again, take another look at the man who had started the restaurant that had become his grandson’s obsession, which would lead to the ruin of the family if it was allowed to continue. But Sherlock knew that upstairs, John Watson was still awake, still listening for the final slam of the front door. Might have even left the bed to stand at the window, watching for him to leave the house entirely.

Sherlock wondered what John would do if he didn’t leave. If he waited until morning. It was an intriguing thought.

But there were tapes waiting to be viewed in his hotel room, and he would need to decide the best course of action to turn Molly and Artie into actual chefs instead of home-kitchen amateurs. Observation Day was over; the real work was beginning, and Sherlock did not have time to invest in…whatever this was, with John Watson.

Sherlock did not want to think about John Watson. He wanted to think about his restaurant, and how to save it. Because when he thought about it – he had no idea how it could be done.
Hi, all. Good news: this week’s chapter is a bit early. Bad news: my computer is having issues. (It’ll start in safe mode, all systems functional including internet, but it freezes if it tries to start in normal mode.) Therefore I’m taking it into the shop Wednesday morning, and I have no idea when I’ll see it again. I’ll be able to read your comments, but I may not be able to respond because typing on a phone is not the easiest thing in the world. I will try like anything to continue the posting schedule though – it depends entirely on what the shop says. But thank you in advance for the comments: seriously, every one of them means the world to me.

I also apologize: there was supposed to be a recipe for Molly’s reworked Russian bread, but it’s going to have to wait for posting until my computer issues have been resolved.

Finally, a note regarding the yeast. Lady of Clunn pointed out that the original recipe would probably suggest that Molly use cake or fresh yeast, not active dry, and it’s likely that Sherlock would suggest that Molly return to that if she was using active dry instead. She’s absolutely right: fresh yeast is loads better, especially for food service. But I am American, and I’m used to active dry, and they say write what you know, so I’m sticking with active dry. I apologize to any professional/serious amateurs out there who are cringing, and please forgive me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What I have loved about cooking my entire life, especially prep cooking, is the way that it keeps your hands occupied but your mind free to sort everything out. I have never once finished an eight-hour prep shift without something from my life – mundane or profound – sorted out.

--Gabrielle Hamilton

John never made it back to sleep. He listened as Sherlock left the room, waited until the footsteps on the stairs died away. When he heard the front door close, he breathed out a sigh of relief, and rubbed his face with his hand.

Stupid, childish, immature, to be sulking in a narrow bed, back turned to the man who’d sought him out. John felt like a fool – worse, he felt like a teenage fool, instead of a grown man who’d been to war and medical school and last he’d noticed, was perfectly capable of acting like a grown-up and making adult decisions. Grown men didn’t flounce off from a fight and bury their heads in their pillows in order to ignore what they didn’t like.

He should have decked him. Just reached out and punched the smug look off Sherlock’s face, and bloodied his nose a little. Watch the makeup crew try to cover that bruising the next morning, see Sherlock try to explain it to Lestrade.

John’s imagination ran wild. Sherlock Holmes, crying out, hands going to his nose, falling to his knees on John’s floor. Except the John in his imagination didn’t stand over him and roar his prowess; Sherlock’s pained cry went straight to his gut, and instead he leaned over the fallen man,
arm across his back, apologizing, and in the next moment, John had Sherlock sitting on the chair and was cleaning up the blood from his cheek with a soft, warm flannel, and carefully inserting bits of tissue into his nostrils to catch the blood. And then Sherlock said something dry and witty, and John laughed, and their mouths were very close, and then John leaned in and kissed—

Fuck.

John threw the covers off and got out of the bed. He pulled his bathrobe on and tied the ends tightly around his waist. If his bloody stupid sodding imagination couldn’t even behave itself….

The kitchen floor was freezing, but John didn’t want to bother going back upstairs to find his slippers. And he was awake now, anyway; his mind wouldn’t stop racing, his imagination merrily tripping down the path it’d set upstairs. The bleeding had stopped, the flannel lay forgotten, John and Sherlock were happily going at each other like…well, like teenagers, and John in frustration pulled the skillet out of the cabinet and slammed it on the range. He dug around in the pantry for the tinned tomatoes while Sherlock worked his fingers into John’s hair. He peeled the garlic and the onion while John pushed the shirt from Sherlock’s back.

Oh, for Christ’s sake…

John filled a pot with water and set it to boil (Sherlock’s blood hot under his skin), and once the skillet was hot, poured in the oil (lube, slick between his fingers). He chopped the garlic and the onion (quick jerks that made him gasp, eyes closed to stop the tears), threw it into the heated oil, and stirred while the vegetables sizzled. Just before the garlic browned, he poured in the tomatoes, and began to mash them with the back of the wooden spoon.

Oregano, basil, parsley. Middle of winter, there wouldn’t be anything in the herb garden outside, and John hadn’t bought himself supplies in years. He doubted Harry had done much better, but there was a row of dried herbs on the other side of the pantry door, and all three were there. The jars looked old, the same faded yellow labels he remembered from childhood, but a sniff confirmed the contents had some flavor left to them, at least. He rubbed the oregano and basil between the palms of his hands to bring out whatever flavor was left; the small cuts of leaves pricked as the scent rose in the air, and when he brushed the herbs into the sauce, his skin even felt smoother. He could smell the lingering scent on his hands, sweet and clear and green. When he tasted the sauce, now simmering merrily, all he added was a pinch of salt.

John’s imagination faded into the background.

The water was boiling. John was about to pour in the boxed pasta he’d found in the pantry when he thought of something. After a moment of digging, he found it – a packet wrapped in plastic and wax paper, a bit coated in frost but none the worse for wear. John grinned, and unwrapped it to find long, flat linguini noodles, twisted in a bow, frozen solid and pale yellow. Not quite right for the sauce, but they would do. He lowered the mass into the water, and poked at it with the end of a wooden spoon, gently coaxing the noodles to loosen and flow freely as they cooked.

The noodles had been in the freezer for six months; shouldn’t have stayed there longer than two, but John knew that Harry had never been one to pay attention to the details about exactly how long things could remain frozen and still taste good. It might have been half the reason the restaurant wasn’t doing too well…but John doubted it.

The sauce bubbled, and John turned his attention, giving it a stir, another taste, another pinch of basil.

Harry hadn’t ever wanted to run the restaurant. John couldn’t remember what she’d wanted to do
instead, and watching the sauce bubble, he wondered how he could have forgotten. Photography? Journalism? Something that didn’t have anything to do with pots or pans or menus, trying to place food orders in time for the next morning’s delivery, working out conflicting schedules and arranging for parties of more than ten during the height of the dinner rush. Harry had eaten her dinners at the small table in the corner of the kitchen, the same as John, but she’d never watched the chefs with rapt attention, never anticipated the small plates of things their grandfather would slip them, never jumped to attention when he shouted at the sous or servers when things went wrong.

The pasta rolled in the boiling water, smooth and fluid, and John gave it a quick stir, could tell it needed another minute just by the way it felt against the wooden spoon. He tasted the sauce, and turned the burner to low, and went to get the parmesan from the fridge.

He saw the cane, still leaning against the counter next to the stove some five feet away, when he turned back, and his leg nearly gave out under him. John clutched at the counter, his eyes tight with the sudden pain, both physical and emotional, and waited for the spasms to subside. He worked his way back to the stove, still clutching the counter for support.

The linguini was done. John gritted his teeth, and shuffled to the sink to drain them. He gave them a vigorous shake; a few slipped out of the colander. John let them stay in the sink, poured the remaining noodles into a wide bowl, and ladled the sauce on top. He grated the cheese, and used a towel to carry the steaming hot bowl to the table, gripping the cane tightly in his other hand.

Slowly, he began to eat. The sauce was sweet on his tongue, the garlic sharp and the onion mild. It needed peppers, thought John. Or fresh tomatoes, with courgettes and peppers, large leaves of basil, the whole thing flash cooked in olive oil and garlic and coarse-ground pepper. He could stop by the market, it’d all be out of season but better than from a can. Something quick, something delicious, something to show Sherlock Holmes he wasn’t a complete fool, that he actually knew something about cooking. Wipe that smug, self-assured smirk off his face and make him reassess…

John thought of it, Sherlock Holmes sitting across from him at the table, eating the pasta he’d cooked, laughing, at ease, wearing a bathrobe with nothing underneath. Their argument forgotten, the kiss just a promise for after the washing up.

John set down the fork and clenched his hands hard against the table. *No, no, stupid, stop it.* Thoughts like that were meant for relationships that had a future. John and Sherlock didn’t have a future – they didn’t have anything except a couple of kisses and some groping in dark corners. In less than a week Sherlock would pack up and move off to the next restaurant to save, and John wouldn’t see him again for weeks – assuming the Empire lasted that long. All John was to Sherlock was a little bit of rough on the side, something to keep the week interesting. All Sherlock was to John was a welcome-home-soldier fling – a little bit of “thank-you-God-for-letting-me-live”. Nothing more.

John filled his lungs until they hurt. He let the breath out in a slow stream, imagining every pain and worry and heartache escaping with it. It didn’t quite work – he could still feel the pinpricks in his leg, knew his heart was heavy with something he couldn’t identify as anything more specific than *loss*, and he knew that the clock was ticking away for the Empire, no matter what he did.

John opened his eyes. The kitchen was empty, lit only by the lamp above his head, cool except for the steaming pasta in front of him. John picked up his fork and began eating again.

*
The film crew started early. Sunrises were a particular favorite, the symbolism of a new day dawning, a new restaurant forming from the ruin of the old. A phoenix rising from the ashes might have been more appropriate, but as phoenixes tended to be rather thin on the ground, sunrises would have to suffice.

Sherlock hated the metaphor. Trite and utterly vacant, and besides, incorrect. For every sunrise, there was a corresponding sunset.

At least he wasn’t required to participate in the sunrise photography. Even so, 8am was early, enough that more often than not, he found himself at the restaurant long before the employees were awake. He didn’t doubt it would be the same for the Empire; Artie did not seem to be the type to wake early, unless it was to be kicked out of the bed of whatever bird he’d managed to snare the night before. And Molly might have been an early riser, but Sherlock suspected she would be paralyzed with fear and remain outside for an hour at least, unsure whether to brave the tempest in the kitchen, or simply to flee.

Upper Brickley was pleasant in the early morning. Sherlock walked the short distance between the hotel and the Empire, and noted the number of people out, particularly for a Saturday morning. They greeted each other, cheerful cries and easy laughter, and children ran past him, dodging him neatly, on their way to wear themselves out before lunch, their mothers in hot pursuit.

What struck Sherlock the most was the way people included him in their easy smiles, their friendly “Good mornings”, as if he were already part of the ebb and flow of life in the village. Which was utterly ridiculous, Sherlock had never stepped foot there, didn’t know a single soul apart from the film crew and the employees of the Empire, was simply a face on a telly screen. Most strangers, if they dared to greet him in public, were overly effusive, calling him by name and making the not-quite-subtle references to his prior shows or restaurants, to pretend that they had been good friends for some time. Sherlock hated the falsehood. But the people he passed now—

“Hello, so sorry,” said one of the young mothers as she breezed by. “Quentin! You nearly knocked the nice man over!”

“Morning,” said the newsagent casually as he knocked his awning into place, before turning to shout at the delivery boy. “Oi, don’t leave the papers there, can’t you see the puddle? Ruin half my delivery, you will.”

“Wotcher!” said the policeman, as Sherlock was about to step into the road, just as the lorry sped by. The policeman didn’t stop, but continued on his way, and Sherlock watched him go with a whistle and a tip of the hat to the newsagent, who bustled inside and returned with a copy of the Times.

It struck Sherlock that it wasn’t that the people there were excessively friendly, or recognized him, though certainly both were true. It was that they were friendly, and they recognized him – and they didn’t care.

When he reached the Empire, he paused on the other side of the street, thoughtful. None of the restaurants were open just yet, save for the bakery directly across. The bell tinkled merrily as the door opened, and a group of young teenagers came pouring out, each carrying bags with the shop’s name imprinted, and bringing with them the scent of cinnamon and nutmeg and sugar.

None of them paid Sherlock the least bit of attention as they thundered past him, far more focused on their destination (rehearsals for the school musical, something well-known and rather ridiculous; Sherlock put a high likelihood on My Fair Lady though Brigadoon was not completely out of bounds).
Hudsons, said the bags, and Sherlock barely had to step into his mind palace to remember the name. This was where he’d been meant to take Artie the day before, instead of the far more sensible solution of the clinic just down the road, where the mysterious Sarah worked. There was something there, Sherlock knew, and he had a very good idea of what it was and what it meant, but for now, the butter and cinnamon beckoned, and the mystery of Sarah would have to wait.

Sherlock caught the door before it finished closing, and went inside. It was reasonably busy, half a dozen people either sitting at tables, drinking their coffee and teas and reading their papers while half-eaten pastries sat on their plates, or at the counter waiting to be rung up. The woman doing the ringing was past sixty, but still light on her feet and sporting a cheerful smile, and Sherlock saw her slip extra biscuits into the bags just before she handed them over. Mrs Hudson, he assumed. He watched from near the doorway, quietly assessing and contemplating, and when at last the customers had finished their purchases, and the shop was quiet once more, he stepped forward.

“Is there a specialty of the house?” he asked. If he’d been hoping to shock her, he was much mistaken; the woman didn’t so much as blink. Instead, she turned and reached for a tray of cakes, cut a thin slice, and handed it over.

“Now go sit down and tell me what you think of that,” she said, quite satisfied and sure of herself. Sherlock raised an eyebrow.

“Rather small piece.”

“Well,” said Mrs Hudson, “there’s no point in wasting food, and I know you very rarely eat anything at all.”

The customer in the corner huffed his amusement, and shook the newspaper. Sherlock frowned and took the cake to a table as far from the gentleman as he could manage. His face was safely hidden behind his newspaper, but that wasn’t quite the hiding place he imagined. (Banker, worked in Canterbury, divorced, no children, one cat, possibly thought himself quite the catch but was rather tight with his own money.)

He took a bite of the cake, let the icing melt on his tongue as the flavors tickled his tongue and his teeth, and, before he swallowed, looked to see where the proprietress was.

Not in the room any longer – the door leading to the kitchen swung merrily. Sherlock could hear the clatter of dishes in a sink, the ping of the oven announcing another baked treat being ready, and was surprised enough to swallow.

And then he took another bite.

By the time Mrs Hudson reappeared, he was standing at the register, his wallet in hand, the plate empty.

“Ah, good,” said Mrs Hudson, pleased.

“Quite,” said Sherlock.

“Well, off you go, then,” said Mrs Hudson. “Going to teach Molly to cook today, are you?”

Ah. Sherlock looked harder, and noticed.

“I believe you’ve already done that,” he said smoothly, and Mrs Hudson shook her head.

“No, I taught her to bake. Quite different. Baking’s only chemistry, cooking’s by feel.”
“Then why isn’t she working in your kitchen?”

The woman smiled, knowingly. “Not quite my story to tell, is it? You’re welcome to come back for another slice, if you’d like, but I shut my doors at three, and I’m closed Sundays and Tuesdays, so don’t put it off too late.”

“How much do I owe you for the slice?”

She waved her hand. “Don’t be silly – charge for that little sliver? I wouldn’t dare, I’d be laughed out of town.”

Sherlock frowned. “You gave away at least three quids’ worth of biscuits to every customer you had this morning, you’re using organic eggs and milk in your baked goods. The flour isn’t of the highest quality though it’s very good and you would sooner keel over and lick the floor than use margarine.”

“Of course,” said Mrs Hudson, drawing herself up. “And I have very loyal customers. Off with you, Sherlock Holmes. And do remember we’re on your side.”

“You should be on John’s,” said Sherlock.

“And isn’t that the same thing? Must go tend my biscuits now. Don’t knock Artie too much about the ears, he’s rather sensitive. Sebastian, if you’re done with your breakfast, clear your own table, I’m not your waitress.”

Mrs Hudson scurried back into the kitchen. Sherlock frowned as he looked at the newspaper hiding the gentleman, and then glanced at the tip jar. The bottom was already covered in one- and two-pound coins, at least two centimeters deep.

Sherlock glanced at the newspaper again, and then dropped in his own contribution. It made a rather loud clatter when it hit the bottom of the jar.

“Thank you, dear!” called out Mrs Hudson.

Sherlock went back out into the cold; the road was quite empty of cars, but it was still early on a Saturday morning. The town might be waking up, but there were more interesting places to be, he supposed. The front door to the Empire was locked, of course, and it took several minutes to walk around to the alley which led to the kitchen door. By the time Sherlock had reached it, he’d been greeted by another three villagers, friendly and underwhelmed by his celebrity, and was therefore ready to bury himself in a pleasant morning of proving to Molly and Artie exactly how frightening he could be.

The kitchen door was unlocked, and light shone through the transom window. For a moment, Sherlock thought it was Harry, come early for some reason, or perhaps a cleaning crew. Or John. It might have been John, and the idea that it was John on the other side of the door made Sherlock’s breath catch in his throat.

John, warm and pliant under his hands, the angry fire in his eyes when he ordered Sherlock out, the drape of the blankets as he curled himself away. John had been hurt, Sherlock knew John would be hurt, but there wasn’t any point in sugar-coating the truth. He wondered, if John was in the kitchen, what he would say. What John would say to him. Or if they’d even bother to say anything at all, because if John was in the kitchen, there was every possibility that Sherlock would hang Artie and Molly for a pound and lock John and himself in the manager’s office and shag him senseless against the desk.
He heard the music as soon as he opened the door. Sugary sweet pop rock, bouncy and filled with teenage longing and youthful promises. Not John, then – no teenage boy who listened to Iron Maiden would grow up to be a man who listened to Britney Spears, or whatever it was that played on the radio.

Let alone sang along.

“Your sweet moonbeam. The smell of you in every single dream I dream.”

The chef, then. Sherlock stepped through the dishwashing station and leaned against the doorway to the kitchen. Molly Hooper continued to sing, her back to him while she mixed something at the prep station. The kitchen smelled of yeast and sugar, and Sherlock saw that there was already something in the oven, with only seconds left before the timer went off.

When the timer went, Molly gave the bowl a last stir, and went to peek inside, still singing. “I knew when we collided, you're the one I have decided, who's one of my—eek!”

The tray of muffins nearly fell to the floor, but Molly was able to catch it against the oven door just in time. She tossed it on the range and slammed the oven shut, and went to put the muffins on the waiting cooling rack on the other side of the kitchen, careful to keep her gaze away from Sherlock.

“You scared me,” she said, her voice shaking.

“You're baking,” said Sherlock.

“That's my job,” said Molly. “I'm not usually in this early, but I don’t imagine there’ll be time to bake for the dinner rush, if you're planning on teaching us how to cook today.”

“What are you baking?” Molly looked puzzled. “Muffins. And biscuits.”

“I smell yeast.”

“That's the Russian bread,” said Molly, nodding to the oven in the corner, and Sherlock wrenched open the door. “Don't do that, you'll let the heat escape—”

Sherlock pulled his arm into his sleeve and used it to pull out one of the bread pans. He dropped the steaming hot pan on the prep table and peered at the half-risen loaf. “It's been in the oven – twenty minutes, yes? Risen but not yet browned. Where's the recipe?”

Molly turned and pulled the notebook from the shelf above the grill. She flipped to the recipe and handed it to Sherlock, who studied it with a frown before looking up. “You don't proof the yeast.”

“No,” said Molly, and the impatience was plain on her face.

“It rises for an hour, you're using active dry yeast, and you don't proof the yeast.”

“Yes, I know that. I've been making it for three months.”

“Where's the recipe for the muffins and the biscuits?”

Molly didn’t move.

“Well?”

“I don't have to give you those,” said Molly suddenly, and with a certain amount of force. “Those recipes aren't the Empire’s, they're mine, and those muffins and biscuits aren't for the customers,
they’re for us, and I was going to be nice and have muffins for our breakfasts and biscuits for after, because you’re going to be horrible all morning to me and to Artie and I wanted something good to happen today, and if I’m making Artie’s favorite muffins and John’s favorite biscuits then maybe today won’t be all horrible. So I’m not going to give you the recipes because so far I don’t like you very much and I don’t think I want you to have them.”

Molly’s voice, strained from the sudden outburst, caught in her throat, and she swallowed and blinked hard, her back ramrod straight as she stared Sherlock down. Sherlock’s mouth’s dropped open, just a bit, and then he snapped it shut again.

“You memorized them.”

“Of course I did,” said Molly.

The door slammed open; a cold breeze swept into the kitchen, followed by Artie, unwinding his scarf with one hand and carrying a tray of coffees in the other.

“I have coffee,” he said cheerfully, and his eyes lit up. “Ooo! Muffins! Cor, Molly, you’re a peach.” He dropped the coffees on the prep table and immediately went about digging a still-hot muffin from the tray. “Ow-ow-ow. Coffee, Molls. Mr Holmes.”

“No, thank you,” said Molly, still staring at Sherlock defiantly.

“I don’t drink coffee,” said Sherlock. He wondered how he ever thought of Molly as a mouse.

“I know,” said Artie. “You drink tea. You told me to deduce it, so I did. Tea, with milk, one sugar.”

Sherlock glanced at the cups. “There are three coffees and one tea.”

“Well,” said Artie. “You can’t believe everything you read on the internet.”

“Research isn’t deducing.” He picked up the tea and gave it a cautious sniff before beginning to drink.

“All the same. More coffee for me, then,” said Artie through a mouth full of muffin.

“That explains much,” said Sherlock dryly, and Molly smiled.

“They’re lemon-berry,” she said, and her voice was quiet again, with her lack of self-confidence showing once more, once again the small, inconsequential mouse.

“I’m very good at determining recipes based on taste alone,” Sherlock told her.

Molly’s smile grew wider. “Are you?”

He reached around Artie and took a muffin from the tray. It steamed when he broke it open, and Sherlock set it down on the prep table to cool, next to the half-baked pan of bread.

“First lesson,” he said, watching the steam curl. “Know your strengths.”

“Should we be taking notes?” asked Artie.

“Molly,” said Sherlock, “how often do you make these muffins?”

“Every few weeks, I suppose.”
“And the Russian bread?”

“Every day.”

“And yet you’ve memorized the muffin recipe, but still require the written form for the bread. Why is that?”

“It’s not my recipe,” said Molly. “And I’m meant to make it the way the recipe says, aren’t I?”

“Repeat the first lesson, please.”

Molly paused for a moment. “Know my strengths.”

Sherlock broke off a piece of the muffin, and popped it into his mouth. *Lemon rind, a touch of lemon juice, chunks of frozen berries melted into squishy-hot goo, crisp fruit-flavored sugar topping... cardamom, freshly ground.* He smiled and swallowed the bite. “Clever. Remove the offending bread from this kitchen, and fix the recipe.”

“But—”

Sherlock turned to Artie, who had a second muffin in one hand, and a coffee in the other. “You.”

“Are you going to make me wash dishes all day?” asked Artie, suspiciously. “Because I’m already pretty good at that, thanks.”

Somewhere behind him, Sherlock could hear Molly already moving to pull the unbaked breads out of the oven, setting them to cool just enough before tossing them away. He could nearly hear her thinking of how to fix the recipe she knew so well, and liked so little.

“For you, Artie, I’ve got a different task in mind,” said Sherlock. “Lesson Number Two: Don’t question the chef.”

“I don’t question the chef,” said Artie.

“Good,” said Sherlock. “In that case – we’ll start with the carrots.”

“Carrots?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock. “Chop chop, Artie.”

*

John didn’t want to wake up. His body had other ideas; he stared at the ceiling and cursed the muscles which itched to move, his eyes which refused to close. Daylight ran thin through the windows. The house was silent, save for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the front hall, and the repetitive clicks reminded him of James, stirring and tapping his wooden spoon in turns.

“There’s patterns to the service, Johnny,” James had always said. “Two people on a date will always order dessert to share. A person eating alone will want efficiency and privacy above all things. A group of people talking loudly can be left to their own devices if you leave bottles of water and wine on their table and keep them full. As long as the food is good, people will come back for more.”

John swung his legs out of the bed and gripped the mattress. The last message he’d gotten from Sally Donovan, just before going to bed after his midnight meal of pasta, had thrown him for a loop.
Sherlock’s request. Lunch service cancelled. Please be at the restaurant by 9am.

John imagined that James was rolling over in his grave. The only time James had ever cancelled lunch service was when three-quarters of the staff had come down with measles.

John whistled the air out of his mouth and stood up. He had no idea why Sherlock wanted him at the Empire if lunch service had been cancelled, but he’d seen enough episodes to have a good idea why. Changes to the menu, changes to the décor, changes to the entire style and scope of the restaurant, and John had the distinct idea, particularly after last night’s argument, that he was going to like exactly none of it.

John headed for the shower, and tried to pretend as though he was ready to start his day.

* 

[EXTERIOR, sunrise over Upper Brickley. Cows are lowing, the sun is dappling on frost-coated snowdrops, beauty and nature strain for the sun, yadda yadda yadda.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: Day Three, and it’s time to get to work. The Empire has several problems but one of the biggest is that its head chef, Molly, doesn’t actually know how to cook, and she’s going it alone without a sous.

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. SHERLOCK stands at ARTIE’s elbow, watching as he tries to cut an onion.] SHERLOCK V.O. cont: The Empire can barely afford the staff it has now, so the only choice is to use the staff available. First on the proverbial chopping block is the dishwasher, Artie, whose culinary knowledge is rudimentary at best. In a classic kitchen, a plongeur would be able to do a bit of basic prep, but Artie can barely handle a knife.

SHERLOCK: Curl your fingers a bit more, that’s it, otherwise you’ll chop—

ARTIE: Ow, shite, *BLEEP*

SHERLOCK V.O.: The chopping block is perhaps more literal than not.

SHERLOCK: Lestrade, we need bandages.

ARTIE: It’s all right, I can wash the blood off, can’t I?

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. Learning how to cook montage – bright, cheerful music plays while ARTIE learns the various arts of how to be a sous. ARTIE chopping vegetables; the knife slips and veggies go flying. ARTIE making an omelet; he can’t beat the eggs without half the mix going over the side of the bowl. ARTIE attempting to flip the omelet in the pan. There’s about five of these, each of them with varying levels of failure. In the last attempt, the omelet lands on his head.]

[Last shot: SHERLOCK, whose face has been stonily passive this entire time, closes his eyes, and sighs. It’s a sigh that wins medals, that sigh.]

ARTIE: I’m pretty bad, aren’t I?

SHERLOCK: No. You’re horrendous.

[Cut to MOLLY, who is kneading dough.]

MOLLY: I’m redoing the Russian bread recipe. The old one – it’s original to the opening of the restaurant, but it’s a bit odd, because you don’t proof the yeast. And I’ve always wanted to fix it,
but – well, you don’t mess with the recipes. Except Sherlock wants me to try this, so – I’m trying it.

OFF-SCREEN VOICE (sounds like LESTRADE): Do you think it’ll turn out?

[The timer goes; MOLLY gives the dough a last pat, transfers it to a bowl, and covers it with a cloth. She grins at the camera.]

MOLLY: I know it will.

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: You sound pretty confident.

MOLLY: Well – I am.

[The surprise on her face is fleeting; the next moment, she’s turned and started to clean up the area. The camera lingers on her for a moment before cutting back to SHERLOCK and ARTIE who has managed to chop a potato without killing himself.] ARTIE: Think I can do that again?

SHERLOCK: Doubtful.

ARTIE: You’re just jealous of my natural talents.

SHERLOCK: Mmmm.

ARTIE: I mastered potatoes! Chef de cuisine, baby!

SHERLOCK: Not quite.

ARTIE: Oh, God, you’re not going to make me do one of those stupid self-confidence building exercises, are you?

SHERLOCK: Artie, of all the things you lack in this world, no one who has known you for any length of time would say that one of them is self-confidence.

ARTIE: So….

SHERLOCK: Instead, we’re going to have a lesson in humility.

ARTIE: You are going to teach me about humility?

[Crash from off-screen.]

SHERLOCK: Shut up, Anderson.

ARTIE: No, I’m with Anderson.

SHERLOCK: Anytime you open your mouth, Artie, I only want to hear the following statements: Yes, Chef. No, Chef. Right away, Chef.

ARTIE: How’s that going to teach me humility?

SHERLOCK: It’s not. What I’m going to ask you to do next will teach you humility. But you’re going to use the correct form of addressing the chef in this kitchen, because I know 243 types of poisons commonly found in a restaurant kitchen, and I’m going to make you a cup of tea.

SHERLOCK: Excellent. You can cook, is that right, Artie?

ARTIE: Yes, Chef, I think so.

SHERLOCK: You don’t want to wash dishes your whole life?

ARTIE: Not particularly, Chef. SHERLOCK: Think you have what it takes to be a sous?

ARTIE: Absolutely, Chef.

SHERLOCK: Good. Make me lunch.

ARTIE: Huh?

SHERLOCK: Tea, Artie.

ARTIE: Ah…right away, Chef. Uh. Okay.

[ARTIE turns to the kitchen, fear on his face.]

[Cut to MOLLY, who is peering through the oven window, looking determined and expectant. The timer dings; she throws open the door, reaches in, taps the bread, and pulls out the loaf. It’s lovely, crisp and smooth and perfectly browned, and she drops it on the prep table and shuts the oven door with a whirl.]

MOLLY: I think it worked!

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: When will we know?

MOLLY: Give it ten minutes and we can take it out of the pan. It’s easier to cut when it’s cooler, but I don’t think I can wait that long, can you?

ARTIE: Molly, where’s the chickpeas?

SHERLOCK OFF-SCREEN: TEA, ARTIE.

MOLLY: What?

ARTIE: Yes-Chef-no-Chef where’s the chickpeas, Chef, please?

MOLLY: We might be out. Why?

ARTIE: Do you think northern beans would work instead?

SHERLOCK OFF-SCREEN: TEA.

MOLLY: Does he want tea?

ARTIE: No, Chef! I’ll get it.

[ARTIE dashes off. MOLLY stares after him, confused, and then looks down at the bread again.]

MOLLY: You know what? Sod waiting. Do you want some?

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: If you’re offering!

[SHERLOCK is watching ARTIE like a hawk, a half bored, half horrified expression on his face.]
ARTIE is attempting to make a sandwich. There’s a lot of colors involved, but not much else is recognizable, apart from the bread, and even that’s a bit questionable.]

SHERLOCK: Artie.

ARTIE: Yes, Chef?

SHERLOCK: What are you doing?

ARTIE: Making a sandwich, Chef.

SHERLOCK: Why?

ARTIE: You wanted me to make you lunch, Chef. I like a sandwich, don’t you?

SHERLOCK: All right. What’s going into the sandwich, Artie?

ARTIE: Well, I have to use what I can find around the kitchen, Chef, so I’ve got some olive oil and roasted peppers and asparagus.

SHERLOCK: Asparagus.

ARTIE: I’m not done yet. I think chicken, and maybe salt and pepper, and there’s some basil that’s going to go bad in a few days, so I thought I’d throw that in.

SHERLOCK: A master of description, you are, Artie.

ARTIE: Yes, Chef!

[Back to MOLLY. She cuts into the bread, and butters up a slice, and bites into it. Her eyes close.]

MOLLY: Oh, this is good.

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: It looks good.

MOLLY: Here, I’ll cut you a slice.

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: No, that’s all right—

MOLLY: No, really, you should try this—

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: I don’t want you to put yourself out—

MOLLY: It’s just a bit of bread, I can see you’re hungry—

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: Well, if it’s not too much trouble—

MOLLY: Here, really, have a piece.

[MOLLY watches the owner of the voice, hopeful and expectant.]

MOLLY: Well?

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: It’s really good.

MOLLY: See?
[SHERLOCK enters the frame, looking somewhat disgruntled.]

SHERLOCK: Is that the bread?

MOLLY: Yes. Here!

[He takes a piece and chews, thinks, chews some more, and then walks away. We see him spit it out into a paper serviette. MOLLY’s face is stony. SHERLOCK returns.]

SHERLOCK: Tell me what you think.

MOLLY: It’s…rising now, so it’s much lighter than it was before.

SHERLOCK: Don’t compare it to the old recipe. Tell me what you think of this recipe.

MOLLY: It’s still a bit chewy. I think it needs another hour to rise. And the raisins sunk to the bottom of the pan – what if I did it as a roll, with the raisins in the middle?

SHERLOCK: Good. Do that.

[SHERLOCK goes back to ARTIE. MOLLY turns to the camera, blinking fast, her smile brave.]

MOLLY: Well, there’s my marching orders.

OFF-SCREEN VOICE: I thought it was very good.

MOLLY: Thanks. But – it can be better.

Chapter End Notes

The song Molly sings is Train’s “Hey Soul Sister”.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

My husband deserves credit for the original concept of the Empire’s menu. But my beta, the fantastic earlgreytea68, figured out how to fix it.

Another shout-out to my lovely Brit-picker, kizzia, who has written an absolutely delectable and delicious 221B inspired by John and Sherlock in Mise called “Bed & Breakfast.” Absolutely go and read – it’s lovely and funny and most importantly, will make you want pie. Assuming you don’t already, that is. (Doesn’t everyone want pie?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock glanced at the clock and frowned. It was just after nine, Molly was starting her second round of bread, Artie was nearly done with whatever ridiculous combination of ingredients would pass for lunch, and John was nowhere to be seen.

Worse, Donovan was flirting with Anderson in the dining room, and Lestrade – Lestrade, of all people – was flirting with Molly in the kitchen.

Sherlock couldn’t even watch them. It was disgusting.

“No!” giggled Molly. “Not like that, you’re meant to knead it, not pummel it into submission.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Think of it as a massage,” said Molly. “You’re giving the dough a really fantastic back massage.”

“All right,” said Lestrade. “So, I’ll just… massage the dough.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. There were some things that were just inappropriate for the kitchen, and apparently the combination of Lestrade and Molly was one of them. Or two of them.

“Molly,” said Sherlock, rather more sharply than he meant to do, “tell me what you’re doing.”

Molly startled, and it took a moment for her to switch from her previous flirtation to actual serious chef. “Kneading the dough.”

“Really? It looked rather like you were needing something else,” said Sherlock. “You’re giving it a ten-minute knead?”

“Yes—”

“Six. No more than seven. Wait until it’s just reached cohesion and has lost its softness and then stop kneading, no matter how much time is left on the clock.”

“But…yes, Chef,” said Molly, and she didn’t glance at Lestrade once until Sherlock’s back had turned again.

Lestrade didn’t say anything, but Sherlock could hear the movement. When it was followed by
Molly’s giggle, Sherlock had a relatively decent idea what the movement was, increased the count to three, and left them to their own devices.

It was nearly as bad in the dining room: Donovan and Anderson were sitting entirely too close together, whispering to each other under the windows.

Lestrade was right after him.

“Right then,” said Lestrade evenly. “Feeling particularly stroppy today?”

“No.”

“Go have a fag, it’ll make you feel better.”

“Patches.”

“Any ideas on how to fix the restaurant?” asked Lestrade.

“Eight,” said Sherlock absently, watching Donovan and Anderson chatting.

“Oh, good, that won’t be hard to narrow down by this evening,” said Lestrade. “Why don’t you go work on those?”

“Why don’t you go back to flirting with the chef?” countered Sherlock.

“Think I will,” said Lestrade, and returned to the kitchen.

The laughter from the kitchen propelled him, much like a tidal wave, over to Donovan and Anderson.

“Aren’t you meant to be filming?” Sherlock snapped at Anderson. In a perfect world, he would have snapped to attention. As it was, he merely leaned back in his chair and grinned lazily at Sherlock.

“I’m taking a break. There’s only so much filming one can do on days like this,” said Anderson. “Aren’t you meant to be teaching the dishwasher how to cook?”

Sherlock ignored him and turned to Sally. “Where is he?”

“The dishwasher?” asked Sally.

“I know where the dishwasher is, he’s mutilating asparagus,” snapped Sherlock. “Where is John?”

“No idea,” said Sally. “He’ll be here soon, I’m sure.”

“I need to discuss the evening’s menu with him.”

“Oh, good, you’ve got ideas, then. How many?”

“Four. And we need to lay the groundwork for changing the décor.”

“That all?” asked Sally, and Sherlock had to work hard not to strangle her. It was a very near thing.

“Yes, that’s all,” snapped Sherlock. “Unlike some of you, I’ve remembered that we are here to work. I have a job to do, Sally. When does the decorating crew arrive?”

“Tomorrow morning,” said Sally, completely unruffled. “But we’ll get the new furniture in this
afternoon. The bulk of the work will be on Monday, the restaurant’s closed that day anyway, we can get everything loaded in at once.”

“Let me know when John gets here.”

“Oh, absolutely,” said Sally, and she was so annoyingly accommodating that Sherlock marched back to the kitchen, took one look at the still giggling Molly and Lestrade, and marched right back to the manager’s office, where he shut the door with a satisfying slam.

It was only once he’d slammed the door that Sherlock realized that as far as locations went, the manager’s office was a particularly poor choice. Bad enough that Sally and Anderson were making eyes at each other – they always made eyes at each other on the road, it was to the point where everyone simply expected it and no one commented on it. Had they stopped, it would have deserved comment. But Lestrade and Molly were something else entirely. Sherlock half expected to go back into the kitchen and find Artie making eyes at a toaster or something. When had love become so thick in the air?

And now he was in John’s office. The alleyway would have been a better choice; there weren’t any sensory cues in the alleyway. In John’s office – or, more correctly, Harry’s office – there were more visual cues than Sherlock could count.

Photographs on the wall going back some thirty or forty years, the older ones of James Watson, young and smiling, in a dining room that looked eerily like the one where Sally and Anderson were sitting. Later, with his son, and still later, with a young boy and girl who were very likely John and Harry Watson as children. Sherlock paused to examine that photograph – John was a handsome child, blond hair ruffled and wild, short and lean and with an irrepressible grin. In the picture, he was standing on a chair in the kitchen, peering eagerly at the range while James stirred something, a sauce of some kind. The picture was crisp enough that Sherlock could see the steam rising from the pan. James looked down at John with a fond, almost proud look.

Or maybe he was looking at whatever he was cooking. It was hard to tell from the angle of the photograph.

Sherlock sat down at the desk and tapped his feet on the floor. He didn’t want to sit and cool his heels in the manager’s office. He wanted to be out, to dazzle Molly into worshipping him, not Lestrade. This was no time for flirting. She needed to keep her focus on the food, not fornication. Honestly.

Sherlock’s mind raced and tumbled, tripped over itself. He growled and wriggled in the chair.

A pen. Sherlock threw open the drawers in the desk, one after the other, searching. He needed a pen, and paper, and…

His scarf, folded neatly, there in a drawer.

Sherlock took a deep breath. His mind still whirred, but began to slow down as he picked his scarf up out of the drawer.

Sherlock let his mind wander a little, back to John’s kitchen, the smell of the ginger and tomatoes, the scrape of John’s fork on the plate, the way he’d smiled and laughed. They’d talked a bit like friends; it was comfortable in a way that Sherlock didn’t really remember with anyone else. And he’d sat there, and almost wished that John would lean over with the fork and offer him a bite, so he could lean toward the other man and take it.
He hadn’t been hungry, not exactly. That is, he’d been hungry, but not for food. For…exactly what they’d shared that night. Sitting at the table with someone, talking, comfortable. That was the thing about comfort food: it wasn’t entirely the food that made one comfortable. It was everything that came with it.

And then the kiss – the completely impossible, illogical kiss which Sherlock couldn’t even remember if he’d initiated or not. John had been too far to touch and then the next moment, he’d been in his arms, pressing up into him, pulling Sherlock down. It had been so perfect and comfortable and right, and Sherlock thought he could have stayed in that moment forever until John had laughed and broke the spell. Laughed, as if Sherlock was utterly ridiculous, a fool falling for another manager, another trick of the moonlight and roasted garlic.

Sherlock supposed that was why he’d returned the next night, climbed into John’s window. He’d been trying to solve the puzzle that was John, to determine whether John was the comfort he’d thought he found, or something else entirely. He very nearly did, too, and Sherlock felt his cheeks flush a little, remembering the way John had gasped and reached, the taste of his mouth, faded peppermint toothpaste and sleep.

And then they’d argued and John had kicked him out and Sherlock had gone wandering for an hour before he holed himself in his hotel room and tried to figure out if he even wanted to try to save the Empire, because it was so tempting to simply call it hopeless and go home.

The idea of five days before the next shoot – because there was no chance Lestrade or Stamford would be willing to change the schedule yet again – five days in which there was nothing to do but sit in his flat and mope was more than Sherlock could bear.

And anyway, the Empire wasn’t hopeless. Not entirely. Not quite yet. Not if Sherlock had anything to say about it, and he did. He had plenty.

He just couldn’t say any of it until John showed up, and it appeared that John was perhaps having second thoughts of his own, since it was bloody close to nine-fifteen and the man hadn’t so much as called in to say he was late or ill or trapped inside a burning house, so sorry, he’d be there just as soon as someone rescued him from the tower and—

The bell on the front door jingled merrily. Sherlock dropped the quickly irrational train of thought the moment he heard Sally call out John’s name.

“‘We were beginning to wonder about you,’” said Sally cheerfully.

“So sorry.” John sounded apologetic and a bit out of breath, but didn’t offer an explanation, which further irritated Sherlock. The man was late, and couldn’t even offer a suitable excuse. The bell jingled again as the door closed behind him. “Where is everyone?”

“In the kitchen,” said Sally.

“Sherlock’s having a strop in your office, though,” said Anderson, and Sherlock frowned. He was not having a strop, and Anderson didn’t have to sound so smug about it, either.

“Right,” said John. “Should I…I’ll just check on Molly and Artie, shall I?”

No, thought Sherlock crossly. You’ll just interrupt the flow of knowledge.

He stood up and stumbled around the desk, but by the time he opened the door to the dining room, John had already gone into the kitchen, the door swinging behind him, and Anderson close behind, the camera on his shoulder.
Sally stood right outside the door, arms folded, a cheeky grin on her impossibly annoying face.

“He’s here,” said Sally.

“I heard.”

Sally studied him. “You…aren’t happy about that.”

“Sally,” said Sherlock, witheringly, and he might have continued, except for once, he didn’t quite know where to go. “Please…tell Mr Watson that I await the glory of his presence in my office.”

“His office,” Sally corrected him.

“My office, I was here first.”

“Today, maybe.”

“Off you pop,” said Sherlock, and slammed the door on Sally. It wasn’t nearly as satisfactory as the slam before, but he imagined it got his point across well enough.

Sherlock glared at the office, trying to find something about it to hate. Except he couldn’t; it was tiny and cluttered and there were far too many papers on the desk and too many photographs on the wall and the telephone was the old-fashioned sort with a rotary dial. Sherlock walked around the desk and sat on the chair again and stared at the phone. It was old and black and nicked in a thousand places, and Sherlock had no doubt that it was probably original to the restaurant; just like everything else, from the wallpaper to the menu, no one had bothered to update it since 1957, and for a moment, Sherlock was filled with such rage and impossible despair over the sheer stupidity and reluctance to change that he picked up the phone, as if to throw it.

But the phone didn’t leave his hand. Instead, he held onto the receiver and felt the weight of it. He’d forgotten how heavy a phone actually was – a real phone, one that you couldn’t slip into your pocket and forget where you’d placed it. Sherlock lifted the receiver to his ear; it fit, so comfortably cool and perfect, and Sherlock heard the dull dial tone, and couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard it. Dial tones didn’t exist on cell phones; you simply entered the number and sent it along. Sherlock remembered, barely, having to listen for the dial tone before dialing the number, or ringing the operator if you were making a longer call.

The memory was a flash: his mother, sitting on a chair in the hall, just outside the sitting room, laughing gaily while on the phone with someone – her sister, perhaps – in bright sunshine streaming in from the windows.

Sherlock placed the receiver on the hook again, and looked around the office a second time. It was a tiny little germ of an idea, just in the back of his head…all he needed was a few more moments to let it grow…

The door flew open, a bit harder than the man on the other side perhaps intended, but it had the desired effect of jerking Sherlock out of his reverie, and the unintentional result that the little germ of an idea was squashed flat before it could flower.

“I hear I’ve been requested to report to your office?” asked John Watson, the annoyance in his voice palpable.

“John,” said Sherlock. “Good morning. So happy you could join us.”

“It’s my office.”
“Point of fact, it’s Harry’s office,” said Sherlock. “She’s taller than you are; this chair is set for her, not you.”

John flushed. “Aren’t you meant to be retraining my staff, instead of lazing about in here?”

“Funny,” said Sherlock, his voice going a bit sharp, “I thought you were meant to be here, instead of popping out to the shops.”

The two men glared at each other.

John changed his grip on the cane, and took a breath. “Right. Right. I was told to be here at nine, so here I am, and if you had wanted me here earlier, you could very well have let me know.”

It was a reasonable response; Sherlock found that he wasn’t particularly interested in a reasonable response, because it just showed the kind of reasonable man John Watson was.

Reasonable men did not allow other men to climb into their bedroom windows in the middle of the night and then proceed to toss off together. Nor were they willing to do it again.

“Next time I’ll text you when you’re meant to be here, shall I?” asked Sherlock through gritted teeth. “But now that you’re here, perhaps we can discuss the menu for this evening?”

John didn’t say anything. He straightened his back and lifted his chin, and Sherlock realized what he was doing: as closely approximating a soldier’s stance as possible, despite the cane. John Watson was preparing himself for something he didn’t want to face: change.

“Go on, then,” said John. “Or should this be on film?”

Sherlock stared at John, and let him wait for it. He half expected John to start fidgeting in the silence, or even to swear and turn and leave the office. But the longer Sherlock waited to speak, the stiller John became. John wasn’t even looking at him – he was staring off into the middle distance; it was as if Sherlock wasn’t there, as if John was willing himself to be anywhere else.

And the cane, the bloody, infernal, pointless cane, was still at John’s side, and all at once, Sherlock grew impossibly impatient with it, and had there not been a desk between them, Sherlock might have reached over and torn it from John’s grasp and thrown it out into the street.

“Molly is untrained though not untested,” said Sherlock coolly. “I’m speaking of her experience as a cook, of course; the opposite is true for her baking abilities. She has a sense for what is wrong or right with baking, and given enough time and yeast, she might actually turn into a reasonably decent baker. I’m sure you saw the improvements she made to your deplorable Russian bread recipe on your brief sojourn in the kitchen when you arrived. The problem is that the Empire neither needs nor wants a baker; there is no hope for this establishment as a bakery when there is a perfectly sound bakery across the street, and Molly could not hope to best it with only a week’s worth of experience.

“Artie is both untrained and untested in the kitchen; I doubt he’s so much as touched a knife in his entire life, which is both utterly reasonable as he is also the most uncoordinated person I’ve ever met, and completely inconceivable since to look at him one automatically assumes some level of disreputable past. However, he has energy and a will to learn, not to mention some intelligence and a sense for flavor, so it’s possible that he hasn’t entirely killed the taste buds in his mouth through excessive drinking, smoking, or other recreational drugs. The sandwich he is in the process of making for my lunch is an unusual combination of the mundane and the inspired, and assuming he doesn’t chop off one of his hands, he has the makings of a reasonably competent sous, provided he
can stay focused.

“The real problem you have is your menu.”

Sherlock took a breath, and saw John do the same.

“Here we go,” said John under his breath, and Sherlock plunged right in.

“The Empire’s menu is dated, extensive, rambling, and overreaching. It may have served its purpose in 1957 but it no longer meets the needs of a public that has been overeducated in the exotic and now-familiar tastes of other countries. There is no such thing as ‘foreign food’ any longer, Dr Watson, not when there are Indian curry restaurants on every corner. Fifteen percent of the population is from other countries and that number will only grow exponentially over time. The Empire was a bellwether of its day, but that day is long past. You’re not an idiot; you must know this.”

“So you want me to scrap all of it, is that it?” said John bitterly. “Throw away everything my grandfather was trying to do—”

“Your grandfather did it, John. He wanted to bring the world to Upper Brickley and that’s exactly what he did. Look at the photographs on the walls – look at the reviews you have in frames. That’s your proof that your grandfather was a success in his day. I’m not throwing away his legacy when I throw away his menu. But if you try to keep it, you are.”

John blinked rapidly, and his fingers clenched on the cane. Sherlock ignored it and kept going.

“You want to prove your grandfather built a success with the Empire? Then don’t let it fail. Don’t let the Empire close because you’re too bull-headed to see that people don’t need the world they already possess.”

John exhaled. “Then what do you want us to do? This is all we know.”

Sherlock didn’t answer. His mind was already whirling, clicking, turning, processing…. “Shut up,” he said suddenly.

“What—?”

“Shut. Up,” he repeated, irritated. “I need to go to my mind palace.”

“Your what?”

“John, do be quiet for a moment,” snapped Sherlock and closed his eyes. He heard John’s impatient huff of breath, and then heard the man shuffle further into the office. It sounded as if John sat down on the chair opposite the desk, and then Sherlock stopped thinking about John entirely, and started making the connections.


Sherlock’s eyes popped open to see John Watson watching him. John looked befuddled and somewhat amused, his chin resting on his fist, and for the first time since John had stepped in the office door, he actually looked…relaxed. Calm. Comfortable. A little more like the John Sherlock
remembered from the night before – and Sherlock couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face. It was almost instinct, and John had begun to smile back when Sherlock leapt to his feet.

“I know how to fix the Empire,” he said, and went straight past John and into the dining room. “Anderson! The camera. We need to film.”

*

[INTERIOR, Dining room. Tables are pushed together. JOHN is sitting down, hands folded and looking apprehensive. MOLLY is at his right hand, but pushed back from the table, twisting her hands together anxiously, and she keeps glancing at someone off screen, as if looking for reassurance. ARTIE is behind them, shifting from foot to foot, and MARY leans against the bar, watching as if everyone is posing just for her.]

SHERLOCK: The Empire is past its prime. If people want good foreign food, they’ll go to those restaurants that specialize. They don’t come here. So you need to ask yourself: what purpose does the Empire serve?

MARY: To educate?

SHERLOCK: Educate whom? No one’s here.

ARTIE: Gives me a place to go and a paycheck.

SHERLOCK: Very close, Artie, thank you.

MOLLY: Ah…it’s a part of local history?

SHERLOCK: Yes, but not quite what I want.

JOHN: It’s home.

SHERLOCK: Exactly. It’s home. It’s comfort. The reason people come to the Empire isn’t because the food is good, because it’s not. It isn’t because the décor is lovely, because it’s not. It’s because they know what to expect – and there are times when people desperately need the sense of safety that “expected” provides. And that’s what the Empire needs to be – it needs to be the place where everyone in this town goes when they want a little piece of home, something that makes them feel better at the end of their dining experience.

MARY: Great. How do we do that?

SHERLOCK: Molly, what’s the first lesson?

MOLLY: Play to your strengths.

SHERLOCK: In general terms, what’s your strength?

MOLLY: Ah…baking. Because I like to do it.

SHERLOCK: Correct. What’s your favorite meal to make? Not necessarily what’s on the menu here – what’s the one dish you make when you want to feel better? All of you – what do you want when you’ve had a bad day?

MOLLY: Pasties.

ARTIE: Bangers and mash.
MARY: Beans on toast.

MOLLY: Victoria sponge, actually. It’s tricky but it always makes me feel better, when I get it right.

MARY: I like soufflés.

ARTIE: You can’t make a soufflé in a restaurant kitchen, don’t they fall flat at loud noises?

MARY: No, not really.

ARTIE: Just give me a tin of soup. I like it easy.

MOLLY: Bangers and mash aren’t easy.

ARTIE: They are when they’re frozen.

MOLLY: That’s cheating! We can’t serve customers—wait. Is that what we’re going to do? Serve customers bangers and mash and beans on toast?

SHERLOCK: A restaurant isn’t just the balance of profit and food costs and labor costs. It’s the love and care and attention to detail that its staff gives what it creates. If you don’t love what you’re making, you’re not going to make it well, and if it’s not made well, no one else will love it, either. There are dozens of restaurants in Upper Brickley but not one of them provides the sense of history, and comfort in history, that the Empire can do.

MARY: You want us to make…comfort food.

SHERLOCK: Yes.

MARY: Huh.

MOLLY: But…can’t people just stay home and eat all that? If that’s what they want? Why would they come here and pay us to make it for them?

SHERLOCK: Because yours is going to be better. Because you’re going to take everything the Empire has been in the last sixty years and you’re going to incorporate it into what you already love to do. The question is not what the Empire has been – it’s what you want the Empire to be.

[Silence for a moment, while the team looks at each other, somewhat skeptical.]

MOLLY: Pizza.

ARTIE: What?

MOLLY: Pizza dough. I love making pizza dough.

ARTIE: I make a mean sandwich.

MARY: Roast chicken. Remember, John, I made you roast chicken all the time.

MOLLY: And potatoes! And – there’s this spinach thing my mother always made, with lemon and garlic.

ARTIE: I hate spinach.
MOLLY: So do I, but this is delicious.

[They keep talking, growing more and more excited.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: It’s true, the key to a truly successful restaurant isn’t necessarily that the net profit exceeds the spending. It’s that the love put into the food needs to match the quality of what is placed before the customer.

[The team is now writing down ideas, laughing and clearly excited about the menu they’re creating. The only person not participating, strangely enough, is the manager, JOHN, who remains seated at the table, arms folded, watching SHERLOCK with a cautious and reserved gaze.]

SHERLOCK V.O. cont: When James Watson started the Empire, he loved what he made – and that love translated to the food on the plate, which was then transferred to those who ate it. But the current staff of the Empire has no such love for their menu, and that’s what they need to recapture – love for what they’re making.

[JOHN glances away. What to?]

[Cut to: the portrait of James Watson, hanging in the back of the restaurant.]

* *

The rest of the morning was a mix of frantic preparation and quiet moments where John could catch his breath and look around, wonder what exactly he was doing, with just enough bemusement before he had to dive headfirst back into the rapid pace Sherlock set for them.

As it turned out, trying to create an entire menu from scratch in just a few hours wasn’t nearly as easy or streamlined as the show had made it out to be. Then again, John had learned that nothing in life really was how one expected – not medical school, or war, or death.

Sherlock took a quarter of the staff’s suggestions and within twenty minutes created a shopping list. He sent Artie into the kitchen to determine what was already on hand, and after scratching half the list away, handed what remained to John with instructions to purchase everything on it and return in less than an hour. John had tapped his cane and tried to point out that it was an impossible task, or nearly so, but Sherlock was already instructing Mary on what needed to be done in the dining room.

“We’ll need to take it down,” he said, motioning to the walls.

“I think you’ll find we need the walls,” said Mary patiently. “Unless you want the first floor to come crashing down on our heads.”

“The photographs, the maps, the bric-a-brac, everything,” said Sherlock impatiently, with the air of someone who was extremely tired of repeating himself. “Take it all down. This entire dining room is going to be transformed on Monday, and the only thing I want to see on the walls are the light fixtures and the wallpaper because you don’t have enough time to remove them before the dinner service.”

“Hold on,” John said, shoving in, the shopping list still clutched in his hand. “You can’t throw away everything my family’s collected over the last hundred years.”

Sherlock turned to him, and for half a moment, John thought he saw a burning, angry glare on Sherlock’s face, just before it was replaced by something softer, something a bit more…humbled? Repentant?
No, ridiculous. Sherlock was many things. Repentant wasn’t one of them; never once had John seen the man apologize on any of his shows, not even the one where he’d accidentally (or purposefully, it was never quite certain) set fire to the curtains.

“Not the portraits,” said Sherlock, still looking at John. “Those should stay; we’re meant to be imparting a sense of history, and they provide that. But everything else is extraneous. It goes.”

John wasn’t sure if that was the answer he wanted, but it was something. “Thank you,” he said, and Sherlock gave him the briefest of nods. For a moment, John forgot they were in a room with Mary and Sally Donovan and a camera which was permanently set to film every single thing that happened between any of them.

Sherlock then promptly ruined the moment. “Don’t you have shopping to do?”

“I thought shopping was something you did, with the chef, to show them how to purchase the proper things?” asked John, somewhat pointed.

“I have plenty to be getting on with here, and you’re rather extraneous at the moment,” snapped Sherlock, and John held his breath, counted to three, and turned on his heel to go.

He almost turned back when Sherlock spoke again. “And you’re less likely to select a poisonous mushroom. Unless you’d rather Artie did it?”

John exhaled. “I can go.”

Sherlock didn’t answer; when John finally gave in and looked over his shoulder, Sherlock was already gone. The only other people in the dining room were Mary, who looked a bit like a deer in the headlights, and Sally, who had an exasperated expression on her face. John thought he recognized it from one his mother had worn when he was a boy and being particularly impossible.

“One of these days we’re all going to be standing around a dead Sherlock,” said Sally grimly. “And it’ll be a restaurant manager who put him there.” She glanced at John. “You’re welcome to the honors. I know people who would help.”

John huffed, and looked at Mary. “Better get started, before he comes back out and rips your head off.”

“I know,” said Mary quietly. “But I’m going to wait until you’re gone at least.”


John left before Mary could answer, and tried not to think about what was happening in the restaurant, or care that it was being dismantled. It didn’t seem right, really, to focus on the changes in the dining room, not when he’d seen the excitement in Molly’s eyes, the way Artie had actually started to be helpful instead of derisive.

John was halfway to the market before he looked at the list in his hand.

2 kilos each ground veal, pork, turkey
Fresh herbs – rosemary, sage, thyme, basil, parsley
2 loaves French bread
1 kilo wet mozzarella
1 kilo each parm, romano

It continued, items grouped not by type of food but by recipe. A terribly disorganized list for
shopping, but John read the ingredients and the meals started to form in his mind.

By the time he was in the market, John was ready.

Saturday market in Upper Brickley at the end of January wasn’t near as extensive as the summertime version, but it was still active enough to remind John of being five years old and out with his grandfather. It wasn’t often that James allowed John to tag along on the shopping excursions; Saturday mornings were too frantic and James was often too tired to chase after John, and thus John learned quickly to keep up or be left behind. He learned the tricks of selecting the right mushrooms (looks), the freshest berries (smell), and the best meats (bribes). He watched James talk to the vendors, ask after their children and their wives, rail about politics and the NHS, laugh with them, cry with them, and argue with them. It was the arguing that everyone seemed to enjoy best. The first time John saw James launch into a full-scale argument with the fishmonger, it came so close to blows that John, then age four, had run crying out into the street, and James, laughing, had to fetch him before he’d been run over by a bicycle loaded with asparagus.

“It’s a game,” James explained to John. “That’s all, nothing to cry about.”

“It’s not a nice game,” countered John, his face streaked with dust and tears. “You could play conkers instead.”

James had howled with laughter, and lifted John up on his shoulder to carry him back. The fishmonger was more sympathetic, and gave John a bit of salt-water taffy. It tasted like a pale approximation of a strawberry, and John spent the rest of the morning attempting to unglue his teeth.

Winter market wasn’t nearly as busy, and John was able to navigate the stands with ease, despite the cane. Fruit was thin on the ground, nearly non-existent, but potatoes and carrots and squashes were in abundance. Hot-house flowers and fresh herbs, ginger and garlic in brown and white piles. The stands that usually held berries were instead stacked with home-made jams and chutneys, and there were artists in all directions, trying to sell home-made jewelry or notebooks or flavorings.

John circled the market once, eyes on the items for sale. It was half an exercise in learning the layout of the market, and half analysis. Which stands looked the cleanest, the freshest; which vendors greeted him with a hopeful smile or were so busy with customers that they couldn’t afford him a glance. When he had completed his circuit, he pulled the list from his pocket again and examined it.

Sausages flavored with fresh herbs, served with buttery mashed potatoes and steaming fresh vegetables. John rubbed the rosemary between his fingers and bought extra parsley, curly and flat because Sherlock hadn’t specified. He rubbed the fuzzy sage leaves and saw the bright orange carrots already paired with the broccoli. French beans might have paired better, but the broccoli was a brilliant green, with small florets that would cook quickly in a busy kitchen.

Vegetable pizza, with peppers and onions and mushrooms. John skipped the large portobellos and went straight for the creminis, and he smelled and touched lightly before eventually choosing the firmest of the lot, and he placed them carefully in the top of the basket.

There was fresh kale, spinach, and beetroot near the lettuce; John bought two bunches each, and then doubled back for the red onions. He had to double back again later for the potatoes as well.

The grocers themselves seemed to bend over backwards, trying to steer him to the freshest vegetables, the plumpest loaves of bread, the largest eggs. Everything was the best and brightest, and what’s more, everyone was perfectly happy to deliver.
It was the cane, John decided, and not that they knew the impressive and talented Sherlock Holmes was on the other end of the delivery. These were John’s people; they knew him, they knew his history, his military service, and they were only doing him a kind turn because watching a veteran limp home with bags full of groceries would have made them out to be hard-hearted cretins.

It wasn’t until John reached the butcher, where he placed an order for twenty chickens in addition to the ground meats and sausage casings, that it began to make sense.

“It’s true, then?” asked the butcher, leaning over his counter. “You’ve got Sherlock Holmes behind the range?”

“It’s true,” said John. He rested on the glass case; his shoulder ached, but in a good way, and he could still smell the rosemary and sage on his fingers.

“Crikey,” said the butcher thoughtfully. “What’s he like, then?”

“He’s—”

But John couldn’t think of how to continue. *Arrogant sod of a bastard who thinks he’s forty steps above the rest of us and we’re not worth the garlic in my basket but for some reason he’s trying to help. Oh, and he’s a brilliant shag.*

The butcher chuckled knowingly. “Think if I bring the chickens myself I’ll meet him?”

“Wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy, mate,” said John, having found his voice.

“When’s the show air?”

“Two months, give or take. I have the date written somewhere, I’ll let everyone know. Or not.”

“Don’t make me wait that long to find out if he likes my chickens,” said the butcher.

“You’ll know if we’re back tomorrow,” said John. “I don’t think he’s closed a restaurant mid-week, but I suppose there’s always a first time.”

The butcher laughed. “Good on you, mate, you’ve got the right attitude for it. Do we need reservations? Me and the missus might want to stop in.”

*Reservations.*

“I…have no idea,” said John finally, completely blown over. “But Harry’s manning the book, she can tell you. You’d have to sign a waiver, I know that.”

The butcher waved his hand, clearly not concerned. “To see Sherlock Holmes in action? Cor. I haven’t been to the Empire in years. It’d be a treat. Good luck tonight, mate.”

“Thanks,” said John, a bit bewildered, and he glanced into the basket, thought *eggs*, and went to find them.

It was as though the butcher opened the floodgates. Now every person John saw was smiling, grinning, nodding their good wishes, leaning toward him as if they were about to ask him something.

But no. Surely not *everyone* knew about Sherlock Holmes. Upper Brickley was small, yes, but….not *that* small. It was the cane. It had to be the cane.
John clenched his fingers, as if to hold tight to the cane to reassure himself it was the reason for the kindness – and his fingers held tight to nothing but air.

For a moment, John froze still on the pavement. It took every ounce of will not to fall over, to convince his leg that it would. Not. Buckle.

It didn’t. But John didn’t dare move, and the tide of people doing their Saturday shopping surged around him. John felt like a sturgeon, trying to spawn.

“John Watson,” said the voice, silky smooth and disturbingly friendly. John snapped out of the intense concentration to not fall over, and saw the man standing in front of him, hands in his pockets, light grey suit tailored perfectly to his frame. It took a moment for John to place him.

“Jim,” said John.

“Fancy meeting you here. Out for an afternoon stroll?” asked Jim Moriarty, and John clenched his hands again and wondered what the hell he’d done with his cane, and moreover, how Jim had noticed so quickly that it was gone.

“Just doing a bit of shopping for tonight.”

“Oh, right, of course. Been watching the proceedings with great interest, of course,” said Jim, and paused as though waiting for John to laugh. When John didn’t make a sound, he frowned in consternation. “Did you see the episode where he kicked everyone out of the restaurant halfway through the dinner service? Brilliant. I liked that one.”

John had seen it too, and he could picture Sherlock doing the very same thing that evening, or any evening, all too easily. He was half surprised it hadn’t happened to the Empire yet.

“Think I might stop in to dine while he’s here,” continued Jim, and John’s blood ran cold. “See what’s going on inside the Empire’s walls myself. Must be fascinating, isn’t it, John? Everything your father and grandfather worked for, being dismantled and traded in for something new and shiny?”

“Not everything is being traded in,” said John stiffly. “There are some things too important to throw away, even for Sherlock Holmes.”

“I can’t tell you how glad I am to hear that,” said Jim, and sure enough, his eyes were bright, and John wished he hadn’t wanted his cane so badly – not because he needed it, but because he had the strongest desire to thump Jim over the head with it. Probably not a good move, thumping the head of someone who could very well own the Empire before the month was out. “Must be off. See you at dinner service, we can catch up then.”

Jim slid back into the flow of the pedestrian traffic so easily that John barely saw him do it. John remained still on the pavement, and tried to catch his breath. The idea of Jim sitting in the Empire’s dining room was such a reprehensible one – a bit like a spider building a web right on the kitchen counter.

“John! John Watson!” came the shout from behind him, and John didn’t dare turn around. A moment later, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and pushing against the crowd, the butcher appeared, his bright red face concerned and curious.

John’s cane was in his hand.

“You left this,” said the butcher, and John took the cane. It was lighter than he remembered it.
“Thanks,” said John, and the butcher’s name popped in his head, as if it had appeared with the cane. “Angelo.”

Angelo grinned and clapped him on the shoulder, nearly knocking him over, and joined the throng of people, heading back up the street.

John held the cane in his hand, weighed like a pendulum, and when a break in the crowd appeared, began the slow, careful walk back to the Empire. His mind was comfortably blank; his feet moved of their own accord, and his leg did not throb, not once.

The cane never touched the ground, and when John stopped walking, he found himself not in front of the Empire, but the Slate Street Clinic. After a moment of consideration, he opened the door and went inside.

Chapter End Notes

Recipe: A full meal for you today, to make up for last week’s deficit! Spicy Roast Chicken with Salt-and-Pepper Potatoes and Spinach with Cinnamon, Raisins, and Almonds. If you’ve never roasted a whole chicken before – it’s time to give it a try! It’s much easier – and tastier – than you’d think.
Chapter Ten

For a Saturday morning, the Slate Street Clinic wasn’t all that busy. There were only three people in the waiting room – an elderly lady who shifted uncomfortably in her seat and a young mother with a toddler who kept crying and tugging on his ear. John smiled at both of them. The young mother gave him a weary and apologetic smile in return; the elderly lady simply glared.

“Dr Watson,” she said haughtily. “I was here first.”

She remembered him; John racked his brain for a moment before recalling her name. “I’m sorry, Mrs Russell, I don’t work here any longer.”

Mrs Russell stretched out her cane and used it to knock on John’s. “You’re still a doctor? The Afghans didn’t knock your degree out with your leg, did they?”

“Ah, no, but—”

“Nothing in this room that a good course of tea and antibiotics won’t fix,” declared Mrs Russell emphatically, and she looked pointedly at the young mother. “Tea. Hot. In his ear.”

The mother clutched the toddler closer to her, and looked worried.

“Mrs Russell,” said John patiently. “Tea isn’t quite that much of a cure-all.”

“Brew it long enough and it is,” snapped Mrs Russell. “Now are you going to give me my antibiotics or not?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs Russell, I explained already, I don’t work here any longer.”

“But you could,” said a new voice from the receptionist’s window, and John grinned and turned to see Sarah hanging out of it. “Mrs Russell, I’m terribly sorry that you’ve been waiting so long.”

“I was here first,” Mrs Russell reminded her.

“Of course you were, and we’re all ready for you, just pop into the loo and you know what to do.”

John helped Mrs Russell to her feet, despite Mrs Russell whacking him with her handbag. “I don’t need help, I need antibiotics.”

“Heaven help the man who tries to help you, Mrs Russell,” said John pleasantly, and held the door for her as she shuffled into the back of the clinic.

Sarah grinned at him from the window. “Be back in a jiff, John. You can sit in my office if you like.”

“I’ll wait out here, ta,” said John, and Sarah left the window, presumably to tend to Mrs Russell.

John sat opposite the toddler, who eyed him for a full minute before coming over and touching his cane with one outstretched finger.

“Stick,” said the boy. “Mine.”

“Tim!” scolded the mother. “Don’t touch the nice man’s stick, that’s his.”
“Mine,” insisted Tim.

“I’m so sorry,” apologized the mother. “Everything belongs to him, he thinks.”

“He’s two?”

“Twenty months; he’s tall for his age.”

“Ear infection?”

“I think so. Never had one before.”

“Does anything hurt, Tim?” asked John gently, and the boy nodded solemnly, and grabbed both ears with a sniffle.

“All right, then,” said John, and he leaned over to the boy. “Want to see a magic trick?”

Tim watched him with eagle eyes. John opened his hands, showing his palms to Tim, and then closed them up tight again. He saw that Tim copied him. John used his hands to wiggle his own ears at the boy, and Tim wiggled his with his hands, too, and John grinned at him.

“Nothing in your ears, right? Do you see anything in mine?”

Tim frowned.

“Let’s have a look in yours, then.” John reached over to Tim’s ear, and almost fumbled the coin in between his fingers; it’d been too long since he’d done this trick. But Tim didn’t seem to notice, though the mother giggled a little.

“Oh, my, look at this,” said John, wonder in his voice. “I think you’re growing money in your ears. That must be why they’re hurting. Painful business, that.”

Tim’s eyes were wide; he took the pound from John and turned it over and over in his fingers, before presenting it to his mother for inspection.

“What a lovely trick,” said Tim’s mum. “Thank the nice man, Tim.”

“Tanku,” whispered Tim to his mother, and John grinned.

By the time one of the nurses popped her head into the waiting room to call Tim and his mother into the back, Tim was leaning on John’s good leg, watching as he read the little boy a book about trucks and trains.

“Doctor Watson!” exclaimed Jeannette. “I didn’t know you were here!”

“Hello, Jeannette,” said John pleasantly. “I think it’s an ear infection, but you’ll want to double check.”

“Of course. Did you want to look yourself?”

“No, that’s fine, I’ll just wait for Sarah to finish up with Mrs Russell.”

“Righto,” said Jeannette. “Come on then, Tim, I need to you jump up on the scale for me. There’s a sticker in it for you.”

“Ticker,” said Tim, clearly impressed with the offering, and he abandoned John’s knee
immediately.

“Thrown over for a sticker,” sighed John, and Tim’s mother smiled, suddenly a bit shy.

“Thanks again, it was lovely of you,” she told John. “The magic trick, I mean. Tim’s dad left, he doesn’t have that many men pay attention to him.”

“He’s a good kid,” said John.

“I…maybe I could buy you coffee sometime? To say thank you?”


“Great,” said the mother with a wide grin. “Ah…my number.”

“I’ll give it to him,” said Jeannette, amused.

“Ticker,” insisted Tim, tugging on his mother’s hand.

“Bye,” said the mother, and disappeared into the back. Jeannette flashed John a grin, and John glared at her as she closed the door and left him alone in the waiting room.

Christ.

John couldn’t sit still any longer; his injured leg was throbbing a little, likely exhausted from the surprise of needing to pull its own weight after several months of relying on a crutch. John stood up and began to pace the room, and held the cane in his hand, though he didn’t use it. More for reassurance than anything else, John told himself. That was all.

Tim’s mum had been flirting with him. Out and out, in his face, no doubt about it, flirting. And in any other week, John would have been perfectly willing to flirt back.

Except now, he couldn’t. He didn’t want to. He hadn’t even noticed that the woman had been sizing him up until she came right out and asked for a date. It wasn’t that John was opposed to women asking him out. It was that usually, he noticed that they were interested and asked them long before they had to do it themselves.

John was off his game. Completely and thoroughly, and worse yet, the only thing he could think about, when the woman asked him for coffee, was that Sherlock probably would not have liked it very much.

Christ. Since when did he care the least bit about what Sherlock Bloody Holmes would think about John going to have coffee with a pretty woman? Sherlock Bloody Holmes didn’t get to have an opinion about who John had coffee with; Sherlock Bloody Holmes didn’t get to have opinions about John, period. Sherlock Bloody Holmes could go right off and fix his bloody restaurant and go back to his bloody television production schedule and keep making his bloody television show for all that John cared.

Sherlock Bloody Holmes could…

John was deep in internal ranting, circumnavigating the waiting room, when the door opened again, and Mrs Russell appeared, with Sarah right behind.

Mrs Russell took one look at John with the cane and scoffed, but didn’t say a word except for, “Antibiotics.”
“Right you are, Mrs Russell,” said John, and opened the door for her to leave.

“Tea’s brewing in my office,” said Sarah, and John straightened with a smile.

Sarah’s office was exactly the same as he remembered, except that the piles of paperwork were taller and less neat. “You’d think computers would have reduced the clutter,” said Sarah, moving the piles aside to make room for John’s tea.

“Never,” said John, and fell into the chair. “Glad you’re not busy today, I was hoping to pop in and thank you for your help with Artie yesterday.”

“How is he?”

“All right, back to threatening the vegetables with the sharpest knife available. Knowing Artie, he’s either completely healed or has lost use of the arm entirely. It was good of you to see him so quickly; he said you popped him to the front of the queue, but that might have been the Percocet talking.”

Sarah waved her hand. “Nothing, it was the least I could do. Especially since I got to meet the dishy Sherlock Holmes to boot.”

John groaned. “Christ, does everyone knows he’s here?”

“Of course they do, Upper Brickley isn’t completely out of the loop when it comes to celebrities. And besides, there’s nothing else interesting happening this week. So,” Sarah leaned over her desk. “Tell me – is it true? He’s here because of the Empire?”

“No,” said John, a bit put out. “He’s here to have a wild and intense fling with me and then he’s going to flit off and fix up some other failing restaurant.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “John.”

“Of course he’s here for the Empire, Sarah. Who’d want to have an affair with me?”

“Other than Timothy Williams’ mother, you mean?”

John groaned and covered his face with his hands. “Does the entire clinic know about that?”

“Two people, we’re terribly extensive. If it’s any consolation,” said Sarah, “she flirts with just about every man who says more than three words to her.”

“Ta, you’re a help.”

“Actually,” said Sarah, sitting back in her chair again, and picking up her mug of tea, “I was hoping you were here to take up your job again, and not to flirt with single mothers in my waiting room.”

John shook his head. “Just the tea and to thank you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Hmm,” said Sarah thoughtfully.

John paused mid-sip. “What?”
“You’ve been in Upper Brickley for over a month and haven’t stopped by once to say hello,” said Sarah. “And you’re not here for a job, and I rather doubt you’re impressed by Mrs Williams – who’s a bit awful but her son’s quite lovely – and you’re not one to brag about having a celebrity know your name, and you know perfectly well that Artie’s injury was no problem whatsoever…so, John Hamish Watson, MBBS, former captain in Her Majesty’s Army and recent veteran of whatever we’re calling the current Afghanistan conflict…why are you sitting in my office right now?”

John stared into his tea mug.

“Sarah,” he began, and then stopped.

Sarah sat back in her chair and drank her tea, and didn’t say a word. But her eyes stayed on John, peering over the edge of the mug.

“Would you hire me again?” asked John before he lost his nerve.

“In a heartbeat,” said Sarah. “Why? Do you want to come back?”

“I don’t know,” said John. “Yes, except…”

“The Empire.”

“Yes, the Empire.”

“What about Harry?”

John sat back in his chair. “It’s…it shouldn’t be Harry’s responsibility anymore. Not by herself, anyway. It’s not even something she wanted. But she’s been managing the restaurant ever since Dad got sick – she left school for it. Christ, that was so long ago, I don’t even remember what she was studying.”

“Photography,” said Sarah.

John frowned. “I thought journalism?”

“Both. I think she wanted to be one of those travel writers, the sort who go fantastic places and then tell the rest of us about them.”

Harry’s outburst and anger suddenly began to make sense. “And instead she’s been stuck here while I’ve been traveling the world myself. Christ, no wonder she’s bitter.”

“To be fair, you weren’t exactly on a pleasure trip.”

“Yeah.” John set the mug down and rested his chin on his hands. “She should have the chance to do that, you know? Instead of managing a failing restaurant that she hates.”

“It’s – it’s not that bad?”

“Sarah,” said John patiently. “Sherlock Bloody Holmes is, at this moment, in the Empire’s kitchen, teaching Molly and Artie how to cook.”

“Oh,” said Sarah faintly. “I…I had hoped the rumors weren’t true.”

“Rumors…?”
“John, it’s a small town. It’s been obvious to everyone for years that the Empire wasn’t doing very well.”

John sighed, and covered his face with his hands. “If the whole town knows it…”

“I’m sorry, John.”

“Well,” said John. “Maybe I should apply for a job here.”

“And I’d hire you,” said Sarah. “But maybe wait until Sherlock’s done whatever magic he’s going to do before you throw in the towel.”

“You’ve seen the show, then?”

“Once or twice.”

“What do you think of him?” asked John, unable to keep the urgency out of his voice.

“I think he’s very intelligent and egotistical and arrogant and he’s a bit of an arse, but he’s also incredibly focused and energetic, and if anyone’s going to be able to make a success out of the Empire, it’s going to be him,” said Sarah, and then gave John a piercing look. “Oh. Oh.”

“What?”

“You weren’t lying, were you? I thought you were trying to be funny, but you were serious? You and Sherlock Holmes…”

“It’s not like that,” said John quickly. “It’s nothing like that.”

“It’s just—you get this funny bit in your voice when you talk about him, you know.”

John paused. “I do?”

“A little. And you couldn’t care less about Mrs Williams.”

John slumped down in Sarah’s chair. “Bloody hell.”

“It’s none of my business,” began Sarah.

“You’re right, it’s not.”

“But you did come to me, John. So maybe that means you want to talk to someone about it?”

John jiggled his good leg for a moment, and looked out the window. Sarah waited.

“Harry took a mortgage out on the restaurant, and if we don’t pay the bank six hundred thousand pounds in three weeks, we’re going to lose it,” said John finally, and saw Sarah’s mouth drop open. “Bloody hell.”

“Yeah,” agreed John, and they fell silent for a moment. Sarah lifted the mug of tea to her mouth, and then lowered it again. John knew the feeling. Drinking was impossible, and holding the mug was simply too much.

“John, I—if I’d known. I don’t think anyone realizes it’s that bad.”

“I’m not looking for pity,” said John.
“I know that, but—”

“The Empire’s important, Sarah. My grandfather nearly bankrupted himself trying to start it, he did what everyone said was impossible and he made it work. He made it great. My father grew up at the Empire, I grew up at the Empire. It’s home. It’s my home, far more than the house on Baker Street ever was or anywhere else ever will be. Do you know what I thought about, the minute before I blacked out after being shot in Afghanistan? I asked God to let me live, and when I closed my eyes, I could smell my grandfather cooking pilau, exactly the way he’d done it when I was six.

“I can’t let the Empire close. Not on my watch, not on Harry’s. She’s given up so fucking much of herself to keep the restaurant going. Her dreams, her university degree, her marriage – she’s got nothing left, if the Empire closes. It’d kill her, I honestly think it would. So anything that I might want out of this week – if it’s not strictly to do with the Empire, then it’s not mine. The Empire’s the priority here. Nothing else.”

“I get it, John,” said Sarah quietly. “You don’t have to convince me.”

John realized he’d nearly stood up with the force of his words, and his legs were shaking. “Right,” said John, and he sat back in his chair. He took a deep breath. “Right. I know that.”

Sarah leaned forward. “John. This thing with Sherlock. I have to ask – is…is it serious?”

John shook his head. “I’ve known him two days, Sarah. Of course it’s not serious.”

“Then I think you’re right. You’ve got to focus on saving the Empire.”

John exhaled. “Thank you.”

“You didn’t need to hear me say that.”

“I think I probably did, actually, or I wouldn’t be here at all.”

Sarah shook her head. “Do you know what I think? I think maybe this whole attraction you have for Sherlock Holmes is based on the fact that you see him as the Empire’s savior.”

John groaned. “Instead of killing the messenger, I kiss him?”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “Hold on, soldier, back up. You kissed him?”

John rubbed his face. “Sarah.”

“Was it good?”

“Sarah!”

“Sorry, sorry,” said Sarah with a grin.

“No, you’re not!” John accused, but he was smiling.

“You know what they say. Kiss someone and it’s like you’re kissing everyone they’ve kissed, too.” Sarah’s eyes twinkled; she started to rock her chair back and forth.

John rolled his eyes. “I think that’s about sex, not kissing. And anyway, it would mean Sherlock Holmes kissed you, not the other way around.”

“That’s acceptable,” said Sarah, and was about to drink some of her tea when she lowered the mug
again. “Ah. John – you and Sherlock didn’t…”

John felt the blood rise to his cheeks and the back of his neck, as quickly as if Sherlock had breathed on them, open mouthed and with an accompanying caress. “We’re really getting off topic here, Sarah.”

“Fine, fine,” laughed Sarah, holding up her hands. “But, John. It’s the Empire for you. It’s always been the Empire, it always will be the Empire. I can’t even imagine what you’d be without it behind you.”

John smiled ruefully. “A doctor?”

“And a bloody good one, yes. If the Empire does fold, I’d hire you back in a heartbeat. But I’m not sure that’s what you want anymore. Is it?”

John stared into his teacup, and thought about the soldiers whose cuts and bruises he’d tended in the field, the endless days of Mrs Russells and Timothys, the comfort of seeing someone he’d treated walk down the street, cured.

“I…have no idea,” he said.

Sarah nodded. “Drink your tea,” she advised, and John followed orders.

*

John brooded as he walked back to the Empire.

He was not in a relationship with Sherlock Holmes. He was certainly not in love with Sherlock Holmes. He was a perfectly normal doctor-turned-soldier-turned-restaurant manager and whether or not he had a mad crush on a celebrity didn’t really matter because the celebrity certainly had no feelings for him, no matter how many times they’d kissed since meeting two days ago or exactly what had transpired the evening before.

People had crushes all the time. It happened. No shame in it. John wasn’t about to go around denying that he might have harbored some…feelings toward Sherlock that weren’t strictly about the Empire. And he wasn’t about to have a sexual identity crisis: that boat had sailed the first night that Sherlock had kissed him, and John had happily gone in for a second round. Besides, he’d had that particular white night years before, when Harry had leapt out of the closet with both feet. He’d come to the conclusion that he wasn’t…maybe. But then, he’d been eighteen. He would have shagged just about anything that moved and was offering.

Sherlock was offering. Maybe. John wasn’t sure what Sherlock was offering, but there was something being offered, and John might not have been eighteen anymore, but he was tempted to accept.

And anyway, it was just a week, it wasn’t as though they were headed for anything serious. John was a grown man, he’d had his share of flings and one-night stands. If he wanted to take Sherlock Bloody Holmes to bed and shag him rotten, he would do it and never mind anyone’s opinion.

The idea of shagging Sherlock Holmes was such a ridiculous one that John began to laugh to himself – not amused, just wry.

To John’s surprise, there was a moving van outside the Empire when he arrived. Mrs Hudson was sweeping the pavement when John walked up, and she waved him down.
“Isn’t it exciting?” she gushed. “I met him this morning, did I tell you?”

“Oh, God, Mrs Hudson, I’m sorry—”

“He was lovely, I think he rather liked my tart. I think he’s just an ogre for the show – better ratings, you know.”

A parade of men jumped down out of the van and headed into the Empire, empty-handed. John wasn’t entirely sure what they were doing, and half expected to see them come back out carrying the various items which had once decorated the walls.

“I can’t tell which of him is the show and which is the real him,” he said to Mrs Hudson absently.

“Oh, now, who would put on such a dour face unless they had to?” said Mrs Hudson.

The men returned, and it took a moment for John to realize that the long roll they carried between them was one of the rugs rolled up tight – the same rug that had hung on the east wall for the last three decades. John froze for a moment, and then jumped to action.

“Oi!” he shouted, and ran across the street. “Oi. What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?”

The men paid him no heed, but Sally Donovan stepped out from behind the truck, a clipboard in her hand. “Oh, there you are,” she said, relieved. “Where have you been? The butcher delivered the chickens and the sausage meats half an hour ago.”

John struggled to keep his temper as he watched another man come out of the restaurant, this time carrying a jewel-encrusted lamp. The tassels rocked back and forth, and the jewels glistened in the sunlight. “What the bloody fuck are you doing to my things?”

Sally frowned, and glanced at the clipboard. “Sherlock was meant to tell you – that freak. He probably forgot. We’re moving a few things out of the dining room.”

John counted to five. “Monday. This was all meant to happen on Monday. Not today. Not yet. He doesn’t get to chuck my menu and my stuff all in one go.”

Sally was calm. Had he been more rational, John might have been impressed with her composure under pressure. “It’s not being thrown away, John. We’re putting it in a storage unit. It will be perfectly safe until you decide what you want to have done with it.”

John turned and looked. It was true; the lamp, now sitting outside, was being wrapped in bubbles and tape. The rug was even rolled correctly, right-side out, and someone was covering it in paper and plastic to keep it safe from harm. John could see inside the windows: people were carefully removing things from the walls, using paper to protect them as they laid them in size-appropriate boxes. John, turned away from Sally, took the moment to compose himself.

By the time he turned back, he was calmer.

“I’m sorry,” he said automatically, and Sally, to her credit, smiled appreciatively.

“It’s all right. I should have thought to warn you before you left. The rest will wait until Monday, when you’re closed, but there’s so much in there, we wanted to get started today.”

“The rest?”

Sally nodded. “Carpet, wallpaper, new things for the walls. I don’t want to say much more – Greg
likes to make the big reveal on film.”

“Yeah,” said John; he remembered the reveal from the show, the surprised and pleased and often teary expressions from the owners and chefs as they saw their new dining rooms, spruced and shining and gorgeous. Not every restaurant had such a complete overhaul; John hadn’t expected that they’d be in that number. “So what happens on Monday? Are we not even allowed to come in?”

“No idea,” admitted Sally. “Sherlock hasn’t really told me anything. I think—” She paused. “I think he’s not entirely sure what he’s doing, between you and me. I don’t mean that he’s winging it,” added Sally, quick to reassure him. “But…he’s normally so much more in control than he is. Normally he comes in the third day, and he knows exactly how to fix a restaurant. But this morning, he was still mulling over ideas. I don’t think he actually knew what he wanted to do until you arrived.”

“He seems to be doing all right now,” he said, and watched the movers carry out another round of boxes.

“Yes,” said Sally, but she sounded doubtful. “Anyway, you better go in, he’s been asking after you every ten minutes since the chickens arrived.”

John frowned. “He doesn’t want me to cook, does he?”

Sally shrugged. “Ask him.”

One of the movers appeared at John’s elbow, and John signed the paperwork almost absently. It was only as he was heading into the restaurant that Sally called out to him.

“John—”

John turned to her.

“Ah – your cane?”

John glanced down at the cane, still in his hand, still unused.

“Yeah,” he said. And because he couldn’t think of what else to say about it, didn’t say anything at all.

Once he saw the dining room, John realized that there wasn’t much that could be said, anyway. The bells on the door echoed in the room as it closed.

The dining room was empty.

Not really empty, of course – the furniture remained, but without the items on the walls, it seemed out of place – overly large and ostentatious. John could see the dust motes floating in the air. The walls were bare; it was obvious, looking at the bright red squares on the wallpaper, what had hung where, and John winced looking at them. Even in the dim afternoon sunshine spilling in from the street, the walls looked terrible.

The Johns, James, and Hamish Watson stared out from the rear wall onto their empty Empire, and John almost wanted to turn right around and go home. His throat was thick, either with the dust or with something else, and John had to gasp for air.

“Awful, isn’t it?” asked Harry, right behind him, and John swallowed. It wasn’t easy.
“Yeah,” said John. He was surprised how well he sounded.

“It’s like – every nightmare I ever had as a kid,” continued Harry.

John turned to her. “Your nightmares?”

Harry turned away and started to lift one of the larger maps of India. “You’re not the only one who grew up here, Johnny. This place is just as much a part of me as it is you.”

John closed his eyes for a moment. “I know. Harry…”

“No, it’s fine. It’s fine.” Harry stood, struggling with the large map. John set down the cane and went to help. Once he’d taken some of the weight, Harry stopped struggling and smiled at him. Her eyes were wet, and a bit pink at the edges. “Dust.”

“Hate that stuff,” agreed John, and helped her carry the map out the door and up to the truck outside.

*

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. Quick shots of knives cutting, slicing, dicing; cutting boards and wide dishes being washed; a box of vegetables being unpacked; raw chickens lined up in a row. The sounds of water splashing, the quick chopchopchop of a knife against a wooden cutting board, MOLLY and ARTIE talking animatedly, seriously, and a shot of MOLLY, brushing the hair out of her eyes, laughing.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: There is a marked difference between what occurs in a home kitchen, and what needs to occur in a restaurant kitchen. A home cook may have as much time as he or she needs to prepare a single meal, without interruption that could derail the entire operation. However, a restaurant chef is not so lucky. They must prepare not one, but a dozen completely different meals, all at the same time, all presented at the same time, each one piping hot the moment it reaches the customer. For this reason, home recipes can be difficult to recreate for the needs of food service.

[ARTIE holds up a head of garlic.]

ARTIE: What am I supposed to do with this?

MOLLY: Chop it?

ARTIE: Okay. How?

MOLLY: With a knife?

ARTIE: When I write my book, Molly, I’m leaving you out.

*

The kitchen was…not a mess, nor was it disorganized, but it looked a bit as if a cyclone had swept through. Every single flat surface was covered in trays, each one holding squares of what looked like slightly damp flatbread, pale and doughy. The kitchen was hot and steamy, and the scent of yeast hung in the air. It gave off a familiar, alcoholic taste to the air which seemed to result in the strange cheerful, bubbly mood that the three chefs were feeling, thought John. He watched as Molly pulled a tray of the square dough out of the oven, her feet twisting in an invisible, excited, stationary dance.
“That’s the last of it,” said Molly, pleased, and she turned to look for a place to put the tray. “Oh, hullo, John, you’re back!”

Sherlock looked up from the worktable, where he supervised Artie’s attempts to chop garlic. He didn’t say anything; John didn’t think he needed to, not the way his eyes searched John, and landed on John’s empty hands. John imagined he could see a slight smile on the bastard’s face, but it was gone a moment later, and Sherlock turned back to Artie.

“Are these done?” asked John, confused.

“Par-baked,” explained Molly, and she wedged the tray onto the warming table. “For the pizzas. We can bake them up quick once the orders come in. Harry said there’s reservations for sixty tonight, and she keeps getting requests for tomorrow and Tuesday, too.”

John’s fingers clenched around empty air again, and he wished he didn’t want the cane so badly.

“That’s good, that’s fine,” he said automatically.

“Molly,” said Sherlock quietly. “Please stay on task, there’s enough to be doing and talking to John is not on the list.”

“Right, sorry, Chef,” said Molly, flashing a last grin at John, and she turned back to the oven, switching it to a lower temperature. “Pie crusts next, Chef, they’ve been sitting long enough.”

John remembered the chocolate from the list, and he glanced around the kitchen. “Everything showed up already?”

“Indeed,” said Sherlock, and he sounded amused. “It would seem that most of the vendors were quite anxious to stop by with the orders. Artie, are you actively trying to slice your fingernails from your fingers? Because you are doing an admirable job in the attempt.”

“Sorry, Chef,” said Artie cheerfully. “I like a smaller knife. Easier to slip between the ribs.”

“Your bloodthirsty tendencies would alarm a lesser man, Artie,” said Sherlock dryly. He glanced at John again; his eyes lingered on the absent cane. His eyes seemed brighter, and when he spoke, John could hear the smug, satisfied tone. “Well. You’ve checked in with us, we’re busily trying to make your restaurant a success. So unless there’s something you’d like to discuss, we have quite a lot to be going on with today…”

John wished he’d brought the cane in, just for the comfort. Or maybe to pop Sherlock over the head. Asking after him every ten minutes, and then dismissing him nearly out of hand? “No, that’s…that’s all right.”

John left the kitchen; the moment the door swung shut behind him, he heard the chatter pick back up again. Molly asking a question, Sherlock answering, Artie adding a belligerent comment. No laughter, not as such, but it sounded…cheerful, excited, friendly. Familiar, in an odd way.

In the dining room, Mary was fast at work moving tables with Harry, setting them into place. The tables were solid, light-colored wood, with leaves that dropped or lifted depending on the size of the party, and the chairs, stacked by the walls, were a similar wood color.

“Let me help,” said John, stepping forward as Harry and Mary grunted and shoved.

“Heavy work,” said Harry quickly. “You’re meant to be taking it easy on your shoulder, remember. We’ve got it.”
“I can do the menus,” said John.

“Done,” said Mary.

“The ironing?” said Harry.

“The last time John ironed, he left scorch marks on my dress shirt,” said Mary. “And I’ll just end up doing them again anyway.”

“Never mind,” said John, disgruntled, and went into the office and slammed the door so hard the pile of menus on the desk toppled over.

John sighed, and picked them up to straighten them. The cardstock was thick and sturdy in his hands, and John wasn’t terribly surprised, despite the grocery list, that the menu was disturbingly short. Considering the disaster of the previous evening, however, maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

Roast chicken – pizza – bangers and mash…

It sounded, thought John, like every other typical British restaurant he’d ever eaten in. Boring, predictable, tame. Completely opposite the food the Empire had built its reputation on, everything James Watson had been trying to do in the first place. John resisted the urge to rip the menus to shreds, and instead, dropped them back down on the desk and sat heavily in the chair.

His shoulder throbbed a little, stiff and sore, and John rubbed his face with his hands before looking up at the bric-a-brac that surrounded him. The office, at least, was the same. Pictures lining the walls, recipes and books and all the bits and pieces that they could never quite fit in the dining room before. A filing cabinet with menus dating back sixty years, receipts and reviews and letters.

There was a knock on the door.


Mary poked her head through. “I thought you might need something.”

John sighed. “What?”

Mary slipped inside the office and closed the door carefully behind her. “You’re not using your cane.”

“Well spotted,” said John, irritated.

“Oh, no, John Watson,” said Mary, and John recognized the don’t-mess-with-me tone. “Don’t you sit there sulking and snapping out at anyone who reaches out to you. You put yourself in this mess and you are not allowed to sit here and wallow and bemoan the fact that Sherlock Holmes is doing exactly what you’ve asked him to do. I know you’re sulking and I know you’re liable to sit here and feel sorry for yourself all afternoon and Harry might think you have the right but I don’t.”

“I know,” said John. “Can I just…mourn a little?”

“Fine,” said Mary after a moment. “You have three minutes. Then get off your bloody arse and do something.”

“What? You and Harry clearly think I’m not up to moving furniture, and the menus are done. I
can’t put in an order for Monday since Sherlock Bloody Holmes hasn’t kept me in the loop on what he’d like us to serve. Christ, would you even let me sweep if I asked?"

“If you can’t figure out how to help, John Watson, then you’re more fucked than I thought,” said Mary, and she slammed the door on her way out. John could hear it echo in the dining room, and wondered how many slams it would take before something fell off the wall entirely.
Nobody wonders, in a busy kitchen, if there is a god. Or if they’ve chosen the right god.

--Anthony Bourdain

[EXTERIOR, Upper Brickley. Sunset; the lights on the High Street click on. Standard shots of people out on the pavements, bundled up against the cold, talking and laughing as they look for their evening fun.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: It’s Saturday night in Upper Brickley. Not exactly known for its nightlife, but the nightlife is brisk enough, despite the chill in the air. There’s always plenty of foot traffic on a Saturday night, and even with reservations on the uptick, there’s room for a few extras in the dining room at the Empire.

[INTERIOR, Dining Room. JOHN checks his watch, and unlocks the front door. He’s not using his cane, but he seems to be moving stiffly anyway, and keeps tugging at his collar. No sooner than the door is open, but people come in, brightly talking, animated, lively. JOHN smiles, and the stoic frown he’s been wearing is replaced by an affable smile.]

JOHN: Good evening, welcome to the Empire. Cold, is it?

[Cut to the Kitchen. MOLLY is at the range, in front of a deep-fat fryer. A pile of scotch eggs is nearby. ARTIE is chopping parsley and chives at the worktable. MARY peeps through the window from the bar.]

MARY: Door’s open.

MOLLY: Oh God oh God oh God oh God.

ARTIE: Worst that can happen, you kill someone.

MARY: Not helping, Artie.

SHERLOCK v.o.: This should be far easier than previous nights for the Empire’s kitchen staff: it’s a reduced menu of things they’ve made a hundred times before in their own kitchens. Food they know intimately, food they enjoy making, food they love to eat themselves. The challenge will be in bringing the food up to restaurant quality, the twist will be incorporating a bit of the Empire’s own culinary history and traditions – because customers are rarely willing to pay for something they could have made at home.

ARTIE: Okay, worst that can happen, you kill Sherlock.

MOLLY: Thinking lovely thoughts. Thinking lovely thoughts.

ARTIE: Yeah, that is a lovely thought!

[Cut to the Dining Room; MARY is standing near a table of customers, handing out menus.]

MARY: So, we’re trying out a new menu tonight. We’re starting off with your choice of Scotch
eggs or spinach salad.…

[Cut to the kitchen; porn shots of the plated salads and the scotch eggs; the chickens roasting in the oven alongside the parsnips and individual pots of mashed potatoes; piles of fresh spinach and kale ready to be sautéed.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: The menu is a simple one: familiar dishes, both to the staff of the Empire and their customers, but with an exotic twist which reflects the restaurant’s history of bringing to world to Upper Brickley. The chicken is rubbed with Indian curries, ginger, and garlic before being roasted. The greens have a Middle Eastern flair with almonds, sultanas, and cinnamon. The pizza is straight out of the Mediterranean, with fresh tomatoes, feta cheese, olives, and chunks of buffalo mozzarella. Even the sausages have elements of Turkey in the spice mixture. All familiar dishes for the kitchen staff but with a unique and exotic twist that will hopefully bring locals back for more.

[MOLLY’s finished the eggs, and already looks exhausted.]

SHERLOCK v.o. cont.: It’s the Empire, updated.

MOLLY: I just wish they’d order something. I’ve been moving all day, standing still doesn’t feel right.

[MARY flies through the door. She is gleeful.]

MARY: Two eggs, two salads, a pizza, two chickens, and a sausage.

MOLLY: Oh my God.

MARY: Don’t hyperventilate.

MOLLY: I don’t know where to start.

ARTIE: Sausages. I’ll get the salads and the eggs.

MOLLY: Sausages. That’s good. I’ll start the sausages. Right. Where are they?

ARTIE: In the walk-in.

[MOLLY disappears into the walk-in]

MARY: Is she going to be okay?

ARTIE: I….have no idea.

MARY: What, no snarky commentary?

ARTIE:….I’m surprised, too.

[Cut to the Dining Room, where JOHN is talking to some customers. His eyes are pained. His mouth is smiling, but the smile seems set in place, a bit plastic.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: The chef isn’t the only weak link in the chain, however.

[JOHN grimaces – he might think it’s a smile, but it’s not – and gets up and goes into the kitchen.]

[INTERIOR, Kitchen]
JOHN: Mary, Table 14 wants a chicken.

MARY: Mr Boscombe? I took his order already, he wanted sausages.

JOHN: Well, now he wants a chicken. He said not to bother you about it, just to tell the kitchen.

MARY: That inconsiderate, barmy old—

JOHN: Yes, well, message delivered. I need air.

MARY: John—

[JOHN leaves the kitchen and goes out into the alleyway. MARY watches him go, confusion clear on her face. SHERLOCK watches him go as well, but then his eyes snap back to MOLLY.]

SHERLOCK: Molly, the chickens?

MOLLY: Right!

[MOLLY springs to action, and reaches for a chicken with one hand, and a carving knife with the other.]

*

The dining room was busy. Truly busy, in a way that John only dimly remembered from his childhood. This was more than the odd rush of customers they’d had the previous day, the lunch with the Army recruits and the dinner with the curious locals, all attempting for a glance at Sherlock, and not really curious about the food.

This was different. John had no doubt that Sherlock had been the draw to bring customers to the tables, but this time, they were paying attention to the food as well. It made sense; Restaurant Reconstructed followed a pattern, and the pattern dictated that Saturday was the start of a new menu, a new attempt to re-energize the staff of a restaurant.

The people sitting in the dining room were not fools; they knew they weren’t eating at James Watson’s Empire anymore. They were eating at Sherlock Holmes’s Empire, and every time John heard a customer say, with some kind of pleased exclamation, “Oh, this sounds good!”, his teeth grated together, and the smile that seemed to be fixed permanently on his face grew more forced and plastic.

John wished he’d thought to continue using the cane. For all that Sherlock had looked at him that day, he might not have noticed that John didn’t actually need it, and then John could have stayed in the back, unable to assist Mary with service, and washed dishes. Instead, Harry was safely ensconced with the washing up, while John was thrown into the dining room, to greet the customers and seat them, to fetch fresh drinks for those who needed them, to help Mary bring the orders to the table.

“You make a brilliant waiter,” Mary laughed at him early in the evening, and John had smiled back at her. His leg didn’t even have the decency to throb, though he had no doubt his shoulder would be aching before the night was out.

“Just don’t skimp on sharing the tips,” John said, and Mary rolled her eyes and carried salads and eggs to Table 12.

John tried not to think terribly hard about anything. It was easier.
“John, I say, Johnny.”

The voice wasn’t familiar, though it did have the sort of cadence John remembered from childhood, of older men who felt that they would be remembered fondly and reverently, and expected their due respect. John set the water glasses down on the table and turned to the speaker, only a bit recognizable, once he de-aged the face a little, and perhaps toned down the whiskers. The man was clearly dressed for the occasion – a waistcoat, no less, and a pocketwatch. And there, pinned to his coat lapel, were three medals. They weren’t quite regulation – shouldn’t have been worn out of uniform, but John didn’t suppose it mattered very much – not to the old man, who was clearly proud of them, or he wouldn’t have worn them at all.

“Mr Boscombe,” said John. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Where else would I be, boy?” scoffed Mr Boscombe. “Dead?”

“Oh, Dad—” said the younger woman at his elbow.

“Wipe the shocked look off your face, Johnny,” said Mr Boscombe. “Old people mention death, young people look as though the Grim Reaper’s standing over our shoulders. Of course I’m here, knew your grandfather, didn’t I? Had to see the Empire one last night. Should have come last night, but she—” Mr Boscombe afforded a glare at his daughter, who looked somewhat peaky herself. “Thought I was having a heart attack. Just a bit of angina, I told you.”

“Dad, at your age…”

“At your age I was climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, and all you’ve got is your afternoon tea and knitting society,” said Mr Boscombe. “No wonder you don’t recognize angina for what it is, you think you’re near death yourself.” He turned back to John. “Your grandfather built this restaurant to last.”

“He did, sir,” said John. A glance confirmed that Anderson was focused elsewhere, likely on Mary taking orders. He hoped she proved to be more interesting for a little while longer. “Sixty years is more than I think he ever expected.”

“Poppycock,” blustered Mr Boscombe. “He expected a century. Ought to have had that, too, if the new generation weren’t so thick in the head.”

One. Two. Three. “Yes, well…”

“Sushi,” scoffed Mr Boscombe, and turned to his daughter. “You eat sushi.”

“Mount Kilimanjaro, but not sushi?” asked the daughter, and for a moment, John rather liked her.

“You want to die from raw fish, have at it. I’ll take the mountain, feel the wind against my cheeks before I’m smashed on the rocks. That’s being alive. Neither of you would understand. Well—” Mr Boscombe looked at John again. “You would. Where were you, lad, Afghanistan?”

Or Iraq.

“Yes.”

“Always Afghanistan. Ridiculous war. Ridiculous place. Worse than Russia in the winter. Absolute travesty, that was. He didn’t deserve it.”

“Russia?” asked John, a bit confused now. He glanced at the portraits on the wall. “That wasn’t
James, Mr Boscombe, he was in the Pacific. Russia was his father, John.”

“Not Russia, boy, I’m talking about James. Great man, your grandfather.”

*And someday, he’ll be a good one,* thought John, and shook the voice out of his head. John glanced at the daughter, who shrugged her shoulders and shook her head, equally lost. He tried to focus. “I’m sorry, what was the travesty, exactly?” asked John, almost hesitant.

But Mr Boscombe appeared not to hear. “To see his restaurant come to this. Glad to see you kept his picture up, even if you did lose the rest of the rot on the walls. What did you say was good here?”

The restaurant. John closed his eyes briefly, and counted. Four, five, six. “The chicken.”

“I’ll have that, then. Just tell the cook, no need to bother the waitress.”

“Of course, Mr Boscombe,” said John, and opened his eyes to see the daughter mouthing an apology.

John didn’t care. He left Mr Boscombe’s table and scanned the dining room for Mary.

No Mary – but Anderson, in the corner, the camera pointed directly at him.

*Bugger.*

John walked into the kitchen, almost blindly. He didn’t remember what he said. The only thing he really recalled was seeing Sherlock, standing behind Molly, aloof and untouchable and not once looking at him.

John couldn’t get out of the kitchen fast enough.

*Observation Days were the worst. It was the day after that Sherlock enjoyed, the day he was finally allowed to start doing something. It wasn’t the best of days – that came later, usually the second or third day with a new menu, when everything began to snap into place. The moment was usually rare, but sometimes, Sherlock was able to see a glimpse of perfection: the chef working seamlessly with the staff, the food being cooked perfectly and to order, plates returning empty or nearly so.

Today was not one of those days. If Sherlock had stopped to think about it, he wouldn’t have been very surprised. Something had been off all day, a little nagging tick in the back of his head, not even saying anything, simply there, watching him as though amused to see him flap about as if he knew anything at all, which made it all the more annoying because normally, Sherlock did know everything. After Observation Day, he ought to have known exactly how to fix a restaurant: what to change in the menu, what to do with the staff, what to throw out and what to keep.

Today, however, Sherlock had floundered. He had done exactly what the little tick in the back of his head knew he was going to do, which was flap his arms about and spin in circles.

The little tick reminded Sherlock of his brother Mycroft – and Mycroft at his worst, elder-brother-knows-all, tap-his-umbrella-against-the-pavement sort of opinion. There had been a time when Sherlock would have shut the Mycroft tick up with cocaine, that had always done the trick. Had the little tick breathed a word about the stuff, Sherlock might have gone right out and found some; even in pissant little towns like Upper Brickley, there was always somewhere to buy.
Sherlock watched Molly at the range. She wasn’t floundering. She was actually swimming, if one was going to keep to the metaphor. Initially she might have stumbled and worried and been a bit flustered, but now that the dinner service was underway, Molly seemed to have slid back into the role Sherlock had laid out for her, and was responding to the orders of food coming in, if not always in the order Sherlock would have preferred, then at least with some sort of style and process that worked for her. It wasn’t perfect (pizzas were a bit heavy on the cheese and light on the sauce, sausages spent a bit too long on the heat and far too long on the line, chickens could have done with less cayenne and more lemon), but it was respectable enough for a girl who had nearly had a breakdown the night before.

Sherlock thought Molly might do all right, given time, and a proper chef above her. Sherlock wasn’t sure that Molly was quite ready to run a kitchen on her own just yet.

A proper chef…or a manager with a close hand. John was still outside, sulking. Sherlock hadn’t been able to give him enough of a look to determine what had happened in the dining room, and of course he wouldn’t be able to watch the tapes until later. And John was the last person that Sherlock worried about. John was sensible, steady, and reasonably intelligent even, which was saying something, since nearly everyone else Sherlock encountered were idiots. Sherlock was not thinking about John.

At all.

Of course not.

If Sherlock stopped to think about it – and Sherlock did nothing but think – then of course it was entirely possible that the day was John’s fault. Sherlock had been feeling out of sorts ever since leaving John’s house in the wee hours of the morning. He’d wandered Upper Brickley for an hour before he found himself staring at the front doors of the Empire, and then another hour before he found himself standing in front of the hotel. He spent the rest of the night watching the video footage of the day, thinking about the menu, John, the staff, John, the man in the park, John, and the portraits lining the wall. Someday, John’s would be among them. Sherlock imagined John’s portrait, with John looking out onto the dining room. He wouldn’t be wearing his battle fatigues – he’d be wearing an old jumper, the collar peeking out from underneath, and he’d have a friendly smile on his lips, a brightness to his eyes. Sherlock thought about the clues scattered around him: a stethoscope curled around itself, a map weathered and soft at the edges, perhaps a pile of kitchen towels or bandages. No cane anywhere to be seen. That omission brought a smile to Sherlock’s face. He half wished he could see the portrait one day, hanging on the wall next to the others.

If the Empire lasted that long.

“Where’s John?”

Sherlock snapped out of his reverie – and there was another thing wrong with the day, he never daydreamed in the kitchen, and during dinner service no less – and glanced over at Mary. Her ponytail was coming loose, a bit, and blonde tendrils were curling around her face. She was quite pretty, in a casual sort of way, and Sherlock thought of John and Mary with their arms around each other, foreheads pressed together, smiling, and he frowned. Sherlock glanced at the clock, and the frown deepened.

Half an hour. John had been outside for half an hour, and Mary was falling behind.

“Outside,” said Molly.
“That wanker,” said Mary with feeling, and she began to come around the warming table as if to get him.

“No,” said Sherlock, and he left the kitchen without another word.

*

At first, Sherlock thought the alley behind the Empire was empty, and the idea that he’d been incorrect about John’s whereabouts likely led to the outburst of anger that resulted when he did finally see the other man, on the other side of the bin, looking up at the thin strip of sky just visible between the buildings.

John’s back was to him; he looked relaxed, hands in his pockets. The coat blocked John’s muscles from view, but Sherlock had the idea, from the way John held himself so still, that he was taut with tension, and his hands clenched in his pockets. John didn’t look away, though his head moved just a bit to the side, a reaction from the sound of the door closing behind Sherlock, a clear indication that John knew someone was there, come looking for him, perhaps. The way the silence dragged on, it would have been obvious; if someone had come out for any other purpose, they would have made some kind of noise – their steps on the pavement, the sound of a bag of rubbish being thrown into the bin. The strike of a match to a cigarette. Instead, there was only the sound of Sherlock, waiting, watching, breathing.

John was many things. Sherlock knew that much about him, even if he didn’t know what all of the things were, just yet. He did know that one thing John was not was an idiot.

“You’re meant to be inside,” said Sherlock.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” said John, not turning around. He didn’t sound surprised that Sherlock was there.

“The only reason Molly isn’t in the weeds yet is because Mary is struggling to do both her job and yours.”

“Everyone always thinks the skies in Afghanistan must have been full of stars. You know, because it’s out in the middle of nowhere and all that. And maybe it is, in some places. I wasn’t ever off the base at night, though. And the lights are always on, when you’re on a base. You can see more stars here than in Afghanistan.”

“You should be inside.”

“More stars here than in London, too,” said John. “The city was too bright to see the stars when I was at uni. Imagine it’s brighter now.”

Sherlock huffed impatiently. “I’m sure. Whenever you’re done stargazing…”

John looked over his shoulder at him. “It’s always the kitchen, isn’t it? Don’t you ever think about anything else?”

“No,” said Sherlock.

“Right. You’re a bloody machine, aren’t you?” John shook his head and started to walk back to the kitchen. He brushed by Sherlock, and then stopped and turned back to him. “So that’s why you came out here. To remind me there’s work to be done?”

“There is.”
Sherlock saw John close his eyes. It hadn’t been the answer John was expecting – or maybe it was, John seemed somewhat resigned to it, judging by the slope of his shoulders and the pull of the muscles in his neck. But it hadn’t been the answer he’d been hoping for, if the crinkles around his eyes were anything to go by.

“Is this what you do, then? Fix the restaurant, fix the owner? I didn’t realize that my leg was a package deal with the Empire.”

“I fix what’s needed.”

“And I needed fixing.”

Yes, no. Sherlock took a breath. “Right now, what’s needed is you in the dining room, the face of the Empire, greeting the customers and ensuring their meals are satisfactory.”

“Oh, of course. It’s the Empire that needs me.”

“Of course it is,” said Sherlock, irritated.

“I’ll just tend to the Empire then,” snapped John, and his shoulder hit Sherlock hard on his way past, almost as if on purpose. John paused on the step, and looked over his shoulder. “It must be so nice to be you, to have that singular focus on one end goal: save the Empire, save the Empire. You forget that we’re people, not just another kitchen accessory. We’ve got our own opinions and feelings and stupid human attachments to things. You probably think it’s all rot.”

Sherlock glanced up at the sky; clouds had moved in, blocking what stars might have been seen from view.

“Caring about the objects decorating the dining room isn’t going to save the Empire,” he said. “So excuse me if I continue to not make that mistake.”

John huffed, and hit the doorjamb lightly with his fist. “It’s easy for you, isn’t it? Walk in, decide what’s wrong, fix it, leave. You’re already thinking about the trip back to London. You don’t give a bloody fuck what happens to any of us in the end.”

John’s voice was bitter and drained. Sherlock turned, wanting suddenly to see if it was matched by the look on his face, but by the time his eyes had refocused for the brighter light by the doorway, John had gone inside, slamming the door behind him.

*

[EXTERIOR, The Empire; from the street, we see MARY close the blinds, turn off lights, and turn the “open” sign to “closed”.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: The first night of the new menu is a success. Despite getting into the weeds early on, Molly has managed to feed an entire dining room with a new, improved menu on short notice. Artie didn’t lose any limbs, and Mary even received a few tips.

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. The staff is gathered: MARY, MOLLY, ARTIE, and behind them, JOHN, who is stony-faced, arms folded, looking a bit cross. The rest of them just look tired, albeit a bit pleased.]

SHERLOCK: The evening was….acceptable.

MARY: High praise indeed.
SHERLOCK: You followed your instincts, you put yourselves into your work - except for Artie, who thankfully did not take that advice literally – and the customers went home well-fed and pleased. I could go home now and I think the Empire might stand a reasonable chance of survival to the end of next week, assuming none of you wished to be paid.

ARTIE: No, I’ll take pay, thanks.

SHERLOCK: I rather thought you might. You’ll need to expand your menu in order to really become competitive, and you’ll need to retain the traditional meets exotic twist so that people have a reason to come in instead of staying at home. I’ll see you in the morning.

[SHERLOCK eyeballs them all, gives a quick nod, and leaves. Every one of them – except for JOHN, who remains staring straight ahead – collapses with relief on the nearest available surface.]

*

The night ended.

John was thankful for that much; it ended, not necessarily well or worse off, but simply ended, with the last of the customers wrapping their scarves around their necks, buttoning their coats, and fixing their hats on their head. Smile, shake hands, see them out the door, and once they were far enough down the pavement that they were unlikely to hear, throw the lock with a firm *click* that signaled the end of the evening.

The night ended.

John had almost forgotten the cameras, once or twice during the service. He remembered them now, somewhere off in the corner, focused on him, with Anderson waiting for some kind of sigh of relief or slump of his shoulders. Despite John’s shoulder aching, he refused to give it to him. John turned, military sharpness belying his exhaustion, and passed Mary as she closed the blinds.

“I’m going to sleep like a rock,” said Mary, nevertheless sounding pleased.

John nodded, and started to gather the last of the salt and pepper shakers from the tables.

“John?”

John shook his head, half an eye on Anderson, but the light on the camera had turned off, and Anderson was already packing up, ready to go home.

Lestrade came in from the kitchen, chewing on a slice of pizza. “Sherlock left a list on the desk – shopping for tomorrow.”

“I’ll do it on my way in,” said John. “Unless you need me here first thing?”

“I think that’s all right. Is there a market open Sunday morning?”

“In Canterbury, yeah. Opens at eight, I can be here by ten or so.”

“Brill.” Greg popped the last bit of pizza into his mouth. “Christ, feels like this day went on forever, didn’t it?”

“Oh, good,” said Mary, now working on the tablecloths. “I thought it was just me.”

“Always like that, first day of a new menu,” said Greg.
“Glad to hear we’re typical,” said John, and thought his tone even sounded even. Or maybe not, Lestrade gave him a bit of an odd look.

“Not sure any restaurant is really typical. Thank Christ, or every show would be the same, and we’d have been finished after the first series.”

“What’s going to make us special, then?” asked Mary.

John didn’t want to hear it. It wasn’t true, anyway – better to think it was all typical. Standard issue Sherlock Holmes, fix the restaurant, fix the owner, shag him senseless and move on to the next conquest. Christ, the last thing he needed was someone actually…

John went into the kitchen before Lestrade could answer. Molly was wrapping up the last of the mise-en-place. The pile of dishes by Harry towered, but the dishwasher was steadily churning away.

“Good night, wasn’t it?” said Molly cheerfully. “Are we going to keep the pizza on the menu, John? Because I was thinking phyllo, instead of pizza dough. It’s a bit fancier, might dress up the dish a bit, make it more special.”

“If Sherlock says,” said John woodenly.

Molly looked up from the tomatoes. “But…it’s your restaurant.”

Artie popped out of the walk-in. “We need fish. And chips. If we’re going to serve proper British food.”

Molly frowned. “With a curry mayonnaise? Maybe something in the marinade, before I fry the fish?”

“Why do chefs always want to do something to the mayo?” groaned Artie. “Are you afraid that if you use plain old mayo, we’ll all think you’re not trying hard enough?”

“It’s an easy way to liven up a menu,” said Molly, sounding a bit lofty, and Artie threw a towel at her. Molly caught it and threw it back. “John, what do you think?”

“Sherlock left a shopping list on my desk,” said John curtly. “If he asks for fish, I’ll buy fish in the morning.”

“Sod him, buy fish anyway,” said Artie, already digging for the cleaning supplies. “Shove over, Moll, I have to start the cleaning if we’re going home before midnight.”

“Shove over yourself, I need to make some pie crusts before I go home.”

The dining room door opened, and Mary entered, carrying the towering pile of tablecloths. “Tarts!” she announced.

“Oi.”

“No, tarts, you should make some kind of berry tart.”

“In the summer when there’s fresh berries, I will,” said Molly, and John nearly wrenched the tablecloths from Mary and went up the back stairs to the washing machine.

Summertime berry tarts, strawberries and cream, with mint leaves as a garnish. John could practically see them on the plate, the cream dripping from the bright red berries, pooling around the
lightly browned crusts. Picture perfect and tasting every bit as good as they looked, in a freshly wall-papered dining room, full of customers happily laughing and talking and eating.

John watched the washer start to fill with water, and listened to the sounds of his staff laughing downstairs. The only one who didn’t join in was Harry, elbows deep in the sink. Maybe she couldn’t hear over the rushing water. More likely that she knew what John knew, what they hadn’t told anyone else.

The Empire wouldn’t be around by summertime – the tables that held the food in John’s imagination would be empty, the windows letting in sunshine would be shuttered. The Empire would be a forgotten tidbit in Upper Brickley’s history, another one of Sherlock’s failures – assuming the episode even aired, considering John doubted they’d be open by then. They’d be the asterisk on the show’s imdb.com entry, maybe a special feature on the DVD. The one true fans watched, and tutted over, and played “what if” games about.

Seventeen thousand pounds that night. Minus the salaries, minus the food costs, minus the electricity and gas and taxes and all the other little expenses that added up, and even if they pulled twice that every night…

John banged his head against the wall. Mary and Molly and Artie, downstairs and so full of hope and excitement, and John wished with all his heart he could join them. Not just join them, but be as happy and excited as they were, as honestly full of hope because wasn’t it good?

It might have been. If the Empire hadn’t been lost before Sherlock had ever appeared on the scene.

John wondered what would happen when Sherlock found out that everything he was doing was for naught. Perhaps he’d never need to know.

* 

Harry, then Mary, then Artie. The last to leave were Molly, who left half a dozen rounds of pie crusts in the fridge, ready to roll out in the morning, and John, who was hoovering the dining room.

“John?”

John switched off the hoover, and started to roll up the cord. “Done with the pie crusts?”

“Yes.” Molly paused at the door. “Is…everything’s all right, isn’t it?”

“It’s fine.”

Molly nodded, and twisted her fingers together. “Are you hungry? Because I could make you something to eat, before you go home. It wouldn’t be much trouble.”

John glanced up at her, and tried to smile. “It’s all right, Molly. Go home, you’ve been cooking all day.”

“I will, but…you just looked a bit…lost.”

John stared at the hoover. “Lost.”

“We’re all right, aren’t we?” asked Molly, her voice small in a way that John had almost forgotten, from before Sherlock, before Molly’s sudden surge of confidence. Before she’d started feeling the hope that Sherlock had given back to them. “The Empire, I mean. I know it’s a lot of change, and the menu’s so different from what it was before, and the dining room doesn’t look the same and
maybe it’s not quite what your grandfather would have wanted to serve, but—"

“Molly,” said John quickly, cutting her off. “It’s fine. It’s different, but…it’s fine.”

Molly nodded, and John could tell she was still worried. “It’s just…I know I was meant to be cooking, and I was, but every so often, I’d get a moment to look up, and I’d see you come into the kitchen. You always looked a bit lost, and then someone would say something, and you’d snap back. I saw. When the cameras are on you, or someone’s talking to you, you’re smiling and laughing – except when you think no one’s looking. I know what that means.”

John breathed, quietly. He didn’t dare look at Molly; he didn’t want to know what expression was on his face then, and he knew he’d see it reflected back to him, see confirmation of what he thought she meant in her eyes.

“You can see me,” John said finally.

“I’m not sure I count,” said Molly.

John looked up. “You count.”

Molly shook her head. “No, I don’t. I mean, I might, but…I’m not the chef you want in the kitchen. I know that. I’ve always known that.”

“Molly…”

“I just want to say…if there’s anything I can do, anything you need, you can have…” Molly took a breath, and straightened her back.

It was a short pause, but long enough. John looked at Molly, the tiny slip of a girl with her hair in a ponytail, who’d somehow, despite her lack of training and confidence and the insults and dismissal she’d been given at the hands of the very person brought in to help – she’d somehow pulled it all together and made the kitchen work, for the first time in months. And people had gone away happy, likely for the first time since James Watson had stood behind the cooker.

“You can have me,” said Molly, and John believed her.

“I…” He thought for a moment. “Thank you.”

Molly nodded, and bit her lip. “I don’t believe it, you know,” she added, and for a wild, frightening, relieved moment, John thought Molly knew about the loan, and the eminent closure, and everything else that haunted John’s thoughts.

“Molly…”

“He’s not a machine.”

John winced. “You heard that.”

“I think he does,” said Molly in a rush. “Care about what happens to us. To some of us. One of us. And that’s…that’s all I wanted to say.”

But before John could quite interpret her words, she was gone, back through the swinging door into the kitchen. John heard the back door shut, and he was alone.

The shopping list waited for him on the desk in the office. John found it, glanced at it, and smiled when he saw smoked herring listed. He folded it and put it in his pocket, and was about to turn off
the light when something else caught his eye.

John paused, and then without thinking about it very hard, reached out and took the recipe down from the wall. It wasn’t very large, and he carried it easily in his hand the entire way home.

But he stopped at the little off-license shop first.

*

Artie was halfway home when the thin-faced man in the crisp suit stepped out in front of him.

“Hello, Artie Wiggins,” said the man, so slippery obviously trying to be pleasant that it was actually off-putting.

“Ta, not interested in what you’re selling, mate,” said Artie, and tried to slide past him.

“Oh,” said the man, and his eyes glittered when he grabbed Artie’s arm and held it fast. “But it’s not what I’m selling you, Artie. It’s what Sherlock Holmes is offering.”

Artie had tried to struggle, but paused with hearing Sherlock’s name. “Sorry?”

“I hear the Norbury Arms is hiring,” said the man. His grip on Artie’s arm was vice-tight, fingers digging sharply into Artie’s muscles. “Might want to look into that, if you were so inclined.”

“I’m not leaving the Empire,” snapped Artie.

“No, of course not,” said the man, and he let go of Artie, who stumbled with sudden freedom. “Check how many eggs you’ve put in that basket, Artie. Pleasant night!”

The man took off down the pavement, shoes clicking, whistling a merry tune. Artie watched him go and rubbed at his arm.

Chapter End Notes

This week’s recipe: Bangers and Mash. Sort of.
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

Labellecreation made two wonderful manip book covers for Sherlock’s cookbooks, entitled *The Art of Cooking* and *The Science of Baking*. They’re absolutely lovely and you should go and look at them and tell her you agree! Thanks, LaBelle! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You never forget a beautiful thing that you have made. Even after you eat it, it stays with you – always.”

--Max Bugnard, via Julia Child

John knew, the moment he stepped into the house on Baker Street, that it wasn’t empty. The light from the television in the dark sitting room was telltale for the location of the occupant, but there was something else in the air – the smell and the feel of it. It was warm in the way that a house lived in was warm. He could smell a faint humidity, a lack of dust, as if simply walking through the rooms was enough to keep the house alive. The sounds from the television were laughter and tinkling silverware, crashes and buzzing, and sometimes the rush of air past a too-sensitive microphone.

“Two chickens, a pizza and a sausage,” sang the television. Mary.

“On it,” replied Artie. The clatter and clank of a kitchen being used, the hiss of the walk-in door opening and closing, the occasional cry of alarm as oil splattered and a hot pad proved to be damp.

Sherlock’s coat hung on the hooks by the door. John stared at it for a long moment. I think he does, Molly had said to him. And now, a third night, and here was Sherlock in his house, watching his television, claiming the space as – if not his own – then at least something he was entitled to use.

John’s heart thumped along, as if it wasn’t the least bit concerned about the man sitting in front of the telly. John almost wondered if he wasn’t pleased about Sherlock’s appearance.

John set the shopping down on the floor in order to unwind his scarf from his neck, a bit roughly. Sherlock had ignored him all day; ridiculous to be feeling a bubbling warmth of contentment because the man was in his house, waiting for him to come home. He listened to the hiss and crackle from the television in the sitting room – Anderson, too close to the action, perhaps – as he hung his jacket up next to Sherlock’s long wool coat, and went into the sitting room.

There sat Sherlock, perched on the sofa, his elbows on his knees, his hands pressed together, his fingers at his lips. He watched the television intently, with laser-focus. There was a notebook on the table in front of him, with a pen nearby, the better to scratch out notes, and John could see some sort of notations there, but not quite what they said. Mostly they were numbers; seconds and minutes, John supposed, marking scenes.

On the television screen, Artie was plating wedges of chocolate pie. He jerked his wrist, almost expertly, and a dollop of whipped cream landed on the pie and slipped off the side. It was almost artful – John heard Greg’s voice cut in as he asked Mary to wait a moment, while Anderson
focused closely on the pie for just long enough to make it look appetizing.

“I know this is unusual,” said Mary, off-screen and sounding amused and a bit tired, “but there’s actually a customer waiting for that pie.”

“Five seconds,” said Greg. “No one’s going to mind a little delay, especially if you tell them their pie is getting air time.”

“I’ll be sure to mention that,” said Mary, and the pie was whisked away. The camera refocused on Molly, plating the chicken, parsnips and spinach.

*Half a meal is presentation, Johnny,* said James. *Make something look good and they’ll eat it happily and order it again, just for the pleasure of looking.*

John wondered if he should bother even asking how Sherlock got inside the house, or if he should just call the police department straight away.

Or take the man to bed, and *then* call the police department.

Sherlock didn’t move from his seat; John would have thought that the man hadn’t noticed him at all, except that Sherlock was preternaturally still, barely breathing, every part of him suspended as if waiting for John to speak.

*What are you doing here? Get out of my house, you bloody wanker. I don’t want you here. Last night was a mistake. This is purely business. You and I, we aren’t anything to each other.*

Instead, John left Sherlock to it, and went back into the foyer, picked up the shopping, and went into the kitchen to start cooking. The noise from the telly followed him, better than music on the radio the way it filled the house with noise and laughter – the comforting sounds of the Empire’s kitchen, a busy dining room, the familiar clinks of silverware and glasses and cutlery. It settled him, while at the same time Sherlock’s presence made him hyper-aware of every step in the cooking process. John propped the still-framed recipe on the counter where he could read it, turned the kettle on, and started to unpack the groceries.

John started with the rice, washed it three times in cold water, swirling the tiny hard grains with his fingers. It was soothing, a bit like playing with the grainy sand at the bottom of a clear stream. Once it was clean, he tipped the lot into a glass bowl, and poured the boiling water over it, then set it aside.

The rice steeped while he rinsed and scrubbed the carrots clean, before starting on the chicken. It wasn’t a whole chicken – that would have been better, but John didn’t fancy having to carve it up, and anyway, he hadn’t thought he’d be cooking for two.

Which gave John pause. Was he cooking for two? John poked his head out of the kitchen far enough to peer into the sitting room. The television was still going; Sherlock hadn’t so much as moved a muscle. John returned to the kitchen, finished rinsing the chicken, set it on a plate, and went to work on the carrots, julienning them one by one. It was awkward, at first, trying to hold the carrots steady with his good hand, working the knife without letting his bad hand tremble too badly. But every cut was cleaner than the last; every slice a little more sure. By the time John had decimated the carrots into neat sticks, he thought he was actually not horrible.

John pushed on, and kept working. Chicken fried quickly in the oil, set aside to rest again. Carrots and onions, raisins and almonds, sautéed in the drippings, and then the rice, drained and rinsed,
spooned on top to cook in the grease until it was golden and fragrant. Chicken placed on top, and then the entire thing covered tightly and set on low.

John glanced at the clock while he washed the knives and cutting boards, the measuring cups and spoons. Nearing midnight – late for any sort of meal, and John was bone-tired from the day. The television was still on, still talking, but now it was playing scenes which must have occurred in the morning. Sherlock had obviously finished watching the footage once already, and had started watching again. John could hear him on the television, talking to Molly about the Russian bread, and how to improve the recipe, how to change it to make it more palatable to a modern customer.

“This recipe doesn’t work,” said Sherlock on the television.

John watched the skin on his hands go red under the hot water. His left hand, so steady while he chopped and sliced and stood by the cooker, began to tremble again, and he squeezed it into a fist.

This was my father’s recipe, said James in the memory, stirring the dough. Bowls of cherries, raisins, and cinnamon waited for inclusion, and John, five years old, snuck bites of the fresh cherries, his fingers still stained red from pitting them. This is what he brought home, with the samovar and the beaver-skin hat. This is his legacy.

The television still blared when John went into the sitting room. He didn’t stop to see where in the day Sherlock was watching; he simply reached over and picked up the remote and turned it off.

“I think you’re done,” said John firmly, and Sherlock, who was still in the same position he’d been in when John had returned home, lifted his head to look at him, surprise on his face.

“Am I?”

“You can go home now,” said John firmly, and he set the remote next to the television. “I’m not sure what possessed you to break into my house again—”

“You left your window open, John, it was nothing less than a clear invitation.”

John laughed humorlessly. He opened his mouth to say something – and then turned abruptly away. What was the point? It didn’t matter what he thought about Sherlock’s presence in the house, or the restaurant, or the entire bloody country. He’d do what he wanted anyway.

“You’re upset with me,” said Sherlock from the sofa, and John stopped in the doorway and bowed his head, trying to rein in the surge of temper.

“Yes,” he said finally. “Well spotted. I am.”

“You want to shout at me.”

John bit his lip and looked up at the ceiling, because it was not the floor.

“And yet – you can’t, can you? You don’t even know where to begin.”

“Nothing to do with where to begin, mate,” said John. “It’s more to do with where to stop.”

“Ah,” said Sherlock, and John heard him shift on the sofa. “Let’s see. You’re upset about the change in menu, the change in décor, the change in the staffing, and…oh, that’s interesting. You’re angry about not needing your cane any longer, aren’t you?”

“Why the hell would I be angry about that?” demanded John.
“Perhaps because you believe I tricked you into leaving your cane behind while you did the shopping, in order to prove my point that you don’t need it.”

John snorted. “Yeah, because you engineered the entire shopping trip.”

“I did press you into going, when it might have made more sense to send Harry or even Mary in a pinch. But no, I sent you, the one person least able to make the trip quickly and efficiently. It struck you as unusual even at the time – surely you realized I had an ulterior motive behind my instructions.”

John’s leg throbbed, and he put his hand to the doorjamb to steady himself. “It’s not the new menu, not exactly. I knew you’d probably come in and change everything – that’s what you do, isn’t it? That’s what I signed up for.”

“Logic which has never stopped any other manager from hating me before,” said Sherlock. “I don’t hate you.”

The room fell quiet. John wasn’t sure why he’d said it – he wasn’t even sure he meant it completely. But he heard Sherlock’s quiet breathing, and thought it was probably true, to a point.

“That’s good,” said Sherlock. “That’s…that’s very good.”

John stepped out into the foyer and took a deep breath, and then walked back into the sitting room. Sherlock was still sitting on the sofa, his eyes firmly focused on John, with the same sort of intensity that John had seen him use while watching Artie decimate a carrot. John looked Sherlock square in the eye.

“The Empire was my grandfather’s restaurant. It’s the only thing worth anything he left to me. It was his heart and his soul and the only reason he got up every morning, and when I went there, I could feel him looking over my shoulder. Every breath I’ve taken in the Empire, I’ve breathed in his memory, and I hate that during the entire fucking dinner service tonight, I couldn’t feel him at all – not in the food, not in the décor, not anywhere. You took the one thing I loved most in the world and stripped it bare, straight down to the bones, and that’s what I hate. But I don’t hate you, because this is just what you do, and maybe I knew that, coming into it, that this is what would happen, but I didn’t think it would hurt quite this much.”

John closed his eyes and tried to draw in a deep breath; the knot in his throat, which had worked its way up from his gut while he was talking, was making it hard to breathe or speak any longer.

“You didn’t thank me earlier, you know.”

John paused. “Why should I have thanked you for destroying something I love?”

“I meant for the cane,” said Sherlock. “Interesting, I thought – I proved to you that you had no need for it at all, and not once today did you even acknowledge your discovery – you simply went on, as if it were a given that you could walk perfectly well without it.”

“Well…”

“Everyone thanks me,” said Sherlock, and finally he stood. John watched him walk to the television, where he stabbed at the DVD player with an impatient finger, waiting to eject the DVD. “Thank you, Sherlock, for saving my restaurant. Thank you, Sherlock, for revamping my menu. Thank you, Sherlock, for convincing me that a neon pink dining room is a poor idea. Thank you, Sherlock, from keeping me from destroying my livelihood and allowing me to continue employing
my friends and family members in a viable business model.”

Sherlock picked up the DVD delicately, and slid it into its sleeve. “I am so. Bloody. Tired of thank-yous which don’t actually mean anything. I can’t abide the posturing, the playing to the camera, the happy smiles and cheerful waves from a manager and a chef who are only glad to see my back, who regret the moment they even thought that inviting me was worth their while. And do you know what happens, John, once I’ve gone? They slide right back into their previous predictable ridiculous ways – they bring back the old menu, they rehang the worn pictures, they continue to hire irresponsible nephews and daughters and siblings, and eventually, they close. So much for thankfulness.

“But you, John. You’re right, you know. I don’t give a damn about your restaurant, or your menu, or the maps and photographs and paraphernalia on your walls. You have no idea how many times I have seen it over the years, repeated and eternally ridiculous. I’ve seen managers utilize alcohol or nicotine or the occasional buxom waitress as their crutch to make it through. What I hadn’t seen was a man using an actual crutch. No manager worth his salt needs those things to survive, not if their restaurant is up to snuff. And the only thing I wanted to do was to make you realize that. Because for some reason, I gave a damn about your leg.

“So yes, I maneuvered you into the shopping trip, because I knew you would be so caught up in the act of it that you’d forget your cane along the way. I was right, of course. You came back, holding the cane but not using it, and you left it in the front hall, because you’re worried that it’s all a trick, that you’ll wake in the morning and need it again. It’s not a trick, John, and despite your worry, I think you know that. And you haven’t thanked me, and what’s more, I very much doubt that you will thank me, and what is perhaps more interesting than this simple omission is the fact that I don’t mind. I’m not the least bit upset that you will never express gratitude for my plan. What I am…is curious.”

Sherlock stood opposite John, so close they were nearly breathing the same air. John took a breath, staring up at the man. His head swirled.

“Curious?” he managed to say.

“I would like to know, if when this week is over, and I have saved your restaurant, if you will thank me then,” said Sherlock. “And I find myself very much hoping you do not.”

Sherlock moved closer, just a small fraction, and John’s breath caught in his throat. He wondered if Sherlock would lean into him, press his body against John’s, and bend down to kiss him. Sherlock’s mouth was still open, his eyes were focused firmly on John’s face, intent and primal. John almost found himself leaning into Sherlock, his fingers ready to settle themselves on Sherlock’s waist, to pull him into the kiss, up the stairs, into the bedroom…

The timer in the kitchen buzzed, bright and incessant, and John was pulled back into reality, and saw that Sherlock remained locked on him.

“The rice,” said John. It was a struggle to turn away, and John felt the pull of Sherlock even as he went into the kitchen and turned off the timer.

The scent of the pilau enveloped John the moment he stepped into the room – the tang of the fried onions, the sweet of the carrots and raisins, the deep homely scent of chicken. John breathed deeply and tried to convince himself that it was the air that was warm, not his skin. It was the chicken and carrots and rice that sparked his interest and excited him, not the seductive voice of the man in the next room. John pulled the baking dish from the oven and set it on the range while he reached for a plate.
“You cook,” said Sherlock from the doorway, and John closed his eyes briefly before reaching for a fork.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” he said, and went to pour himself a glass of wine. “I’m not a master chef like you, but I do know my way around a kitchen.”

Sherlock leaned against the doorway; John knew he was being watched, and decided he didn’t care. He wasn’t going to offer any of the pilau, either – Sherlock invited himself in and insulted everything John loved, so he could just starve.

John served out the chicken and rice and sat at the table. After a moment, Sherlock sat next to him.

John ignored him, as best he could. He cut the chicken with a bit too much force, still annoyed at Sherlock’s insisting presence. Normally all it took was the first bite to wrap him in a cocoon of safety and comfort – but now, with Sherlock watching his every move, he found it difficult to chew and swallow without second guessing every move.

Sherlock didn’t say a word, didn’t move so much as a muscle, simply sat and watched and waited, expecting.

Finally John sighed, stood up, and went to fix Sherlock a plate. He dropped it in front of the other man with a grimace, and went back to his own meal.

The next bite, and the chicken melted in John’s mouth; the carrots burst with flavor and the memory of James, standing in the Empire kitchen and laughing, wrapped around John like a warm blanket. John closed his eyes for a moment, savoring it, and then continued to eat.

*It’s not about the food, Johnny. It’s about the hospitality. If the customer doesn’t feel at home, doesn’t feel happier just for walking in the door, doesn’t want to linger and talk to you – then why even open the doors?*

He didn’t see Sherlock take a bite, nor did he see Sherlock take a second.

“Afghan pilau,” said Sherlock.

John ignored him.

“The recipe from your sister’s office.”

“Ah, you admit it’s not your office, then,” said John.

“The recipe is quite archaic, most modern cooks can’t follow it.”

“Well, I’m not exactly most cooks, am I?”

Sherlock took another bite, chewed, and swallowed. “Everything cooked separately, interesting – the chicken cooked in the onions which are added to the rice later. The carrots and raisins cooked before adding to the dish as a decorative accent, but which give the final meal the full body of flavor for which it’s known—”

John recognized Sherlock’s deductive pattern immediately, and swallowed the food in his mouth before he’d really finished savoring it. “Sherlock,” said John. “Shut up.”

Sherlock stared at John, the rest of the sentence already halfway out, and John could see what a struggle it actually was that he not continue speaking, as if the deductions had a mind of their own.
It wasn’t Sherlock who deduced the meal, it was simply that he was a conduit for whatever genius could take a bite of anything and immediately discern what made it up. John felt the food settle in his stomach while Sherlock swallowed the words, and didn’t take another bite until Sherlock had done so as well.

“This recipe is important to you,” said Sherlock as he reached for the wine.

*More important than anything in the world.*

*Don’t you have something you love so much that you can’t abide sharing it, let alone hearing someone break it down into pieces?*

*Flavors so strong that just thinking about the combination of them brings you back to when you were a kid?*

“Yes,” said John, because it was the easiest thing to say.

“It was important to your grandfather as well, or it wouldn’t have hung in his office. He taught you to make it when you were quite young.”

“I’m going to show you a secret, Johnny,” said James. “I showed your father, and now I’ll show you.”

“He died when I was ten,” said John shortly. “His grandfather, the original John H., taught him. He was starting to teach me.”

“Ah,” said Sherlock softly.

The kitchen fell quiet; the scrapings of metal forks against china plates, the sound of mouths opening and closing. Bits of chicken fell easily from the bone, tendrils wrapped around John’s fork, and he ate the brown-burned edges, crisp and salty against his tongue. The best bits, the tastiest, that reminded him of his grandfather and the sizzle of meat frying in a pan and not anything like the way the dusty Afghan air tasted at the end of a long day in the sun. The raisins popped sweetly between his teeth.

“The recipe was never on the Empire’s menu, was it?”

“Dad, let’s discuss the menu.”

“It’s a family recipe. The pilau stays, Hamish.”

“It takes too long to prep and no one orders it anyway. We’re wasting time and food on it, Dad.”

“No, Hamish – leave it be!”

John laid down his fork and folded his hands together. He rested his forehead on them and sighed. “When I was a kid. My father took it off the menu after my granddad died.”

“But you clearly remember your grandfather making it.”

*James’s hand, knuckles cracked and discolored from thousands of hand-washings, burns, and close encounters with the knife, swirling the rice in water which goes from clear to cloudy before he’s finished a turn. Johnny watches as his grandfather pours the water out of the bowl in one steady stream, without losing a single grain.*

John picked his fork back up again. “If you’re done analyzing my relationship with my grandfather
now—"

“For now,” allowed Sherlock, and they continued to eat in silence. Sherlock finished before John, and when John had taken the last bite, he stood to take the plates and utensils to the sink. Without a word, Sherlock began to do the washing up.

“What are you doing?”

“Washing up, John, do pay attention,” said Sherlock briskly. “If there are leftovers, you’ll want to box them up.”

There were, but not much. He watched as Sherlock ran the water burning hot, and worked the soapy sponge over the knives and spoons and into the pot, cleaning everything until it was shining and balancing the lot on the dish drain. John wiped down the counter, the range, and the table, and by the time he was done, and ready to start drying the dishes, the dishes were clean, in a neat and well-arranged tower, halfway to dry already.

John stood in the center of the kitchen, the dishtowel in his hand. Sherlock turned off the water and took the towel from him to dry his hands. “Done,” he said.

“I saw,” said John. Sherlock was standing close again. John could nearly feel the other man’s breath on his forehead.

“The dinner was…good,” said Sherlock. He seemed to be struggling with his words. Or his breathing. John wasn’t sure.

“You’re welcome,” said John, and decided to hell with it. He reached up, cupped his hand around the back of Sherlock’s neck, and kissed him. Sherlock’s mouth opened easily, readily, and his hands settled on John’s waist—not holding him in, but more to hold himself steady against him. Sherlock wasn’t even participating so much as allowing John to maul him, but when John pulled away, he felt Sherlock’s hands tug his waist closer, and Sherlock’s mouth followed his.

“You laughed,” said Sherlock. “The first time we did this.”

“It was joy, wanker,” said John, and he might have shoved Sherlock away, but the grip Sherlock had on his waistband was too tight, and John found himself pressed up against Sherlock again, Sherlock’s mouth on the skin below his ear. As it was, when he pressed his open hands against Sherlock’s shirt, he could feel the warmth from his skin, and imagined he could feel Sherlock’s heart pounding against his palms.

“You talked to that doctor this morning,” said Sherlock, his voice rumbling against John’s skin. “Shannon.”

“Sarah. She’s an old friend.”

“An ex-girlfriend.”

“Twenty years ago. And she’s married.”

“Ah.” John felt Sherlock’s smile, the deep breath in his chest, the relaxed, relieved sigh against his skin, and he closed his eyes as he felt his breath quicken.

“This is a bad idea,” said John, and his back hit the countertop.

“Is it?” said Sherlock, and began kissing down John’s jawline, toward his ear, where he sucked the
lobe between his teeth.

“Ah…a bit not…good, no,” said John, trying not to gasp too loudly. Sherlock chuckled anyway, and kissed the skin below John’s ear, near his hairline.

“I’ve never aspired to being good,” said Sherlock, and worked his hands under John’s jumper, and began to pull on his shirt. “You’re wearing clothing.”

“That’s what people do, Sherlock.”

Sherlock made a snuffling noise, and John let his head fall forward, until his nose was pressed to Sherlock’s shoulder. John pushed at the fabric of Sherlock’s shirt until it had parted just enough for John’s mouth to reach Sherlock’s collarbone. Sherlock was still working on the skin at his neck; John waited for him to plant an open-mouth kiss on the hard line of his pectoral muscles, and then latched onto Sherlock’s neck himself, sucking hard in one desperate bid for attention. He was rewarded with a gasp from the other man.

“Fuck,” said Sherlock into John’s skin, and pulled the rest of John’s shirt from his trousers, shoving the fabric up until it bunched under his arms. He pushed at John’s trousers, struggling to get them down, to slide his hands under the waistband, which pulled at John’s still full stomach uncomfortably.

“Oh, for—” John pushed away from Sherlock and quickly undid his trousers, then pushed on Sherlock’s shoulders, shoving the man down to his knees. Sherlock gripped John’s waistband and glanced up at John. Sherlock’s eyes were half-blown; his lips were already showing signs of being swollen from kissing and sucking and loving. His shirt hung lopsided on his shoulders, and John could see the bit of skin he’d been suckling, shiny with saliva and already a darker shade of pink than the rest of Sherlock’s skin.

John watched as Sherlock slowly pulled on the waistband, slipped the trousers and the boxers down, inch by inch, just past his hips, then moved to catch the suddenly bobbing erection in his cool hand. John held his breath, watching as Sherlock moved, and then took the cock in one full swallow into his mouth.

It didn’t take long, and if Sherlock wasn’t exactly well-versed in all the different erotic things one could do with a cock in one’s mouth, John wasn’t disappointed, either. When he came, he had to lean with his elbows on the counter behind him in order to keep from slipping to the ground, and John threw his head back and shouted out while Sherlock sucked him down. When he’d finished coming, John felt Sherlock’s arms around him, replacing his trousers, helping him to sit on the floor, back to the cabinets.

Sherlock kissed him gently, almost reverently, and John tasted the salt and earthy undertones of carrot and rice. John let him, unable to think much past breathing. Sherlock’s fingers caressed the side of his face, his neck, his shoulders.

“So this is what you do, is it?” asked John, when he found his voice. “Is seducing the restaurant owner part of your plan?”

Sherlock paused in his kissing, for half a moment, no more. “No,” said Sherlock, quietly. “You weren’t part of my plan. Ever.”

John believed him. “Sherlock – what is this?”

Sherlock didn’t answer. He settled his hands on either side of John’s face and kissed him again,
deep and long, stroking the insides of his cheeks with his tongue, straddling John and pressing close. “I don’t know,” Sherlock admitted into John’s mouth. He pulled away, and rested his forehead on John’s. “But I spent most of today thinking about the curve of your back when you sent me away yesterday, and wishing I hadn’t left at all.”

John squeezed Sherlock’s biceps in his hands, and shut his eyes tightly. “You couldn’t even look at me.”

“You planned this.”

“You are really most inconvenient,” said Sherlock.

John shook his head. It wasn’t as though Sherlock himself was a walk in the park, either.

“What now?”

Sherlock stood, and reached down to grasp John’s hand. “Very easy, John. We’re going to bed.”

John took Sherlock’s hand, and followed.

* 

John dozed against Sherlock’s chest in the dim bedroom. The window was still open, enough to let the cold air in. The room was just crisp enough to make the duvet and extra blankets particularly seductive. It was warm as an oven, wrapped around and with John, and the cliché was stupid enough that Sherlock felt cheapened just by thinking it – and then thought it was perfectly true all the same. His mouth quirked as he even felt himself rising – which was utterly ridiculous, he was a thirty-four year old man with a refractory period, and John had returned the favors from the kitchen.

Besides, the air was cold, and Sherlock didn’t want to disturb either the blankets or John.

John shifted against Sherlock’s chest. He was draped over him, a bit possessively, and as he fell into a deeper slumber, he moved off Sherlock almost entirely, twisting to land face-up on the bed beside him. Sherlock shifted to his side, and studied him in the pale moonlight. (Another cliché – he was really becoming terribly trite with them, he’d have to ensure he didn’t become ridiculous.)

It was, thought Sherlock, very inconvenient.

He’d had affairs before. He’d even slept with one or two of the employees of the restaurants he’d rescued, but that was less compassion than it was convenience and curiosity, and the rules had been well-established before any clothes had been removed. Once, he’d had a terrific snog with a manager during the lunch service on the fourth day, when the sexual tension in the kitchen had finally exploded as the service came under control and things began to move smoothly. Or perhaps it was less sexual tension than relief that things were at last going well. It had been a particularly excellent snog, Sherlock remembered. And then the young man hadn’t been able to meet his eye and had hidden in the walk-in when it was time for Sherlock to take his (filmed) leave, and when he’d had his visit two months later, the restaurant was doing well but the manager had left for Iberia.

Sherlock thought briefly of the Norbury Arms, and then put it out of his mind. Not deleted, not yet, but…not relevant. Not really.
This, with John – this was new. This was different. This was uncharted territory, an untested recipe, and Sherlock had no idea what would happen when the final dish was unveiled.

Sherlock tried to imagine what would happen in the morning when they woke up. John would smile at him, sheepishly and a bit shy, perhaps. Or he would bound out of bed, full of energy and anxious to begin the day. Or he’d roll over on top of him, and want to play before getting up.

Or he’d turn away, embarrassed, and try not to catch Sherlock’s eye. He’d mumble about needing to do the shopping, and look at the time, and race out to the car and it would be the restaurant manager all over again, although perhaps without Iberia.

Sherlock couldn’t quite see John doing any of these things. He would face the situation head on, perhaps demand some kind of discussion. He would want to talk, lay down the groundwork for what they were doing, what it meant, where they were going, what would happen with the week over…

No. John wasn’t a man of talk. He was a man of action.

John shifted on the bed again. He frowned in his sleep, twisted until his arm was above his head on the pillow, and kept twisting, disturbed.

A nightmare.

Sherlock reached out, his hand hovering over John’s shoulder, and the moonlight caught the scar there, the deep, shiny imprint the exact size of Sherlock’s thumb. John moved again, and Sherlock caught it – the stiffness in John’s shoulder, the way he held his arm close to his body, even in sleep, especially in the dream - and with a start, Sherlock knew what John was dreaming.

“John,” said Sherlock, softly, and John’s eyes snapped open, still half in the dream. “You’re dreaming. It’s not real. You’re here with me. You’re safe.”

John’s eyes closed. He probably hadn’t seen Sherlock, but he grew still on the mattress. The dream was over, and Sherlock watched as John fell back into a dreamless sleep. Slowly, he lowered his hand, until it rested on John’s chest, just above his heart.

pa-thump – pa-thump – pa-thump

Bollocks, thought Sherlock, and did not close his eyes until morning.

Chapter End Notes

This week’s recipe: Three kinds of Pilau
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

I feel the need to apologize for responding so horrifically late to everyone’s lovely comments last week (as in, me responding last night and this morning). I was feeling a bit down for some reason, and then just as I was picking back up, the rest of our belongings arrived from Cairo, and I spent every spare moment in a frantic search for my KitchenAid mixer – which I’m happy to say was finally unpacked on Tuesday afternoon. But no excuse: I appreciate and read and smile over every single review left (and every kudos and hitcount, too), and that you took the time to say anything at all really does make my day that much brighter. That I waited so long to say “thanks” is inexcusable, and my mother would be highly disappointed in me.

There is no recipe this week, though I had intended to share the recipe for Thai-spiced Kedgeree. I was really looking forward to making that one, too – I couldn’t in Cairo, because I couldn’t get the herring, so I planned to wait until we returned to the States. And then by the time we got here – the recipe had been pulled down from the BBC’s food website, and I hadn’t saved it because I didn’t realize they did that (my bad), so I found a less interesting recipe to try, but never got around to it. Ah well. Feel free to have a go yourself. Happy cooking!

Every chef I have known spends a lot of time dreaming up recipes. Every good home cook has the same kind of culinary reveries. Just as a composer hears melodies in his mind before committing them to paper, cooks taste recipes before they put pan to fire.

And then they go to the market.

--Peter Kaminsky

Sunday morning market was a strange place. For one thing, it was Sunday, and Sunday markets never had quite the variety, in terms of people or produce. Most reasonable people were either sleeping in, or preparing for church.

John Watson had never really counted himself as a reasonable person. For one thing, he’d had far too many careers in his lifetime: dishwasher, doctor, soldier, and now restaurateur. A friend had once said that the average person had six careers in their lifetime. Most of the people John knew had only one or two. He wondered where the people who skewed the average lived.

The produce in the middle of winter wasn’t particularly promising, and worse on a Sunday, when even the farmers were slow to start moving. He took his slow lap around the stalls, cataloging and inspecting and letting the various bits and pieces swirl around in his head. It was easier, almost, because none of the vendors knew him in Canterbury, the closest Sunday market available. He was anonymous here, and while it was a bit freeing to know that he didn’t carry his grandfather’s weight on his shoulders here, on the other hand, no one was anxious to give him the pick of the best, or offer delivery, on the off-chance of a mention by Sherlock Holmes.

Once he did start buying, the moment he mentioned it was for service (and who else shopped on a Sunday at eight in the morning, John would like to know), the vendors instantly became a little
more favorable. Purchases made in such large quantities generally meant a guarantee of return business if the quality was good, and there were nearly always teenagers underfoot who would carry things to a car for a few quid. Spinach, potatoes, carrots, and parsnips, all purchased in such mass quantities that John wondered if Artie and Molly would have time to wash it all before the mid-afternoon service began.

It would be easier on Tuesday, when regular deliveries from the supplier started up again, thus eliminating the need to actually go to the market himself. John would need to place the order on Monday morning. Which meant talking to Sherlock Sunday night, to determine what he’d need to order.

Which meant talking to Sherlock. There was the problem.

The chickens had been handled locally – Angelo had already promised Sunday chickens, and John trusted him – so all there really was to find was the fish. The line at the fishmonger’s was surprisingly long, and John waited patiently and tried not to be bothered by the prospect of talking to Sherlock. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to talk to Sherlock. It was only that every time they did, it ended in snogging.

Excellent snogging, of course, but still. John liked to think he had more control over his libido than a teenager.

“Next!” said the fishmonger.

“How much smoked haddock do you have?” asked John.

“How much do you need, mate?” asked the fishmonger.

“Between two and three kilo – it’s for service.”

The fishmonger was dubious. “I can give you two,” he said, checking his supplies. “And another two of the mackerel.”

“Brilliant. Fresh salmon?”

“How much would you like?”

“Four kilo, center-cut steaks should do me.”

“Right, mate, give me a tick.”

John watched the fishmonger gather the fish, and let his mind wander. The house had been empty when he’d woken, but the space next to him in the bed was still warm, so Sherlock hadn’t been gone long. John had tried to shove down the mix of disappointment and relief, and taken his shower and dressed before going downstairs to find the note on the fridge.

Coffee on the range. You’re out of milk. Stop by the restaurant on your way out of town if convenient. If not convenient, stop by anyway.

Sherlock’s handwriting was quick and sharp. The entire note made John laugh, and the coffee was still hot and not completely horrible without milk. It at least served to wake him up.

But when John drove by the restaurant, Sherlock hadn’t arrived. Artie waited by the back door. “I could do the shopping for you,” suggested Artie, bright-eyed and anxious as John unlocked the
“I know how to cook.”

“No, Artie, you’re meant to be learning to cook.”

“Artie, you know how to microwave. There’s a difference.”

“I did the spinach and carrots yesterday,” insisted Artie. “And did you see any of it come back?”

“Actually, yes,” said John.

“Some people just can’t appreciate the better things in life,” said Artie, and disappeared into the kitchen. John shook his head, and turned to go back to the car, but Artie stuck his head out of the door again. “Say, boss. Want me to give Sherlock a message when he shows up?”

John gave Artie what he hoped was a blank look. “Ah – that I’ll be back with the shopping?”

"Boss?"

"What is it, Artie?"

For Artie, it was almost hesitant. Except John had never heard Artie be hesitant about anything in his entire life. "You're all right, aren't you?"

John frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I did some research online last night. You know there are forums dedicated to people who just follow Sherlock Holmes around the country, trying out the restaurants he’s in? And they tell stories, mate."

John sighed. “Artie. What are you trying to tell me?"

“Just…” Artie paused, as if reconsidering what he was going to say. “You don't have that post-traumatic thingy whatsit, do you? I hear it can make you do some pretty ridiculous stuff. Like go into dark corners with egotistical chefs."

Something made John think that Artie had meant to say something very different. John started to walk back to the road. "Sod off, Artie."

"I'm just saying," shouted Artie after him. "It's not like you to do something without considering it first."

*Considering.* John thought he did nothing *but* consider anything, and he had the feeling he spent entirely too much time trying to consider Sherlock Holmes, who was going to leave in another three days to return to London.

John wondered what would happen after that, and wished he hadn’t.

"Here you are, mate," said the fishmonger. He stood in front of John with a box of paper-wrapped packages nestled in ice. "Pretty heavy, what with the ice and all, if you need help lugging it to your car?"

"Yeah, cheers," said John automatically, and was somewhat surprised when the man himself began to follow John out of the market. "Listen, I can get it if you need to stay—"
"Rather stretch my legs a little. You're not parked far, are you?"

"No, just around the corner."

"Then it won't take long. What sort of restaurant, mate? New?"

"In a way. We're changing the menu." And everything else, thought John.

"On a weekend? Chancy thing," said the fishmonger dubiously.

"Isn't everything?"

"True. What's this destined to be?"

John opened and closed his mouth quickly, and frowned as he ran over the list of ingredients in his mind. It didn't occur to him until just then - he'd been able to discern the menu on Saturday from the list he'd been handed. It had been easy, in fact. But there were no such indications on the list in his hand why Sherlock wanted the fish. Kedgeree, maybe – but it was such an odd thing to have on the menu, John couldn’t imagine why Sherlock would want it.

"Do you know, I haven't the foggiest," said John, a bit sheepishly, and the fishmonger grunted, not overly impressed.

John didn't blame him. The person doing the shopping, not actually knowing what it was he shopped for? It was a completely asinine concept. What if he'd been unable to find any haddock at all? What if the mackerel he'd purchased in its stead didn't do what Sherlock wanted? What if the salmon was completely wrong for anything they planned to serve? And how was John supposed to make adequate substitutions if he was blind to the final result? John's jaw grew tense.

Sherlock's plan, Sherlock's recipes, Sherlock's decoration or lack thereof. Sherlock's rules when it came to private spaces, Sherlock inserting himself into John's life as if he were the missing piece John had been wanting. Sherlock casually taking over the life and soul of the Empire, booting the old out and inserting in his own ideals, without even a glance back to see what might have survived, if just tweaked.

John thought he ought to have felt resentful. He didn’t, and in a way, that was worse. Instead, he could actually track the sorrow building, block by block, and part of him even realized how stupid it was, but it didn't seem to matter. It kept right on placing block after block as if building a wall to shield himself from being hurt.

"This is me," he said shortly as they reached the little blue car, and after fumbling a little, he managed to pop open the boot. The box was nestled in amongst the other purchases, and John slammed it closed with a satisfying amount of force.

He'd invited Sherlock to help with the Empire, sure. That was one thing. But Sherlock had spent the entire evening in his house, left that morning with only a curt note, and wasn't even there to meet him at the Empire when he'd specifically asked John to stop in. As if Sherlock was trying to make himself not only indispensable to the Empire, but to John himself as well - and what would that mean, when the week was over and the cameras were packed and it was time to move on to the next disaster?

"Luck to you, mate," said the fishmonger, shaking John's hand, and he headed back to the market, and likely never actually realized that one simple question had completely shaken John's world.

*
“There you are,” said Greg Lestrade, and Sherlock looked up from his mobile phone, where he’d been trying to find a recipe that at least matched the one he’d not been allowed to deduce the night before. “I’ve been looking for you. Never thought you’d deign to sit in a pastry shop.”

“I’m sitting at a table outside the shop,” said Sherlock. “I would have thought the distinction obvious.”

“Yeah, well,” said Lestrade, unabashed. “Still closer than I’d have thought.” He peered into the windows. “Is it even open?”

“It’s Sunday morning, Lestrade. Of course not.”

“You’ve got a muffin.”

“The proprietress is a fan and lives above the shop.”

“I’d like a muffin,” said Lestrade wistfully.

Sherlock went back to examining his phone. “Please proceed to the part where you tell me why you’re bothering me so that I can go back to ignoring you.”

“You’re not sleeping in your hotel room.”

Sherlock glanced at him. “And this matters to you because—”

“Well,” said Lestrade. “For one thing, if you’re going to continue to not use your hotel room, it’d be nice to cancel the reservation and not continue bleeding money we can’t afford. For another, I’d quite like to know where the leading man in this production is spending his nights. Not that I care, mind you, but I’d rather not wake up and find out that you’re strung out in a dark alley. Again.”

Sherlock’s fingers paused over the phone, and he tried to assess Lestrade, who was still looking through the darkened windows of Hudson’s, as if hoping a tray of muffins would materialize by merely wishing. But there were lines just faintly visible on his cheek from the creases on the pillow, and his hair was wet from washing, without the product he normally used. His shirt had been ironed the night before, and the tips of his collar weren’t buttoned down.

No tell-tale darkness under his eyes – but Sherlock saw the red at the edges.

“The chef is a side-sleeper, I see,” said Sherlock. “You’re allergic to her perfume, by the way.”

Lestrade stiffened.

“I’m clean,” Sherlock added, his voice short, and his suspicions were borne out by the way Lestrade’s shoulders relaxed.

“I know that,” said Lestrade.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Nah,” he admitted, and sat down across from Sherlock. “Look. You understand why I’m asking, right?”

“You understand why I would take offense that you feel the need?” retorted Sherlock sharply.

“To be honest, Sherlock, I don’t give a flip if you’re offended or not,” said Lestrade calmly. “The bottom line is that the show can’t afford you going on another bender. We’re on thin enough
ground as it is. And the last time you stayed out of your hotel room all night…”

Sherlock didn’t want the reminder. “Yes, thank you, cheers,” he said shortly. “Let’s derail the trip down memory lane, if you will. I’m busy.”

“Sleep much?”

Sherlock glared at him, a bit peeved. “What?”

Lestrade motioned to the coffee cup. “You think I can’t smell it? Double espresso, not even watered down, plenty of sugar and no milk. Second one you’ve had this morning, unless I miss my guess. Your hands are shaking, and I’ll warrant it’s not because of the cold. Either you’re high on coke or caffeine. You say you’re clean, and maybe you are, so it must be the caffeine. Only reason you’d be drinking this much coffee in the morning is because you didn’t get to sleep last night.”

Sherlock set the phone down on the table.

Lestrade met his gaze. “You think I haven’t watched you for five years and not picked up on some things, you’re more of an idiot than the numbskulls in the studio. So tell me again, Sherlock – what kind of fool would I be to not ask what you get up to in the middle of the night when you don’t return to your hotel room?”

Sherlock closed his eyes, briefly, and then opened them again. Lestrade’s expression hadn’t changed; he looked at Sherlock expectantly, solid and sure and confident. As if he simply waited for Sherlock to catch up.

“The studio—” he began.

“Is not part of this conversation,” said Lestrade. “They don’t have any say in what happens on the road. That’s always been true and as long as I’m at the helm, it always will be.”

Sherlock nodded, and rested his hand on the phone again.

“You’re not going to say it, are you?” asked Lestrade, watching him.

Sherlock smiled; perhaps Lestrade really was picking up on a few more things by association with Sherlock. “I understand your concerns and will take note of them.”

“No, I don’t think you do,” said Lestrade. “Look, Sherlock – there’s more at stake here than just this restaurant. There’s three weeks until we finish filming for this series. This isn’t just your reputation at stake here, there’s an entire crew’s worth of paychecks that depend on you getting it right.”

“Yes, what a shame if Molly Hooper were to have to move to London to find work,” said Sherlock, and jumped when Lestrade slammed his hand on the table.

“This isn’t a joke, Sherlock, and it’s got nothing to do with Molly or me or even your John Watson. Viewership is down – you might have a core group of fans who feed off watching you tear idiotic managers new ones, but the truth is that your track record is dismal. More than half the restaurants you’ve tried to help have closed within six months. Including the Norbury Arms.”

It took Sherlock a half second for the words to sink in – much, much too long. He looked up, sharp, and saw from Lestrade’s serious and almost angry expression that he was telling the truth. “The Norbury Arms?”
“Closed on Friday night,” confirmed Lestrade. “There was a message waiting for me when I got back to the hotel room last night. You didn’t answer your phone and you weren’t in your hotel room.”

Sherlock couldn’t say a word.

“The opening restaurant for the next series, closed before you could even make your return trip,” said Lestrade bitterly. “How’s that going to look, Sherlock, when viewers turn in? That’s an entire week down the drain, wasted. And here you are, mucking it all up again, in almost exactly the same way.”

Sherlock’s voice was cool. “Mucking it up? Is that what you think I’m doing?”

“Aren’t you?” countered Lestrade. “Because that’s what I see happening, even if you don’t. Your head was turned sideways by that Adler woman, you couldn’t even think straight enough to remember how to make a mayonnaise. And here you are again, so blinded by John Watson that you’re going to chuck it all in and this restaurant will close before we even leave town.”

Sherlock tried to remember how to breathe. “You thought I was doing coke in the back alley.”

“I hoped you were doing coke in the back alley,” Lestrade corrected him. “Christ, I never thought I’d say it, either. But at least with coke, I could bring in your brother and knock some sense into you. Easier to break you of drugs than sex, I think.”

Sherlock laughed hollowly. “You think my association with Irene Adler was about sex?”

“Just tell me this,” said Lestrade. “Is it serious? You and Watson. Because if it’s serious – or if you’re just playing games—”

What is this, Sherlock?

I don’t know.

Sherlock picked up the mobile. “I have research to do.”

Lestrade pressed his lips together. “Fine. You know what? I don’t actually care. But get your head back in the game, Sherlock. You can’t afford to let this restaurant fail.”

The chair scraped on the pavement as Lestrade stood up. “I’ll see you across the street.”

Sherlock stared at his phone, scrolling through recipe after recipe, trying to match the ingredients with the flavors barely remembered on his tongue.

Cumin, coriander, cardamom, salt.

He glanced across the street in time to see Artie let Lestrade in the front door of the Empire, and remembered with a pang that he’d asked John to stop by on his way to the market. Artie didn’t have his own set of keys, Harry was surely sleeping off the excessive amount of vodka she’d managed to drink during service the night before, if the drawn shades were any indication. Sherlock felt his heart grow heavy with the realization that John must have come and gone already.

Sherlock gave himself exactly thirty-five seconds to think about it for a moment: the Empire, with the windows boarded and the dining room emptied. Molly and Artie and Mary and John, all out of work and wondering what to do. Mary would find a waitressing job somewhere, perhaps one of the better restaurants in Canterbury. Artie was resilient, he’d either turn to a life of crime or end up
owning them all, perhaps both. Molly would turn to Mrs Hudson for a bit, and gain a little more confidence before Lestrade gained his divorce, after which they’d move to a nice little flat in Kensington somewhere.

Harry would either drown herself in drink or flit off to Thailand and take photographs.

John.

Sherlock knew what John would do. He would be sensible; that was the sort of man John Watson was. He would go to the clinic, pick up his doctoring and diagnose all the mainstream maladies a small town could throw at him. He would marry Sarah, or perhaps Mary, and produce 2.4 children and get a dog. He would let the children root around in the garden behind the house on Baker Street and he would plant vegetables and herbs and on cold weekends he would make his grandfather’s pilau. It would be a perfectly comfortable boring life, and he would probably be happy in it because he wouldn’t know any better.

The one thing John Watson would not do was board a train and go into London, show up on the doorstep of Sherlock’s kitchen looking for a table. He wouldn’t smile at Sherlock, the skin around his eyes crinkling, his bag over his shoulder, expecting to stay the night. He wouldn’t taste of wine and raisins when Sherlock kissed him, and he wouldn’t go home with him and wake up next to him in the morning.

John Watson would do none of those things, because Sherlock didn’t deserve them, if he couldn’t even manage to save the restaurant John loved from closing, couldn’t keep the studio from shutting down his production, couldn’t keep his mind on the Work long enough to save them all from themselves.

Sherlock scanned the recipes, remembered the flavor of chicken and John on his tongue, and turned off his mobile. He slid it into his pocket, and went across the street, wondering when John would arrive, and what they would say to each other when he did.

*

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. MOLLY is kneading the dough while ARTIE is chopping vegetables.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: Sunday morning. Molly’s success in the kitchen the night before has bolstered her confidence, enough that the menu will be expanded to include new starters, new main courses, and new desserts. The Empire’s menu is still small, but if she can continue to add two or three new dishes with every service, there’s hope that the restaurant might start to turn a profit before the end of the week.

[MOLLY drops the dough into a bowl and covers it with a cloth before setting it aside. She brushes the excess flour from her hands and turns, determined, to the kitchen.]

MOLLY: That’s the bread done.

[MOLLY pauses, as if trying to remember what’s next, and then watches ARTIE shake the excess water from the spinach.]

MOLLY: Are the potatoes scrubbed?

ARTIE: Not yet.

MOLLY: I’ve got a minute, I can get them now.
ARTIE: Cheers, Chef!

[MOLLY breaks into a smile, clearly pleased with the title and the ease with which ARTIE has bestowed it. She turns to the potatoes with a spring in her step.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: Artie will never be a master chef, and in any reputable kitchen, would probably not even survive as commis.

ARTIE [singing]: You may be right, I may be crazy...whoops!

[ARTIE’s knife slips, and the bunch of scallions he’s been chopping slide off the table. ARTIE is quick as a fox; he manages to catch them before they can hit the floor, and he heads straight for the sink, where he quickly rinses them anyway.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: The one thing Artie has in his favor is his ability to roll with the punches and work through whatever disasters will inevitably occur. It’s something that will come in very handy today.

[The door to the kitchen opens; JOHN enters, carrying a box of ice and fish, which he deposits on the clear space on the chopping block.]

JOHN: Sorry, running late.

MOLLY: Eggs?

JOHN: In the car.

MOLLY: Brilliant!

SHERLOCK: Smoked herring?

[JOHN looks around the kitchen, and finally sees SHERLOCK, standing to the side. He gives him a long look, almost assessing. SHERLOCK looks placidly back at him.]

JOHN: About half of what you wanted, and smoked mackerel for the rest. Hope that’ll do?

SHERLOCK: It will. Very well.

JOHN: Good.

[And JOHN turns away to unpack the box. Neither of them look at each other again, but their shoulders appear to be lighter, anyway.]

*

Much to her surprise, not to mention the rest of Upper Brickley, Harriet Watson didn’t mind her diminished role at the Empire one bit. She had been the manager of the restaurant for so long, most people forgot that she hadn’t always wanted to work there. As far as the town was concerned, there had always been an Empire, and there had always been a Watson to welcome you there.

The only thing Harry minded, really, was that she hadn’t thought of calling in Sherlock Holmes first. It hadn’t been the best of ideas – she was determined to think that until her dying day – but it had proved to be successful. For some reason, Sherlock Holmes had convinced John of what Harry had been saying all along. The Empire needed to change. The Empire needed to grow.

And for some reason, John had listened, and if he hadn’t been entirely willing to let go of the
flotsam and jetsam on the walls, and the outdated and frankly horrible items on the menu, he’d at least let it happen.

Harry didn’t mind watching her brother greet the customers, smile and laugh and joke. Seeing John interact with the people at the Empire was like watching someone come alive again.

Harry didn’t want the spotlight. People snapping their fingers, asking for more water, more wine, less salt, no gluten, does this have nuts, quite allergic to legumes, thank you, could I bother you for the bill, lovely meal, we’ll come again and tell our friends, all with simpering, apologetic, insincere smiles. Harry didn’t believe any of them, not anymore, not after five years of watching the profits dwindle and the food go home with Mary and Molly and Artie.

So Harry hung back, washed the dishes, chopped the vegetables, set up mises for chicken and spinach and pizzas and pies. She settled into the role of kitchen dogsbody so easily that no one really commented on it.

Not the Empire staff, at least. The camera crew, however…

“You’re so good,” said Sally Donovan. “Most managers wouldn’t want this job.”

Harry shoved the plunger down the clogged drain, putting all her weight into it, and then pulled it up with a sharp tug. Thwoop, and the water began to drain with a hiss.

“And miss all the glamour?” said Harry, jokingly, and Sally laughed.

“Oh, sorry, didn’t know you were back here,” said Lestrade. Harry pushed the hood on her parka back; the deep freeze in the walk-in made her ears freeze before she could blink, but the hood drove her spare. It was always a battle whether or not to wear it.

“Have to keep everything rotated,” said Harry, as cheerfully as the cold allowed.

“How do you keep warm?” asked Lestrade, already slapping his arms against his body.

“Gin,” said Harry, and Lestrade laughed.

Harry didn’t know why it bothered her that morning, what Anderson had said as she tipped the carrot and ginger and garlic peels into the compost bin.

“It’ll be good, won’t it, to go back to normal.”

Harry glanced up, and brushed the hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand. “Sorry?”

“After we’re gone,” explained Anderson. “I mean, your brother, he’s only acting the part of the manager because you don’t want to be on camera. He’ll go work at the clinic with that fancy doctor and you’ll have your restaurant back.”

“John doesn’t want to go back to doctoring,” said Harry. She gave the peels another shove downward, and reached for the bowl of eggshells. “And anyway, he can’t. He’s got a tremor in his left hand, and who would trust a doctor with a cane?”

“The cane he hasn’t used since yesterday morning, you mean? And I’ve seen him serve out water and wine for hours, he hasn’t spilled a drop.”

The egg shells crumbled under her fingers, the thin membranes holding them together like sad memories of their former smooth shapes.
“John loves the Empire,” said Harry, eyes on the eggshells. “He’s always done. He’s finished with all that adventuring.”

“Well, you know him best,” said Anderson. He sounded doubtful.

She did, or thought so, anyway. Harry thought of John, talking to Mr Boscombe, keeping his temper where Harry might have dumped a glass of gin and tonic over the old man’s posh and haughty head. John, bound and determined to save the Empire and their grandfather’s legacy at any cost.

John, who looked a bit more like James every day, without ever quite realizing it. Harry remembered the two of them, standing at the counter, as they kneaded the dough for the evening’s bread basket, while Harry watched from the homework table. James had his arms around the small boy, quietly explaining gluten and yeast and the chemical reactions, while John concentrated and his eyes shone, and Harry turned back to her sums. But by the time she was finished, the dough was already set to rise, and there was no more dough for her to knead.

“Not filming out here, are you?” asked Harry, and Anderson shrugged.

“Smoke break.”

“Not smoking, either,” said Harry, and she shoved past him and went inside.

* 

It rankled. It nipped and tugged and poked at her, the rest of the morning, as she watched John set the tables and dust the bottles and handle the accounting, while she hoovered and ironed and double-checked that they had enough drinks for the afternoon. He retyped the new menus and she helped him sort and shuffle them into place. He went through the additional foodstuffs and organized the order they’d need to place for Tuesday morning’s delivery.

He was completely changed from the day before: no longer John Watson, Little Boy Lost. He was John Watson, co-manager of the Empire, asking questions about the menu, quizzing Molly on how she was preparing the food so that he could describe it appropriately on the menus, thinking of everything they’d need for service on Tuesday. John was present and involved and energized in a way he hadn’t been before. Harry wasn’t entirely sure what had happened. Nor did she know if she liked it.

Sherlock Holmes had to be the reason. What else could it have been?

The accounting was the worst.

“Seven thousand a night profit,” said John quietly. Harry couldn’t tell if he was shocked or depressed. “That’s…good.”

“It’d be fine if it were just us,” said Harry. She buried her head in her hands. “I keep doing the math over in my head. Even if we filled the dining room twice over, every night, and everyone had the most expensive thing on the menu – starter and dessert and a couple of drinks each – that’s what, 20 quid profit? Every night, for a week – that’s barely forty thousand. We’re sunk.”

“We’re not sunk,” said John quietly; Harry could hear the chair roll on the floor as John shifted away from the computer. “Hey. Hare. Look at me.”

Harry looked up, blinking hard. John leaned over the desk, reaching for her hands.
“We’re not sunk,” said John. “We’re still in the game. When the week is up –”

“The week,” scoffed Harry. “As if Sherlock Holmes is going to save the Empire.”

“He is,” said John stubbornly.

“You’re delusional if you’re putting that much faith in the man. He doesn’t care about the Empire; he just cares about his ratings.”

“That’s not true.”

Harry shook her head. “He’s got you twisted round, doesn’t he? Don’t tell me…” Harry squinted at John, and her breath caught. “Holy fuck. You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

John scoffed and withdrew his hands. “Oh, come off it.”

“No, you are,” insisted Harry, and she reached across the desk and grabbed his hand. “You are. Don’t think I don’t know that he’s been at the house every night. And I’ve heard the whispers from the camera crew. They’ve all been talking. Christ, John, we were joking when we told you to flirt with him. You weren’t supposed to actually do it.”

“Piss off,” said John, and he turned back to the computer. He set his hands on the keyboard, as if to type, but didn’t make a move.

Harry sat back in her chair. “So what happens when he leaves on Tuesday?”

John didn’t look at her. His voice was quieter than she’d ever heard him. “I don’t know.”

Harry thought, briefly, of John following Sherlock to London, turning the successful Empire back to her. She shuddered.

“All these changes.” John kicked the side of the desk. “It’s all a bit…fast, isn’t it?”

Fast. Fast. Harry tried to hold in the bitterness. “You’re the one who wanted to call him in,” she reminded her brother. “Not me.”

“I know,” said John, a bit irritable now. He leaned back in the chair again and stared at the wall, still lined with photographs of James Watson shaking hands with various members of the Council. “I don’t know what I expected.”

“Please,” said Harry. “You expected Sherlock Holmes to waltz in and look at the décor and the menu and decide it was a national treasure, not to be touched or changed in any way, and maybe he’d sprinkle a little salt or sugar or pixie dust on the food and suddenly people would be flocking to the doors. Oh, and he’d find the wad of cash that Granddad left tucked behind the spare set of dishes we never bother to use, and it’d be just enough to cover the mortgage, saving the restaurant from ruin.”

John’s mouth quirked. “You forgot the Michelin star.”

“No, that’d come after he left. Might as well earn something on our own.”

“I don’t suppose anyone’s actually checked behind those dishes, have they?”

Harry rolled her eyes. “And under the mattresses, and behind the oven, and under the floorboards.”

John smiled wistfully. “It was never going to happen that way, was it?”
“No,” said Harry quietly. “John…it’s not any of my business, but do you…does he…?”

“No, it’s not your business,” said John quietly.

“Except it kind of is,” continued Harry. “Because the only reason Sherlock is here is because of the Empire, and the Empire is our business, and if he’s in love with you, and you’re in love with him, then…well, I think I have a right to know.”

John laughed. It wasn’t joyful laughter; Harry wasn’t sure how to categorize it. “Love? Harry, I only met him a couple of days ago. It’s not love.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know, but it’s not love.”

“If you don’t know—”

“Let it go, Harry,” said John shortly. “I seem to recall you saying you didn’t really want to know anything about my sex life anyway, so stop asking.”

“Seducing Sherlock Holmes was meant to be a joke, baby brother,” said Harry, cross now. “You’re the one who took it seriously. And now you’re sleeping with him, and just how much do you actually know about him?”

“I don’t see—”

“No, you don’t see, that’s the problem.” Harry sprang out of the chair and went to stare at the wall of photographs. “You’re so sodding selfish sometimes, did you know that? Sherlock Holmes came here for a reason, and the reason isn’t you.”

John didn’t say anything for a moment. “I know that.”

“And now you’re sleeping with him. What if it goes wrong, John? What if you say something to screw it up and he ends up destroying the Empire out of spite?”

“He won’t do that.”

“How can you be so sure? You don’t know important anything about him.”

“I know he wouldn’t do that.”

“Sure you do,” muttered Harry, and wrapped her arms around herself. “And if he wants you to go to London with him? What then? Would you go?”

Another long silence. Harry counted out the seconds, hoping and praying and wishing. “We haven’t really talked about what happens next, but I kind of doubt that me going to London is really on his mind.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Harry said, “I really don’t want to know about your sex life.”

“Then don’t bring it up,” said John. He turned away from the computer. “Hare…thanks for helping out the last couple of days. I know you didn’t want anything to do with changing the Empire.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it,” said Harry, rising a little. “I just didn’t think we needed a celebrity to show us the way.”
“Maybe not,” said John, and he paused, as if about to say something else.

She waited. He’d say it now, of course. It was the perfect moment to slide it in. You were right, Harry. We needed to change the menu. We needed to change the décor. The Empire was dying, and Sherlock hasn’t said anything you haven’t said all along. I’m sorry I doubted you.

John sat back up, and got to his feet. He picked up the menus and shuffled them together.

“Might as well post the menu outside,” he said. “Give them all a chance to find another place to eat before it’s too late.”

“Yeah,” said Harry listlessly.

John paused by the door. “Harry – I think – I think you should be in the kitchen today.”

Harry didn’t look at him. “The kitchen,” she said flatly. “I thought Artie was the sous now.”

“He is. But you don’t want to be on camera, and I saw some of the footage last night – you’re on camera a lot, in the dining room, so they’d have to pixilate your face out. Maybe the best place for you to help is with the washing up.”

Harry couldn’t even be bothered to fake a laugh. “Don’t try to pretend that you’re thinking of the film crew, John, when you’re really just trying to keep me from the alcohol.”

“In that case, don’t try to pretend that you haven’t been sneaking shots of whiskey in between pouring drinks for customers.”

Harry closed her eyes. He knew. Of course he knew. “Bugger.”

“Yeah,” said John, and didn’t even have the decency to sound sad about it.

It wasn’t until John had left the office that Harry realized she was still waiting for what he hadn’t said. The words unspoken hung in the air. You were right, you were right all along. Harry could almost taste them; and when she heard the bell on the front door chime as John went outside to post the menu, she knew for certain that the words would likely never be said at all.
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

[INTERIOR, Dining room, where MARY unfolds the tablecloths, lays down cutlery, glasses, underplates. The pixilated manager is helping, and somewhere in the rear, JOHN is working behind the bar, answering the phone as it rings, moving between the kitchen and the manager’s office, talking to the kitchen staff through the window.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: The staff of the Empire is riding on their success from Saturday’s dinner service, which went smoothly. Almost too smoothly – it has given them a false sense of confidence in their own abilities. Customers may think that a Sunday afternoon service should be simple and straightforward. The truth is that nothing can ever be properly described as simple or straightforward when one is discussing a restaurant kitchen, as the false sense of security in the kitchen is about to prove.

[Cut to dining room, some time later, now filling with customers.]

MARY: Here’s today’s menu, would you like me to tell you about the new items?

[Cut to Kitchen. MOLLY is peering into the cooker and biting her lip.]

MOLLY: I’m not sure this is going to work.

ARTIE: Buck up, Moll, what’s the worst that can happen?

MOLLY: Well.

ARTIE: Aim for Sherlock, if you can manage it.

[INTERIOR, Dining Room. MARY lays out the tables while SHERLOCK watches her, as if testing the waters.]

MARY: It’s exciting, isn’t it? New menu, new focus. All the customers yesterday, they really liked it, they had trouble deciding what they wanted to eat. I mean, they always had trouble deciding, but it was more like eliminating what they really didn’t want. Yesterday, they were trying to decide what they’d be willing to wait until next time to try.

[Cut to the Kitchen, where ARTIE is chopping carrots. SHERLOCK is watching him cautiously over his shoulder.]

ARTIE: I like the cooking. I didn’t get to cook much before.

SHERLOCK: Obviously.

ARTIE: Sandwiches. I made myself beans on toast once. I burnt the toast, though.

SHERLOCK: Really.

ARTIE: I’d quite like to cook every day. Think I can do that?

[ARTIE waves the knife around, carelessly, dangerously close to whacking off SHERLOCK’s head.]
SHERLOCK: Let’s see if anyone dies from the soup you make today.

ARTIE: Right you are, Chef!

[Another part of the kitchen. MOLLY is setting up her mise-en-place; behind her is the pixilated manager, helping.]

MOLLY: No, it’s good, it’s good. The new menu is…good.

MANAGER: Different.

MOLLY: Really different. It’s…familiar. Sort of. I mean, I kind of recognize what everything is supposed to be, and I didn’t before, except for having served it out. I feel really comfortable in the kitchen now, you know? I didn’t before. I mean, I was comfortable, of course I knew where everything was and what it did, but I never really felt like I knew what I was doing, and now – I do. Almost.

MANAGER: I like it. I think it’s exactly what the Empire needed. New blood, a new look, and new flavor.

SHERLOCK v.o.: Sunday will be a watershed day in the Empire’s kitchen. Can Molly and Artie handle the full-scale push of a Sunday afternoon lunch, with a larger menu with more complicated and unfamiliar items? Molly is a reasonably competent baker, and the new recipe for dessert, a Mexican Chocolate Soufflé, should be a knock-out. If she can get it right.

[Close up on MOLLY, stirring a pot over the range, and looking somewhat worried.]

MOLLY: Melt…melt…it’s not melting.

[Cut to ARTIE, dumping a bowl of chopped carrots into a large pot with a tantalizing sizzle.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: Artie, dishwasher-turned-sous, has taken on more responsibility in the kitchen, including preparing the soup and salad courses, in order to give Molly the headspace she deserves to concentrate on the increased workload from the soufflés, fish courses, and vegetables added to the menu. The Empire has never had a proper soup on the menu, so we’re rectifying that omission with a Gingered Carrot Soup. Classic, easy to prepare, and perfect for winter months. Even Artie can’t mess this up.

[The carrots stop tumbling out. ARTIE gives the bowl another shake, and more carrots emerge.]

[Cut to the dining room. JOHN shows customers to their tables, MARY passes out menus. Afternoon service is starting.]

SHERLOCK v.o. cont.: The staff of the Empire is settling into their new roles. The day might actually succeed without a hitch after all.

* 

Sunday afternoon service had been going fairly well, everything considered. The dining room was busy, the customers were reasonably happy, and while the kitchen could see the weeds and was familiar with both genus and species, it could not be said to reside among them.

Harry was perfectly content to wash the dishes. It meant she didn’t have to be in the dining room. This had its positive and negative points. On the positive side, it meant that she didn’t have to wait to see if Jim Moriarty was one of the day's customers. Harry knew it was only a matter of time;
coming on Sunday would have been a reasonable thing to do. If Harry couldn't tell if Jim was in the dining room - then that made things easier, didn't it?

The negative, of course, was that Harry's distance from the dining room was also the distance from the bar and the half-full whiskey bottle under its counter. She'd promised John to stop with the little tipples during service. John trusted her, had always done, would always do - even if Harry did slip now and again, and have her little restorative drink. That was because he was John, and he trusted people he loved. Trusted them implicitly. Harry didn't think it was possible for John to not trust someone he loved, believe that they wanted the best for him and his. He had too much faith that everyone was just like him, at the end of the day.

If Harry stopped to think about it, this was probably why Harry didn't trust people. It evened the scales a bit.

Take Sherlock Holmes. Five days ago, the man had been a perfect stranger, celebrity status notwithstanding. And now he was on a first-name basis with them all. It was so patently ridiculous that John would trust Sherlock to such a degree that he'd be willing to change everything he had previously loved about the Empire, Harry felt as if trusting him was a moral imperative, something she was contractually required to do. It wasn't just that Sherlock was changing every little detail of the Empire's existence (to the point that Harry wondered if James was rolling in his grave, though she'd never actually say it to John), it was that he seemed to be equally intent on starting some kind of relationship with John.

It wasn't that Harry was jealous. It wasn't that she watched the two of them skirt around each other in public, and thought about what she and Clara must have looked like to everyone else. Jealous didn't enter into it, because Harry loved her brother, and she saw the way John looked at Sherlock, the way he eyes opened and his expression softened and his shoulders squared up, as if he was preparing for an inevitable end. It was the same way that Clara had looked those last few weeks, when they both knew without saying that it was over.

Harry wasn't jealous of John. No. Jealousy had nothing to do with what she felt when she watched him and Sherlock not looking at each other. Not a bit.

The restaurant had been going full-steam for about an hour, and moving very well. Harry was perfectly content to stay in the annex, doing the dishes as they came through, taking out the rubbish, sweeping the floor, dodging the cameras, and keeping her head down. She'd absolutely forgotten the possibility of Jim Moriarty - though not the whiskey bottle - when the first of the dessert orders came in.

"Three soufflés and a custard tart," said Mary, eyes shining. "And they know it's a bit of a wait, they don't mind."

"Oh bollocks!" said Molly, her eyes going wide.

"Come on, Moll, they'll be fine," said Artie cheerfully as he ladled out the soup.

"No, it's not that, I can't leave the range," fretted Molly.

"I'll get them," said Harry, and ducked quickly so that the cameras didn't catch her as she went into the walk-in. The soufflés were where she'd left them, individual little Pyrex pots covered with cling film, and Harry balanced three on one arm before heading back out to the kitchen. They were solid and cold and Harry half thought her arm would freeze off, but she managed to pop them on one of the pre-heated trays and slid them in the oven without much trouble.
"Twelve minutes on the soufflés, Chef," said Harry, and Molly flashed a grateful smile.

"Thanks, Hare," she said, finishing her plating before coming over to peer into the oven. "Do you think they'll rise?"

"They'll be gorgeous," said Harry, wondering the same thing herself. But Molly's ego was too fragile, even with a good day under her belt, to waver with any lack of confidence.

"Oi, Chef," called Artie. "Spinach burning."

Molly shrieked and turned back to the range, and Harry went back into the annex, where there were four sauté pans, six soup bowls, five salad bowls, three water glasses, and Christ knew how many utensils. She got to work.

Twelve minutes later, she had just come back in from taking out the rubbish - again, it was a never-ending chore, much like the dishes - when she heard the crash – a bit like every wine glass in the entire building falling to the floor. It was silent for a moment, and then Molly began to shriek.

"They're frozen!"

Harry peered into the kitchen. To say her heart fell wouldn't have been accurate, because it didn't fall so much as turn as rock-solid as the soufflés, which were a sad combination of risen and raw and completely destroyed. The edges had clearly made an effort to rise above the pots, but only by a centimeter, and then just barely and were burned black for their trouble. The centers had not risen at all; in fact, they were a solid lump, and from the way that Sherlock was placing his finger on them with a frown, clearly provided the frozen part of Molly's analysis.

But the worst was the soufflé pot itself. Clearly the pots were not made to go between the excessive cold of the freezer straight into the oven, because the glass had cracked in several places, dark lines oozing soufflé dough. Sherlock tapped the edge of the pot with a long, elegant finger, and it wobbled dangerously and then toppled over, and the entire small soufflé fell over on its side, bubbling and wheezing, exhausted from its failed efforts to rise above its station.

Molly burst into tears. Harry couldn't really blame her. No one else in the kitchen could make a sound.

"Tears. You're crying," said Sherlock, his voice hard and cold and low, and Harry felt her stomach twist in a way that was almost...not pleasurable, not really, and she'd never quite swung that way, but she could very easily see how her brother might, if Sherlock said his name in just the right way.

"I'm sorry," said Molly.

"You're a professional. Well, you claim to be a professional, but here you are, crying over spilt soufflé," said Sherlock, and he was growing angrier with every word. Molly sniffled and tried to stop, but Harry knew that once Molly was going...

"What, precisely, happened here?"

"They didn't bake properly."

"No, I think they baked exactly the way they should have done, if someone had failed to store or temper them properly. You put them in the freezer, didn't you?"

"Yeessssss..."

"The freezer, when I specifically told you to put them in the walk-in. You froze your soufflés. Which would have been fine had you not intended to bake them until next week. And then you
baked them, immediately, without giving them so much as a minute to warm up before tossing them into a 190-degree oven. Cold Pyrex, on a pre-heated tray, an act which resulted not only in an uneven bake but completely destroyed what were clearly soufflé pots original to the opening of the restaurant.

"What's more, I suspect the rest of the soufflés are also in the freezer, which means they are also unusable for the rest of the day, which means your crowning achievement of dessert is absolute rubbish."

"I must have misunderstood—"

"Oh! Oh, right, of course, you misunderstood," said Sherlock, the mocking tone coming in. "Right, sorry, all's better now, Molly simply misunderstood when I gave her precise instructions on how to prepare and properly store the soufflés for today's service. But really, what else should I have expected? That's what you do, isn't it, Molly? You're meant to be clever, you showed real promise in the kitchen yesterday, you're intuitive and you might actually be a competent baker but only if you can read the directions someone has left for you to follow, because you don't stop to think about what you are doing. 'I'll bake the bread without tempering the yeast or allowing a rise, that's what the directions say though I know better.' 'Here, let me cook all the flavor out of the tomatoes which come from a tin and are therefore flavorless already, because that's what the directions say though I know better.' 'I'll just pop these soufflés into the freezer even though I'm meant to bake them in a few hours, and bake them on a preheated tray because that's what the directions say though I know better.' Only you don't know better, do you, Molly? Your mind is so small or perhaps so distracted that you can't possibly process the dozens of things that are meant to be going through your head in order to keep a kitchen running smoothly and the food turning out on time and in an edible form. It must be so nice to be you, Molly, to have such a small mind and move at such a small pace. How I envy you. No, really, truly, I do. I always wondered what would happen if a barely competent cook was given an entire restaurant kitchen to muck up. Thank you, Molly Hooper, for confirming my theory that people like you have no business in food service."

The tears were running down Molly's cheeks; Harry couldn't move. No one in the kitchen could move - not Mary by the warming table, her eyes wide with shock and horror. Not Artie, just behind Molly at the range, his mouth pressed in a thin line. Not Anderson or Lestrade - Anderson continuing to film (of course, this was high drama right here, a lovely clip for a television promo), or Lestrade, who stared at Sherlock like he desperately wanted to pulverize the man under a meat grinder.

The only movement in the kitchen was from Molly, who shook and wrung her hands, unable to look up, unable to meet anyone's eyes.

"I thought...I thought you said—"

"Oh, you were thinking," scoffed Sherlock. "Shall I tell you what you were thinking? You were thinking that you need a new haircut, wondering if maybe you should add highlights to your hair. The answer is yes, he likes highlights, but I wouldn't cut your hair much shorter than it is, because while short hair might be cooler in a kitchen, he quite likes to play with it around his fingers, but you know that already, don't you? You're thinking that you need to try to eat an actual meal before dinner service begins, because you don't want to rely on tasting to keep you fed, you only end up overtasting items because you're feeling a bit peckish, and that all adds a bit of weight, doesn't it, and yes, you'd like to watch your weight because yes, he really does like them small, I can confirm that for you, too. If you were thinking about the soufflés at all, you were hoping there'd be one left at the end of the night so that you could share it together after the rest of us had all gone home, and you probably had a lovely little scenario where the lights were out and you were feeding each other
before a delightfully romantic kiss with chocolate-flavored lips. I'm very sorry to break the news to you, Miss Hooper, but it would never have happened because he's quite allergic to eggs, and such a display of affection would likely have killed him here on the floor. But luckily for you, the soufflés are frozen so it appears you won't be murdering your lover tonight, but if you take them out to defrost, there's a chance you could murder him tomorrow instead. Assuming he still wants to be with you. He tends to like them competent, and after your display today, I have my doubts that you are competent in any role which could be construed as traditionally female."

Molly gasped, a little, high-pitched, sobbing intake of breath. Sherlock seemed to be out of breath, his tumbling tirade spent, and for a moment, Harry had no idea what could possibly break the silence that followed, if it wasn't Molly bursting into flame on the spot, or perhaps running from the room, never to return.

She didn't expect Artie to take a step forward, and without saying so much as a word, punch Sherlock squarely on the nose.

She didn't expect John to suddenly appear in the kitchen in time to see Sherlock reel back, his hands going instinctively to his face, as blood spurted out between his fingers.

She didn't expect Lestrade to go to Sherlock and drag him out of the kitchen, past her, into the alleyway, and she didn't expect John to pull Artie back from following him (which Artie was about to do) and slam him up against the walk-in door.

The door to the alleyway shut behind Lestrade and Sherlock, and the kitchen fell mostly silent again. The only sounds now were Molly, still sobbing, and Mary, her arms around her, quietly hushing and soothing her.

"All right then," said John, quite calmly. He held Artie firmly against the walk-in door, up on his toes. "Someone care to tell me what's going on?"

Molly's sobs changed. And Harry realized that Molly was actually beginning to laugh.

"I think she's hysterical," said Mary in amazement, and John looked over at Harry.

"Brandy. Or sherry. Or something."

"Right," said Harry, and went.

The dining room was still busy, but the conversations were stilted. They'd heard the shouting; Harry knew it. Sodding hell. Harry could feel every pair of eyes on her, and she smiled brightly at them before crouching behind the bar where they couldn't see her.

It was as she poured the brandy, and the images of the faces in the dining room began clicking in her mind, that she realized who was sitting in the corner table, a smirk on his too-thin face, wearing his perfectly pressed grey suit, looking around as if he was already calculating how much it would all bring at auction.

Bloody wanking bugger pissing arse sodding...

The drink poured, Harry stood back up, still smiling gamely, and disappeared back into the kitchen. John had let go of Artie, who was sulking by the ovens. Molly was sitting on a stool, drying her eyes on a spare kitchen towel, and Harry handed her the drink.

"Bottoms up, Moll," said John gently, and Molly drank the entire shot in one go, and came up coughing.
"Ow," said Molly, rubbing her chest.

“All right?” said John, leaning down to look her in the eyes.

“Yeah,” said Molly. “I think so.”

“Okay.” He glanced at the ruined soufflés, and to his credit, didn’t so much as blink. “I take it the soufflés are off the menu.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Molly.

“Don’t be sorry. We need to come up with something else. I need everyone to think.”

And Molly burst into tears again. Mary sighed and pulled her in to give her a tight squeeze.

John looked lost. “Ah…”

“That’s it,” said Artie. “I’m going to kill him.”

John reached out and grabbed Artie by the wrist, yanking him back into the kitchen. “Artie.”

“He shouted at her, John!” yelled Artie. “He stood there and he called her an idiot and he shouted at her, in her own kitchen, and he told her she was worthless and didn’t deserve to be here, because she made one stupid mistake and who the fuck cares about soufflés anyway? Why should he care about them? It’s not his restaurant!”

“No, it’s not,” said John calmly. “It’s mine, and I’ll thank you not to go round punching people in the kitchen, even if they do insult the chef.”

“Allowing him to walk all over us, just because you’re sleeping with him—”

Harry sucked in her breath. Mary’s eyes widened.

“Artie,” she hissed, and Artie caught his breath.

John, however, wasn’t fazed, though Harry thought she saw his ears go pink, and his hands clenched for just a moment.

“I don’t care if it’s the bloody fucking bastard who shot me in the shoulder,” said John, and Harry could hear the tension and anger in his voice. “You do not punch people in Molly’s kitchen. Do. You. Understand. Me.”

Artie took a deep, shaking breath. “I’ll quit.”

John shrugged his shoulders. “Fine.”

They stared at each other, while the rest of the room held their breaths. John didn’t blink – but then, neither did Artie.

And finally, like a breath of air, Molly spoke.

“He didn’t call me an idiot.”

John broke the staring contest with Artie to look at her. “Molly?”

“He said I didn’t listen,” said Molly. “He’s right. I didn’t. I put the soufflés in the freezer instead of
the walk in, and I didn’t think to question it, I just did it, and then I forgot, and I had Harry put them straight into the oven on a preheated tray, when they ought to have gone on a cold tray instead. I wasn’t thinking. He might have been awful about it,” Molly added, “and I don’t want to excuse him from being rude, but…”

“All right,” said John. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “What are we going to do about dessert?”

The kitchen was quiet. “We’ve got egg whites,” said Molly, hesitatingly. “And cream. If we have any fruit, we could do Eton mess. Meringues don’t take very long.”

“I think there’s a box of strawberries,” said Mary.

“There is,” said Harry, glad to finally say something positive.

“Eton mess, then,” said John. “Mary, let everyone know the change in the menu when you present dessert, and anyone who’s ordered soufflés, apologize and comp them a glass of wine and a chance to reorder.”

“Right you are,” said Mary briskly, and gave Molly a quick kiss on the cheek before she left the kitchen.

“Boss,” began Artie, but John motioned him to be quiet.

“Harry, can you help in the dining room?” said John.

“Of course,” said Harry.

“Boss,” Artie tried again, and John turned to him.

“I thought you were quitting.” He didn’t sound angry, though – just sad.

“I’ll finish out my shift,” said Artie, lifting his chin.

“Then finish it at the sink,” said John.

Artie opened his mouth as if to protest, but the words died when John’s expression didn’t change. He turned and went to the sink, once again towering with dishes, and set to work.

“John?” asked Molly. “I…I still need help. It might be silly, but – Sherlock—”

“I know,” said John, and he reached for an apron. “Don’t worry about him, Molly. I’m going to be your sous.”

*

The alley was quiet, mostly. For anyone else, the cold air would have been a blessed relief from the heated kitchen, a place to unwind and try to regroup.

For Sherlock, it was simply another location for the continued torture of his brain which refused to stop. His eyes darted around the alleyway while Lestrade tried to staunch the bleeding from his nose.

“Hold your head back,” said Lestrade tersely, and Sherlock ignored him.

“Sunday afternoon the last rubbish collection was Friday morning we were here but of course it’s
obvious from the number of bags in the skip but also there’s ginger peel on the ground, probably a
cat came in and was scrounging for food and left it. It’s not discolored too heavily so it can’t be
more than two days old. Artie sweeps back here every morning and once before the dinner service,
or at least did before he became too busy with being a sous, I believe Harry’s doing it now and
she’s not quite as handy with getting into the corners, hence why the peel is still present.
Additional cigarette butts on the ground, thrown in the corner, different from Artie’s preferred
brand, which means another person has taken it up. Not Molly or Mary, not any of the camera crew
because they smoke on the main street, that leaves Harry. Makes sense, she’s under a deal of stress
and she’s not even finishing the butts, they’re barely half finished, most of them. Lack of time or
indication of disgust? I’ll say disgust.”

“No John,” said Lestrade quietly. He had pulled tissues from somewhere, and rolled them into
sticks to shove into Sherlock’s nose.

“John doesn’t smoke. John doesn’t drink. John doesn’t…”

Sherlock stopped, unsure where else to go.

“Right boring berk,” said Lestrade, and Sherlock knocked his hand away from his nose.

“John is sensible,” he snapped. “He doesn’t engage in useless, self-harming activities.”

“Why’s he hanging about with you, then?”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped open.

“Yeah,” said Lestrade, a bit like a man who’s just stumbled into something intelligent. He reached
again to shove the last tissue up Sherlock’s nose. “Think about that one, why don’t you.”

“John Watson is trying to save his restaurant.”

“I suspect he can multitask.” Lestrade finished the tissues and assessed Sherlock’s face.
“Bleeding’s stopped.”

Sherlock nodded dully, and spun around when the back door opened. It was Sally, shrugging on
her coat.

“Whispers in the dining room,” she said briskly. “And no one’s come out of the kitchen to say
anything since the rumble began. Think the natives are getting restless, boss.”

“Right,” said Lestrade with a sigh, and he turned to Sherlock. “Feel up to going back in?”

Sherlock turned to Sally. “What’s the mood in the kitchen?”

Sally frowned. “Bit weird, really. John told Artie off for punching you and then told him to finish
his shift at the sink. There’s egg whites left, plus what Harry has in her own fridge upstairs, so
Molly’s making meringues.”

Sherlock’s brain, still whirring away, went speeding down another path. “Frozen strawberries, and
the whipped cream…”

“Eton mess,” they said together, and Sherlock chuckled.

“Look at that,” said Lestrade softly. “She’s bouncing back. Clever one, she is.”

Sherlock pushed himself to his feet. “She’ll need help, if Artie’s demoted to dishwashing.”
“Not really,” said Sally, but Sherlock ignored her and went back into the kitchen.

Artie was at the sink, scrubbing the sauté pans; Sherlock could feel the sulk roll off him in waves, and Artie pointedly turned his back to him, obviously determined not to look at him or even risk acknowledging his presence.

Sherlock paused only long enough to roll up his sleeves, ready to dive in to wherever he was most obviously needed; he walked through the annex and into the kitchen. He scanned the chopping block, where the standing mixer was whirring at top speed with a cloth draped over it – the whipping cream for the Eton mess, no doubt. The warming table was loaded with plates of chicken and fish, ready for delivery, and there were only three tickets waiting to be filled. Molly stood at the range, just about to slide a tray of meringues into the oven, ready to bake.

“Twenty minutes before the meringues are out,” said Molly, and shut the oven door carefully. She set the timer and turned to prep the next tray. Once she moved, Sherlock saw John standing at the counter, carefully and competently plating the roast chicken atop the spinach and parsnips.

“How long to cool?” asked John. “Five or ten?”

“Five if we put them in the walk-in,” said Molly, doubtfully. “But they might get chewy.”

“It’s Eton mess, is anyone going to notice?”

Mary flew in from the dining room. “You’re in luck; everyone who ordered the soufflés is disappointed but happy enough for pie or custard. When can I start offering the Eton mess?”

“First plate in half an hour,” said Molly. She peeked under the cloth at the whipping cream. “Two minutes to cream.”

“Did any of the soufflé orders take the wine?” asked John, and he slid effortlessly behind Molly to start plating the fish.

“Three,” said Mary. She picked up the orders and was out the door again.

John breathed a sigh of relief. “Good, that’ll have finished off the Merlot Boscombe refused to drink last night.”

Sherlock caught the look on John’s face the moment before John saw him standing in the doorway. Intent focus on the food he was plating, and concern about the comfort of his customers, the monetary implications of an open bottle of wine, the ability to push a time-consuming dessert through at the last minute.

Then John saw him, and the expression flickered for just a moment. Sherlock didn’t know if it was amusement or relief, or simply, Ah, there you are.

It was gone almost as quickly as it’d appeared, and John turned back to the kitchen. “What next, Chef?”

“The strawberries,” said Molly, and John disappeared into the walk-in.

But before the door closed, he looked at Sherlock.

“You should put ice on that,” he said quietly. “I’ll bring some out for you.”

The walk-in’s door closed with its customary heavy thunk, and at the same time, Molly switched
off the standing mixer. The kitchen was quiet. Sherlock could hear the chatter and laughter and music from the dining room. It was disturbing.

Molly didn’t look at him. Instead, she concentrated on scraping the last of the whipped cream from the beaters, her mouth set in a line.

“Eton mess,” said Sherlock, awkwardly, and he swallowed. “That was a good idea.”

“Thanks,” said Molly stiffly, and didn’t look at him.

Sherlock went to the corner by the window, where he could look out into the dining room. Mary was serving out meals, laughing, and he could see Harry on the far side, talking to customers, with an actual pleasant expression on her face. It was cheerful, and loud, and everyone looked happy to be there.

“You always say such horrible things,” said Molly suddenly, and Sherlock turned to look at her.

“You shouldn’t work in a restaurant kitchen if you have a thin skin,” said Sherlock.

“It’s not that,” said Molly. She still didn’t look at him. “I don’t mind criticism, or someone telling me I’m a bloody awful cook. I know I’m rubbish in a kitchen, I rely too heavily on recipes someone else has created and I’m terrified that I’ll undercook the fish. The entire dining room could come in and tell me how horrible I am, all one after the other, and I’d wonder why they didn’t come in sooner.

“But you – that’s what you’re like all the time. Every time, always. I’ve seen your show. You aren’t critical because you honestly want us to improve. You aren’t critical because you know people will watch. I don’t think you even enjoy it, not really, because you always look so sad afterwards. I think you can’t help it. It just...comes right out, and you couldn’t stop it if you tried.”

Molly pulled out the cling film to cover the bowl of whipped cream. “I bollocksed up the soufflés, I know that. But you didn’t need to bring Greg into it. You hadn’t the right. I suppose you couldn’t help it, and I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” repeated Sherlock, bewildered.

“Because someday you’re going to say something horrible to someone you care about, and you’re going to wish you could stop yourself, and you won’t be able to do it,” said Molly.

“There’s no one I care about,” said Sherlock.

The whipped cream was covered; Molly picked up the bowl and headed to the walk-in, just as John came out, a box marked Strawberries in his arms.

“Sorry, they were on the top shelf,” he apologized, and frowned when he saw Molly’s downturned eyes. He glanced sharply at Sherlock before turning back to her. “You all right?”

“Yes,” said Molly. “Can you plate the pizzas for Table Five? I’ll do the strawberries in a tick.”

“Right,” said John, and set the box down on the chopping block as Molly disappeared into the walk-in.

"Your nose all right?" John asked, and Sherlock instinctively reached up to touch the tissues.

"Yes," he said carefully. "The bleeding stopped, though it feels sore. I don't believe it's broken."
"The clinic closed half an hour ago," said John, "but I could call Sarah and ask—"

"No," said Sherlock quickly. "I do not require medical attention."

"All right," said John. He opened the box and started to fuss with the plastic bag. "I - ah...I'm sorry Artie punched you."

"I'm told I deserved it."

"Yeah, probably," admitted John, and he looked up from the strawberries. "The soufflés weren't Molly's fault."

"John," said Sherlock quietly. "The reason Artie punched me had absolutely nothing to do with the soufflés."

"I know," said John, and Sherlock felt John's gaze lock on him. "There's a—"

Two steps until John stood in front of him, reached up and brushed his thumb along the top of Sherlock's cheek. Sherlock could smell the cold air still in John's hair, the soft and warm scent of cooked onions, the tang of the fish with orange sauce, the peppers from the kedgeree. Sherlock breathed in deeply and held the breath inside while John brushed whatever clung to his cheek away.

"Flour, I think," said John, his voice pitched low, and Sherlock reached up to grasp John's wrist.

"John."

"I know," whispered John. "But—"

Sherlock didn't want to hear it. He moved forward, just that much, and lightly pressed his lips to John's. John leaned on him, warm and solid and relaxed, but his mouth didn't open, and when Sherlock pulled away, he could see the worry in John's eyes, the creases on his forehead.

"Not here," said Sherlock, and John's mouth turned up in a small smile.

"No," he agreed. Sherlock let John's arm go, and John stepped away, just as Molly returned.

"Ten minutes on the meringues, Chef," said Sherlock, as if he and John had done nothing more than discuss the weather, and nothing more needed to be said.

* 

"We need to go back to London tomorrow," said Lestrade gruffly, catching Sherlock’s arm and holding him fast.

The service was nearly over; Sherlock had only been in the dining room to see how the customers liked their meals before giving the silly little daily wrap-up speech, more a necessity for the cameras than for the crew at this point. He had already discussed the next day’s work with them: an intense one-day tutorial for Molly and Artie, covering the half dozen new main courses, as well as briefly going over the far simpler starters and desserts. Nearly twenty dishes in all, most of which would debut on Tuesday, and the rest to be trickled out over the week as they gained confidence.

Sherlock almost wanted to insist that John sit in on the tutorial. Seeing him in the kitchen, cooking in tandem with Molly, would have been shocking if Sherlock hadn’t already known the man could
cook. Instead it slotted into what he already knew about the great puzzle that was John, the half dozen things he was accomplished at doing without realizing what an odd mix of talents he was. Soldier, doctor, manager, cook? Sherlock wondered what would have happened if John had been given a ball of yarn and told to make a jumper, or a tennis racket and told to win Wimbledon. He had no doubt that John was capable of doing either.

“Sherlock,” repeated Lestrade, and Sherlock gave his director a cool gaze.

“I realize that Miss Hooper has you in a tailspin, but we are in fact scheduled to remain here for another two days.”

“Change of plans,” said Lestrade, still holding fast to Sherlock’s arm. He paused, the words caught in his throat, and Sherlock realized that it wasn’t annoyance in Lestrade’s voice at all, but…fear?

“You’re afraid,” said Sherlock, wondering, and with that deduction, Lestrade’s grip loosened. Sherlock shook off his hand easily. “What? Something happened in London. Did the studios burn down? I don’t know why we’d need to return if—”


“Yes, in Berkshire.”

“Gregson wants a meeting.”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “I fail to see—”

“That’s just it, Sherlock. You fail to see. I told you that we were on the line, that you couldn’t mess this restaurant up—”

“I haven’t.”

“Then why did I get a message an hour ago from the producer in charge of the entire cooking division, demanding an immediate meeting with you about what you’ve been up to during filming?” snapped Lestrade, his voice low and clearly distraught. He ran his hand through his hair and glanced at the customers, who weren’t paying them much attention, considering the drama.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Sherlock coolly. “I haven’t done anything untoward—”

“You’ve been seducing John Watson.” Just as you did with Irene Adler went unsaid, but then, Lestrade didn’t need to say it for Sherlock to understand it. Nor did Lestrade really understand what had gone on between them, only what was visible on the surface. At any rate, it was easily ignored.

“That’s not untoward and it’s also none of the studio’s business. It’s your job to keep the studio in the studio and not sticking their fingers into the filming when we’re out in the field – or isn’t that what you said just three days ago?”

Lestrade sighed. “Look, Sherlock, I don’t know why exactly they want us to come in tomorrow. We can leave early in the morning, get to London before the worst of the rush hour and have this meeting the minute the studios open and be back before lunch. That’ll give you half a day to work with Molly and Artie. It’s the best I can do.”

Sherlock kept his gaze locked on Lestrade, who looked more agitated and uncomfortable by the moment. But it wasn’t because he knew what was going on – if he had, he wouldn’t have been able
to focus on anything, much less Sherlock. And while it was true that Lestrade didn’t meet his eyes now, he’d been very much looking at him before, when he kept his voice below a shout.

Lestrade didn’t know anything, and that was what was scaring him.

“What time do you want to leave?” asked Sherlock quietly.

“Five,” said Lestrade. “I’m not even going to ask where you’re spending the night—”

“I’ll be in the hotel lobby at five,” said Sherlock, and went to see if the kitchen was ready for him. He rather hoped they weren’t; he had no idea what he was going to say.

* 

The end of the day – John hadn’t thought they would ever get there, but suddenly they were. Molly sent out the last of the Eton mess, and Mary delivered it. Harry was already working at the day’s tally, Artie was scrubbing the last of the sauté pans, and John watched the door rock back and forth behind Mary. There were five tables of diners left, and Sherlock and Lestrade were in deep discussion in the back of the dining room.

John exhaled slowly. The day was over. His skin prickled, and his heart pounded, and he felt a little dizzy, rather like he was dehydrated. He wasn’t; he’d been drinking water steadily all afternoon, and anyway, his mind was clear, and focused on one small detail.

The day was over, and if the last few days were any indication – Sherlock would stop by the house on Baker Street, and find his way inside, and they would cook something to eat, and they would talk about anything and everything except what would happen when the dishes were washed and the lights were off, because that was when Sherlock would kiss him or he would kiss Sherlock and they’d go upstairs and…

John couldn’t think further than that. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to, only that every time his mind started going in that direction, he was interrupted, and lost his train of thought.

John’s head was in the oven as he wiped down the splatters and spills. His imagination was on the landing, where Sherlock was pushing John’s shirt off his shoulders, and John was easing Sherlock’s trousers past his hips, and both of them had lost their shoes somewhere downstairs, because John had already realized that shoes were going to be an imposition, and had worked that into his daydream. John’s sleeves caught on his wrists, and they both chuckled and in the oven, John shook his head and grinned, and anyway, he’d have had to roll up the sleeves to do the washing up downstairs, so the buttons would have already been undone, scratch that, although the laughing together part was nice—

The dining room door opened, and Sally Donovan poked her head in. “All set?”

John blinked out of the daydream. He backed out of the oven and realized the entire staff was looking at him, and for one heated moment, hoped his daydream hadn’t produced a physical response. “Sure,” said John, and when everyone glanced back at Sally, surreptitiously checked his pants, which were thankfully not quite as bulged as they could have been.

Sherlock came into the dining room a moment later. John thought of a maharajah entering his harem, and stifled the giggle. Another slight modification to the daydream, check.

Sherlock took a moment and just looked at all of them, while they looked at him. John wondered if he was maybe supposed to say something first, and then Sherlock opened his mouth to speak.
“It was…” Sherlock glanced at them. He looked unsettled; John wondered what he was thinking. “You did well. You did remarkably well. You have handled crises with aplomb and creativity. You pulled together and supported each other. You may not be the most talented of kitchens, but you are the most resourceful.”

Silence, for a moment, while this sunk in. For a moment, John wondered why it sounded so unusual. And then it came to him: it wasn’t that what Sherlock said wasn’t sincere, because everything he said was truly meant. It was that Sherlock was giving them all a compliment, without the pandering, and with only the slightest of insults worked in. And what’s more – it was a compliment given before the final day, before the final reveal of a finished and ready-for-the-world remade Empire.

John should have been ecstatic. Instead, his stomach began to twist. There was something about Sherlock’s face – the graveness, the dark look in his eyes, the way he held himself stiffly, as if he were merely hitting his marks, responding to orders he didn’t agree were correct.

Something was wrong. John didn’t doubt that Sherlock believed in what he was saying – but the reasons he was saying it weren’t quite right.

“I have every confidence that you will take on a full menu of traditional English fare with an international flavor and make it your own specialty. Starting on Tuesday, Upper Brickley will not know what they have been missing. I will…” Sherlock took a breath. “I will see you on Tuesday morning.”

Sherlock turned to leave, and the kitchen broke out into chatter.

Mary: “But…what about tomorrow?”

Molly: “There’s still so much I don’t know!”

Artie: “You can’t honestly think we’re ready to take on a full menu without practice!”

Sherlock paused by the door, and then glanced at them over his shoulder. John thought that Sherlock’s gaze rested on him for just a moment, before he looked at Molly. “Tuesday morning. Be ready to show me just how flexible you really are.”

And then he was gone. The kitchen was quiet as they stared at each other, and then Artie spoke.

“That wanker.”

“Artie!” said Mary, with a quick and worried glance at John.

“No, he is!” insisted Artie. “He’s supposed to help us, it’s the last day tomorrow that he’s really going to be here and we won’t have any distractions and instead he’s talking like…” Artie sucked in his breath. “Wait. You don’t think he’s just giving up on us, do you?”

“Stop,” said John, but he wondered if Artie wasn’t right. “Wondering about it now isn’t going to do anything. He said we have the day off tomorrow, and you all want to work on your skills – well, that’s what you’re going to do.”

“How?” asked Harry. “We’re not even supposed to be here, they’re going to redo the dining room tomorrow.”

John had forgotten; he closed his eyes for a moment and thought about the portraits of his grandfathers on the wall.
No. Sherlock wouldn’t move those. He’d as much as promised.

He opened his eyes again to find everyone still looking at him. “That’s the dining room. Not the kitchen. Mary – tomorrow you come in and we’ll do a full-on clean of the kitchen. Molly and Artie, you can do as much of the prep for this coming week that we can reasonably manage in one day, and we’ll set up the mise for Tuesday for everything we know we’ll need, so we won’t have to worry about that when Sherlock arrives.”

“What else is going to be on the menu?” asked Molly, hesitant.

“I suspect I’ll find a list in the office,” said John. “I’m going to need to place the delivery order, anyway, and Sherlock knows that.”

“It’s a test,” said Mary suddenly. “That’s what this is, isn’t it? He’s been looking over our shoulder all weekend, and he keeps saying how we keep watching each other’s backs – that’s what this is, isn’t it? He wants to see what we do without him looking over our shoulders.”

“Maybe,” said John cautiously. Artie still looked skeptical, but Molly was nodding her head.

“We’ll just be as ready as we can be,” she said, and it sounded like she had some of her confidence back. John saw the way she lifted her chin, and didn’t have the heart to disparage her.

Harry poked her head through the window. “Tables 15 and 22 just paid.”

It broke the strange spell; “Oh!” said Mary, and went through the door into the dining room. Artie went back to the dishes, a half-frown still on his face. Molly turned to John.

“You don’t think it’s a test,” she said, and John put his head back in the oven so as not to answer her, or let her see his doubts. “John?”

“Mary might be right.” John’s voice echoed in the oven. “I haven’t any way of knowing.”

“But you know him best. Sherlock, I mean. You’ve spent the most time with him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Molly. He’s been teaching you how to cook every day; we’ve just had a couple of meals together.”

Molly didn’t say anything. John found a burnt bit of sauce on the side of the oven, right where it was the most difficult to scrape, and worked at it furiously. *Scratch scratch scratch.*

“Yeah, all right,” said Molly finally. “Okay. Sure.”

*Scratch.* John started to back out of the oven, doubt still eating away at him, but with a new twist: Molly’s disbelief that he didn’t somehow know Sherlock better than the rest. How could he? He barely knew the other man. “Molly—”

“Do you know what I’m going to do?” said Molly. “I’m going to go and greet the customers. I’ve never done that as chef before, and I’ve got a little time now.”

John stayed in the oven and listened to Molly leave the kitchen. He couldn’t hear her in the dining room over the sound of his knife scraping at the oven walls, or the water splashing in the annex, but he could imagine it; Molly, talking to the customers, smiling and laughing and for once confident in her own abilities.

John wondered – had Sherlock given that to her? Or had she had it in herself all along, and he’d
just showed her the way?

John finished the oven; the customers paid their bills and went home; Artie finished the dishes and swept and mopped the floor; Harry finished the accounting and put in the final orders for the next day’s delivery; Mary Hoovered and John slowly collected the tablecloths and used napkins. Molly went home, promising to return by 8am to help Harry with the veg delivery. Mary went home, intending to return at 10 to start the deep-clean of the kitchen.

Harry went upstairs at half seven, with a longing look at the bar that was not missed by John.

Artie finished the floors, took out the last bag of rubbish, and stopped in the door of the office.

“Boss,” he said, and repeated it when John didn’t immediately respond. “Boss.”

John looked up. Artie was standing straight up, arms at his sides, a little like a soldier at attention, waiting for orders.

“About earlier.”

“It’s all right,” said John shortly. He looked back down at the accounting. “We were all a bit under fire.”

Artie considered this, and then nodded. “I…I wanted to know if you wanted me back tomorrow. Boss.”

John stilled, and then glanced up at Artie again. Artie wasn’t looking at him; instead his gaze seemed to be focused just to the side, as if he couldn’t quite bring himself to meet John’s eyes.

“Artie,” said John, and Artie’s gaze flickered at him, and then back out again. “Look at me.”

Artie’s gaze held now. “Boss.”

“Whatever you think about me and Sherlock Holmes…it’s not like that.”

Artie was quiet for a moment. “It wouldn’t matter to me if it was. Boss.”

“Wouldn’t it?”

Artie shook his head. “No. I…look. I know what you’re thinking. That I’m homophobic or some shite like that. I’m not. Just…” Artie paused, and then plunged on. “I don’t see it ending well. How much do you really know about him – do any of us really know about him, beyond whatever shite they put on the telly? He leaves day after tomorrow. Then what?”

Artie took a breath, and straightened up again. The serious façade fell; and John saw the old, snarky, jovial Artie slide back into place. “Anyway, boss. You’re just home from overseas. Probably aching for a good shag. You’d fall for a plucked chicken, I think.”

“Find me a plucked chicken and we’ll see,” said John, and Artie grinned at him. “You’re not fired. Not today, anyway.”

“Tomorrow?”

“We’ll see. Tuesday’s not off the books either.”

“Right, boss.”
“Get out of here.”

Artie flashed him one of his half-arsed salutes, and left. John listened until he heard the slam of the back door.

And then he closed the ledger, and set down his pen. He pushed back from the desk and left the office, turned out the lights and closed the door.

The Empire was silent and dark; John couldn’t even hear the echoes of his footprints on the carpeted floor.

John stood in the middle of the dining room, and looked up at the portraits of John and John H. and James and Hamish as they looked resolutely out at him.

John listened to the faint sounds of traffic outside. The sound of Harry upstairs, moving across the floor. The persistent hum of the walk-in, the buzz of the fluorescent light that Artie had left on in the kitchen. The memory of James clattering over the range, Hamish shouting in fury about burnt cakes, the smell of pasta sauce bubbling on a range, James carefully shaping bits of dough into perfectly formed biscuits.

_There’s no point in doing things by halves, John. Decide what you want, and put everything you have in you into getting there._

In another day, none of it would be left. The reconstruction team would fall on the dining room with paint thinners and new carpeting, and when John saw it again, it would be transformed into… something he didn’t recognize, something that wasn’t a part of him.

Maybe that was a good thing.

John didn’t know.

Maybe Sherlock was waiting for him at the house on Baker Street, glancing at the clock and deducing exactly how long John would stand in the empty dining room, soaking up the last of his childhood to carry him the rest of his life.

Maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing.

John didn’t know that, either.

And anyway, it was only a room, dark-paneled, with blank spaces on the walls where pictures and photographs and African masks used to hang. It was already altered. John already had stopped recognizing it.

For a moment, John had the urge to take down the portraits. The idea that any of Sherlock’s crew would touch them, move them, toss them into a heap like so much of what had already been removed - it was an anathema. John could barely stomach the thought.

But Sherlock had promised. And John had seen the videos. The promises that Sherlock made – he kept. John took a breath, and straightened his back, sliding so quickly from parade rest to attention that he barely noticed the movements. He turned sharply, military-precision exact, and walked, quick-step, out of the dining room.

Better to leave now, before he changed his mind and pulled the portraits off the wall and ran like hell for safety.
Double recipes for you – [Carrot Ginger Soup and Mexican Chocolate Soufflés](#)!

Incidentally – it’s true about the Pyrex dishes. Cold dishes on pre-heated trays may result in cracked dishes. DON’T DO IT.
Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

I greatly apologize for the lateness in responding to reviews last week. But to make it up to you, a nice long chapter today, complete with smut. Also, because of your patience, my son is going to have a kick-ass Halloween costume tomorrow (he's going to be Mater from Pixar's Cars). AND you're getting bonus Halloween fic! I hope that makes it better!

John was already home by the time Sherlock arrived. The gate was unlocked, the lights in the kitchen were on, and Sherlock thought he could hear the strains of music. He frowned, listening, but couldn’t quite place it. Something with a strong drumbeat and words, a bit repetitious, but when John’s profile flashed across the window, he moved in time with it.

John didn’t look through the window; he was concentrating on something. Cooking, Sherlock decided, and without seeing John’s hands, playfully tried to deduce what. Ravioli. Breaded chicken. Pots de crème. Pork roast. Sushi. Sherlock smiled, thought of John making sushi, and when John disappeared from the window, stepped from the shadows and to the door.

He hesitated a moment, and then carefully pushed it open with ease. It gave its customary creak, and Sherlock was thankful he wouldn’t have to announce his presence, at least. He stepped into the warmth of the hallway and shut the door behind him.

The noise from the kitchen, the sound of John’s knife against the cutting board, steadily slicing through something, blended with the strains of the music. Sherlock could hear the words now. Potatoes, he decided. And the Beatles.

*Love, love me do. You know I love you.*

Sherlock slid off his coat and hung it on the peg next to John’s. There was a neat line of shoes under the coats, including the pair John had worn earlier that day, and Sherlock toed off his shoes as well and left them cockeyed in the hall. He padded quietly to the kitchen door, and leaned against the frame, arms crossed, and watched John.

John’s back was to him. The music wailed just a bit, that horrible plaintive bit of song where it sounded as if the instruments were actually pleading with the audience: *No, really, love me, I’m actually worth it, please.* And then John turned, hands full of diced potato, and spotted him, and smiled.

Sherlock hated clichés. In the kitchen, in life, in anything. They were boring, predictable, and served only one purpose, which was to make someone’s job infinitely easier.

John turned, his hands full of potatoes, a ridiculous pop tune on the radio, and Sherlock fell like a ton of bricks. It was a cliché, and Sherlock hated it, but it was accurate.

*I love him.*

“Oh, hello,” said John easily, as if Sherlock was not currently in pieces on the kitchen floor. “You
weren’t here when I got home, I wasn’t sure if – well, thought maybe you went to the hotel, and I wasn’t sure if you’d be stopping by, or if you’d be hungry. I’m just making up some potatoes, and there’s a bit of chicken in the fridge. If you don’t want anything fancy we could just stick it under the grill…”

John was babbling, and Sherlock was in love with him. John was holding potatoes in his kitchen, and talking complete nonsense, and Sherlock finished putting himself back together and walked across the kitchen floor to stand next to John, put his hands on John’s face and kissed him, if only to shut him up from his incessant rambling. John didn’t seem to mind; in fact, Sherlock thought he was grateful for the excuse, because he immediately relaxed against Sherlock, sighed deep in his chest with relief, and responded eagerly, easily, without any sort of resistance.

It was a little bit, thought Sherlock, like John might have loved him back.

Sherlock broke the kiss and slid his hands down to John’s arms. “I’m not hungry,” he said, his voice low. “Why would I eat when I’m not hungry?”

“So, no dinner.”

“No.”

John laughed, a bit high-pitched. His eyes were bright. “Right, then. I’ll just…” He lifted the potatoes, as if Sherlock needed reminding, and turned away to drop them on the counter behind him. He reached to shut off the pot of boiling water on the range, and then he was kissing Sherlock again, arms up and around his shoulders, one hand on the back of Sherlock’s neck, the fingers carding through his hair.

The kiss turned frantic, though Sherlock wasn’t sure who pushed it in that direction. They moved across the kitchen floor, grappling with each other, trying to keep their lips together as they stumbled and tripped over their feet. John nearly fell over the table and chairs, which skidded across the floor; Sherlock’s shoulder rammed hard against the doorframe, which would surely leave a bruise.

In the end, he was enormously grateful that John paused at the base of the stairs, and appeared to realize that under the circumstances, they were a bad idea, and instead steered them into the sitting room and the extra-long sofa, which was more than wide enough once the pillows along the back had been thrown into a corner.

Clothes littered the ground – John’s shirt had been left behind in the kitchen, and Sherlock had easily stepped out of his trousers in the foyer. He thought of the shoes lined up by the door and smiled as he dropped to his knees to work at John’s buckle.

“You’ve been planning,” he accused John.

“Yeah.” John was breathless, and he worked at Sherlock’s shirt, not an easy task with Sherlock so much lower. “Your shirt—”

“Your trousers,” countered Sherlock, and managed to undo the button. He shoved them down and took the boxers with them, and then gave John a light shove. John fell on the sofa and pulled Sherlock with him, his hands on Sherlock’s shoulders. Sherlock fell exactly as he wanted to fall, so that he wasn’t quite on top of John, but just low enough to give John’s cock a long, lazy lick. His tongue curled around the curve of John.

“Fuck, Sherlock,” gasped John.
“Maybe later,” said Sherlock, and took John into his mouth.

Every muscle in John’s body tensed; John’s hands on Sherlock’s head stilled and flexed in turn, unsure quite what to do, before finally grabbing hold of Sherlock’s hair and tugging, gently but with a steady pull, as Sherlock’s lips slid up John’s cock and pressed lightly on the head.

Sherlock wondered if he was the first man to suck John off. No, of course not, that much was obvious; John had been in the Army, after all. Sherlock hadn’t been, but he’d seen films.

Well, maybe some of the films were accurate. Probably not all of them.

Sherlock was about to start calculating the percentage of films that might have had some basis in reality when John pulled on his hair again, lifting his head so that they could look each other in the eyes, bringing him back to his own current reality.

John was flushed, and there was a near-smile on his lips. His chest was quivering, probably the exertion from trying to breathe through the sudden rush of blood to his genital region.

“You were saying?”

Sherlock blinked. “I was distracted.”

“Mmm.” John loosened his grip, and ran one hand through Sherlock’s curls. “Don’t tell me you were thinking about the menu.”

“The depictions of the Army as seen in the last twenty years of cinematography, to include the extensive inclusion in pornographic pieces.”


Sherlock grinned, and went back to work. It didn’t take long before John was gasping out incomprehensible syllables that might have been Sherlock’s name, and might have been curses half-formed. He came with a gasp and a stutter and finished with a deep groan that Sherlock swallowed down, and his arms wrapped around Sherlock easily as Sherlock crept up his body to lay half on him, and half on the stubbly fabric of the sofa.

“I like this sofa,” said Sherlock once John’s breathing was back to a more normal rate.

John chuckled. “I’ve always been partial.”

“Oh, look,” said Sherlock. “It’s Sunday night. I think there’s a rerun of me somewhere.”

“Christ,” swore John, amused. “You are the most egotistical berk I’ve ever met.” He reached above him to the side table and grabbed the remote control. It took a few tries before he had the right angle, and then another moment before he found a rerun of Reconstructed from the second season. “Hey,” said John, pleased. “This is the first episode I ever saw of yours.”

“Which one is it?”

“The Cross Keys.”

Sherlock frowned. “Be a little more specific, John.”

“Come on, you don’t remember? Vegetarian restaurant in Yorkshire? Two gay blokes?”

Sherlock scoffed. “A vegetarian restaurant in Yorkshire? They must have been mad.”
“You don’t remember?” asked John.

“I delete the closures,” said Sherlock, off-hand, and he grabbed the remote from John and began to flip the channels. John stayed quiet beneath him, and Sherlock glanced at him. John looked troubled for a moment in the flickering blue light of the television. “John—”

“Shove over, I need to start the water again,” said John, and he got to his feet.

“I’m not hungry,” said Sherlock.

“You have to eat,” said John, and picking up his trousers, left the room.

Sherlock listened to John in the kitchen, back to the clattering and the chopping, and he heard snatches of the music from the kitchen in the moments when the noise from the television abated.

Monday Monday, it was all I hoped it would be Oh Monday morning, Monday morning couldn't guarantee That Monday evening you would still be here with me.

“Bugger all,” said Sherlock, because he might be a genius, and he might be famous, and he might have half a dozen restaurants in London, New York, and Las Vegas, but even he knew when he was facing a losing proposition.

Because all of those things were true, and Sherlock was meant to return to London in the morning, and he knew, even if Lestrade pretended he didn’t, what the studio executives were going to say to him. He knew what being called into the London offices meant, when he was already in the middle of filming.

“Say again?” called John from the kitchen.

Sherlock made the decision quickly. He picked up the remote and turned the telly off. “I do hope you have some garlic hanging about,” he said, and left the problem sitting next to the remote, where it would do the most good for anyone.

“I thought you weren’t hungry?”

“John. Hunger has very little to do with anything when one has ideas.”

In the kitchen, John turned to smile at him. Sherlock saw the smile, saw the trust in John’s eyes, saw absolutely everything he’d had in the last three days naked and raw and real, and made up his mind then and there, and knew exactly what he was going to do next.

* 

Explosions in the far off distance, but close enough to rattle the ground. John could feel the reverberations in his bones, as if he were on a roller coaster ascending and nearing the top, the kinetic energy of the upcoming fall building anticipation.

“John.”

The rat-a-tat-tat of nearby gunfire, quick and sharp, and John ducked, determined to push forward anyway.

“John, you need to wake up.”

Three more meters. Two more meters. One.
“John.”

He woke on his stomach with a start, gasping as the dream clung to his shoulders. For a moment, John wasn’t sure why the world had gone dark – he was blind, he was dead, he was….

In his bed, in his bedroom, and Sherlock crouched next to the bed, already dressed. It was still dark.

“I was dreaming,” said John, and immediately, the dream began to dissipate.

“Yes,” said Sherlock calmly. “Come on, time to dress.”

John pushed himself out of the bed, and reached for the clothes folded on the nearby chair. He couldn’t remember putting them there – perhaps Sherlock had done it before waking him. John was buttoning his shirt when things began making some degree of sense.

“Wait – it’s not morning yet.”

“Four-thirty,” said Sherlock.

“That’s hours too early,” said John. “We don’t have to be at the Empire until nine.”

But Sherlock shook his head. “We’ve an errand to run beforehand,” he explained.

John finished dressing and followed Sherlock down the stairs. Grim reality of an extremely early morning began to make itself known; John shivered and shook, his muscles tired and achy from not having rested nearly long enough to rejuvenate themselves. He realized, with something of a shock, that Sherlock had actually spent the entire night in the house – or nearly, it not being morning precisely. He let himself daydream a little about a lazy morning in bed, waking up with the sunlight dappling on their skin. An impossibility now, and John couldn’t help but feel cheated.

In the cold foyer, they donned their coats and scarves, and Sherlock took the car keys from the hook on the wall.

“All right if I drive?” he asked casually. “You can sleep another hour.”

“All right,” said John, too tired to be suspicious, and they slipped out into the dark morning. John saw Sherlock glance up and down the street. “Nervous about driving?”

“No,” said Sherlock shortly, and got into the car. John lowered the chair back and folded his arms.

“I had plans for waking up this morning,” John told Sherlock, and Sherlock’s mouth quirked.

“I’m sure you did,” he said, and they were off.

* 

John dozed in the car. He hadn’t meant to fall asleep, but the gentle vibrations and the fact he’d only slept for about four hours meant that once they were properly driving on the highway, and away from the start-and-stop motions of driving in town, John was out.

He didn’t dream, and for that John was grateful. He had, however, drooled, judging by the dampness on the seat belt where he’d been resting his head, and John turned away from Sherlock and tried to wipe away the wetness from his chin and still look somewhat mature.

It didn’t work. Sherlock was smirking at the road when John turned back around.
“Oh, shut up,” said John, a bit tetchy, and Sherlock broke into a grin.

“No, no, it’s fine,” said Sherlock lightly. “You don’t snore, either.”

“Where the fuck are we?” grumbled John, looking out of the windows.

“Belgium.”

John gave him a stoic glare.

“Sussex,” amended Sherlock. He was in a remarkably good mood, and John wondered what he had up his sleeve. “I wasn’t sure if you’d brought your passport.”

“I’m not entirely sure where I put my passport.”

“Remedy that at some point,” said Sherlock. “We’re nearly there.”

“Lovely. Where’s there?”

“Here,” said Sherlock, and turned off the main road onto a gravel drive. The little car bumped along, and John reached up to grab the handle above the door.

“Er, Sherlock – you do know this isn’t an SUV?”

“Of course not, John. But it’s not very far. We might have to walk a bit.”

“Walk where?”

Sherlock didn’t answer. John had the distinct impression that Sherlock was enjoying the mystery too much.

Finally Sherlock pulled the car to the side of the non-road, and turned off the engine. John followed him out of the car, and hurried to catch up to Sherlock’s long strides as he continued down the path and through a thicket of trees.

“Oh,” said John, his eyes going wide when they emerged through the trees. “It’s a gingerbread house.”

“Hardly, John,” Sherlock called over his shoulder, still moving ahead.

The sun was just rising; John could make out the gardens surrounding the house, which did look very much like it was made of gingerbread, or at least painted that way. It was small, two storeys with a thatched roof and dark half-timbers against cream-colored walls, and little dots of shrubbery marking the base.

The gardens were perfectly tended, even in the winter chill; John could see the beds where flowers would bloom in the summer, bushes that were hardy enough to withstand the cold, and behind the house, a bit of lawn and a tree with a swing hanging out from one branch.

Sherlock strode right up to the house and turned the handle, leaning hard against the door with his shoulder.

“Sherlock,” began John, eyes on the swing. “You can’t just walk in – someone lives here.”

“Of course someone lives here, John,” said Sherlock. “We’d never hope to find breakfast if the house was empty.”
“Sherlock—”

But the door was open, and Sherlock grinned successfully at John. He held his finger over his lips – as if John had any intention of informing the occupants of the cottage that he was currently breaking into of their presence – and went inside.

The cottage was snug and delightfully warm. There was a nightlight in the hall that cast just enough light so that neither of them would trip over the rag rug on the floor, and John followed Sherlock through the hall, feeling exactly like a burglar, and desperately praying that no one would wake up. He glanced into the sitting room on the right, up the stairs on the left, and was thankful that at least all of the occupants appeared to still be asleep. Perhaps he’d be able to convince Sherlock to get out of the house before either of them was arrested.

“Sherlock,” he hissed, but Sherlock ignored him and pressed on into the kitchen. As soon as the door swung shut behind him, Sherlock switched on the light.

“There now,” said Sherlock, inordinately pleased with himself. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them briefly, and then pulled off the gloves. “What do you fancy for breakfast, John? Eggs? Toast? I’m sure they’re around here somewhere.”

“Are you bloody insane?” demanded John. “We’ve just broken into someone’s house for breakfast, and we’re meant to be at the restaurant in two hours.”

“Plenty of time for eggs,” said Sherlock. He dropped his coat on the back of a chair and went to scrounge in the half-sized fridge. “Oh, and aged gouda. An omelet, perhaps?”

“You’re mental,” said John. “Absolutely barking. I’m going to go back and sit in the car where I can watch you be arrested in peace.”

Sherlock stood up from his crouch in front of the fridge. “John. I did not break into the house.”

“Well, it’s not yours, unless there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Oh? And how do you deduce that?”

“There’s a swing in the back garden and family photographs along the wall.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows rose. “And you gather I don’t have a family?”

“I know you don’t. I looked you up, you know. Married to your work, that’s what you’ve always said in interviews about your private life.”

Sherlock smiled. “What if I were to tell you it’s Lestrade’s house?”

John’s eyes narrowed. “Lestrade’s house.”

“Summer home, of course. Empty now, but he allows me to use it now and then.”

John wasn’t sure whether or not to believe him.

“Empty, but with eggs and cheese in the fridge?”

“And milk,” said Sherlock, looking in the fridge. “The cupboard to your left, John. You’ll find the coffee and tea. There’s a perfectly acceptable coffeemaker in the cabinet along the back wall. Sugar is in the bowl on the counter.”
He was right. John gave Sherlock a scrutinizing look, but Sherlock, already preoccupied with the preparations of eggs and cheese, looked entirely innocent. And how could he possibly know the location of the coffee, the tea, the coffeemaker, or the sugar if he’d never been in the house before?

“You deduced that,” John said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’d make far more sense for the coffee and tea to be near the coffeemaker, John.”

Which was true enough that John went ahead and made sure the electric kettle had water before switching it on.

They were just sitting down to breakfast twenty minutes later, and John had finally relaxed and was laughing and joking with Sherlock, when the door opened to reveal a tall man in a dressing gown. His dark auburn hair was thinning, and he had a frown on his face that for some reason didn’t look the least bit surprised.

Oh, shit, thought John, staring at the man, whose eyes went over the kitchen table, the omelet and toast and the small pots of designer jam John had found in the cupboard near the tea.

John began to wonder at what point he’d be able to call Harry to post bail, and if being arrested with Sherlock Holmes for trespassing meant he was guaranteed a place in the tabloids for the rest of his life, or merely for the rest of the week.

Then again, if the tabloids mentioned the Empire, it might mean more customers, which meant more money, which meant he might actually be able to pay off the bank loan. Would Sherlock mind if he sold his story to cover what the Empire didn’t earn? Notoriety did have some advantages.

“Oh, hello,” said Sherlock, smooth as cream. “Would you care for an omelet?”

“Sherlock,” hissed John under his breath.

“What are you doing in my kitchen?” said the man, his voice icy.

“I would think it would be obvious,” said Sherlock. “Your onions have turned, by the way.”

“Sherlock.”

“And I saw the tag on the gouda, you overpaid by at least half.”

“I know. I wasn’t expecting anyone to put it in an omelet.”

“Only sensible thing to do with aged gouda,” said Sherlock airily.

“Sherlock Holmes.”

“Oh, sit down and eat an omelet, Mycroft,” said Sherlock, and ate a bite of his own. “Your blood sugar is clearly at a low point. John made tea.”

“You cannot just let yourself into my house—”

“Our house, Mummy left it to us both.”

“—at any time it suits you, and you’re meant to be in Kent, not in Sussex.”

“Hold on,” said John. He pointed his fork at Sherlock. “You said this was Lestrade’s house.”
“I lied,” said Sherlock.

John turned the fork onto Mycroft. “And he’s your—?”

“Brother,” said Mycroft, somewhat disdainfully. “Which does not give him the excuse to use my home as a waypoint while he kidnaps military officers.”

“You’re slipping,” said Sherlock smugly.

Mycroft rolled his eyes. “Hardly. He hasn’t worked as a doctor in some years and he’s only recently taken on the mantle of restaurateur; if you were to ask him, he’d sooner describe himself as retired military vice any other occupation. Do give me a little credit, Sherlock, you aren’t quite as clever as you think you are.”


“Amateurs,” said Mycroft, and walked past the table to the cupboard where the coffeemaker was stored.

“How does he – is deducing life histories after two minutes a family trait?” John asked Sherlock.

Sherlock’s mouth quirked, and he took another bite of omelet. John glared at him for a moment, and then returned to his own breakfast. The only sound in the kitchen was Mycroft wrestling with the coffeemaker.

“I never actually said it was Lestrade’s house,” said Sherlock.

John crossed his arms and glared at him.

“I merely implied—”

John turned to Mycroft. “Has your brother always been this much of a wanker?”

“From the day he was born,” said Mycroft behind them.

“Brother, dear,” said Sherlock, in a falsely pleasant voice. “I never expected to see you here on a Monday morning. Pray tell, has the government fallen?”

“Don’t sound quite so hopeful,” said Mycroft. He sat opposite them at the table, holding a slice of dry toast. “Are you going to introduce me to your companion?”

“Deduce it for yourself,” said Sherlock.

John extended his hand. “John Watson.”

“Mycroft Holmes,” said Mycroft, taking it. “And…my. You’ve only known my brother a few days, haven’t you?”

John glanced at Sherlock, who rolled his eyes in exasperation and continued to stab at his omelet. “Four, actually.”

“Four. Goodness. And he’s already bringing you to his childhood home to meet the family. Will there be a happy announcement by the end of the week?”

John kept his gaze even. Sherlock let out a hefty sigh and dropped the fork on the table with a clatter.
“If you’re done interrogating my guest, Mycroft.”

“Hardly interrogating, I’m merely asking a few questions to get to know him better,” said Mycroft smoothly. “I never had the chance with your last paramour.”

“Don’t you have a government to run?”

“Government?” repeated John. Paramour?

“Feast your eyes, John,” said Sherlock. “We have, gracing our breakfast table, the British Government in his dressing gown.”

“Ever the dramatist,” said Mycroft. “I occupy a minor position. Quite boring.”

“God save the Queen,” sang Sherlock.

“Do shut up, Sherlock,” said Mycroft, wearily, and Sherlock did, smirking as he returned to his omelet.

“So,” said John, as if he spent every morning breaking into people’s houses, eating their eggs, and sitting with them at the breakfast table, “is the government falling? Because it’s Monday morning, and not a bank holiday.”

Sherlock smirked wider.

“Lovely,” said Mycroft to Sherlock. “You found one exactly like you.”

“Hmm,” hummed Sherlock, almost happily, and kept at his omelet.

“I’m hosting an international conference of extremely high import, and in two hours, the house will be besieged by very powerful people,” Mycroft told John. “I would happily tell you more, except to do so would be to ensure your imminent demise. In the meantime, I would suggest leaving the county.”

John kept his gaze steady. After a moment, Mycroft sighed.

“I do have some holiday time, you know.”

“When does the car pick you up?” asked Sherlock.

“Two hours,” admitted Mycroft.

“Splendid,” said Sherlock, and he whisked John’s plate out from under his fork and went to dump it all in the sink. “That’s enough time for John and I to take a constitutional around the gardens while you do whatever ablutions you need to do to appear human, and by the time we return, you’ll be long gone. Be sure to do the washing up first.”

“Sherlock,” scolded John. “We can do that.”

“Nonsense, we’re guests,” said Sherlock. “Come along, John!”

“Pleasure to meet you,” John said to Mycroft.

“All mine, I’m sure,” said Mycroft dryly, as John was yanked from the room.

The sun was just over the trees now, but the air was no less cold. Moreover, a wind had picked up,
and John had to hold onto the cap Sherlock had dropped on his head to ensure it didn’t fly off. John wound the scarf tighter around his face, and burrowed into his coat, shivering a little bit.

“Christ, it’s cold,” he said.

“It’s the wind from the sea,” explained Sherlock. “We’re a bit inland, but there’s some of it, when the weather’s right.”

A particularly strong gust swept through, and Sherlock put a hand on his own hat – a ridiculous tweed thing with earflaps.

“What is that on your head?”

“A deerstalker, John.”

“Are there deer nearby which we’ll be stalking?”

“Of course not. It’s a hat, not an intention.”

“It has ear flaps. And it looks like it should have a pinwheel on top.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s only a hat. Here, just through these trees now. Careful of the poison ivy.”

“The what?”

Sherlock laughed and held back some of the branches while John climbed his way through the brambles. The ground was no longer crisp with frost – the sun was warm enough at least to have melted that away – and John could feel his shoes growing just a bit damp as they walked.

“Sherlock,” said John. “What are we doing?”

“I told you, we’re taking a walk while Mycroft is in the house.”

“No,” said John patiently. “What are we doing here at all? We’re supposed to be at the Empire.”

“The Empire is closed today.”

“Sherlock,” John grabbed Sherlock’s arm, and spun him around. Sherlock met his eyes briefly, and then looked away. “Why did you bring me here? It wasn’t to meet your brother. You weren’t even going to tell me it was your house, were you?”

Sherlock shook John’s arm off. “It wasn’t necessary.”

“I thought we were going to be arrested.”

“And you also thought the publicity would have brought in more customers,” Sherlock pointed out, and John huffed and looked away. “Aha, see, I’m right. The restaurant will be fine, I’ve left instructions for Molly and Artie. Harry and Mary will see to the cleaning, and you’re better off not there because you can hardly access your office when the dining room is under renovation. Besides, you would succumb to the curiosity of what is happening to your dining room, and that would destroy Lestrade’s all-important reveal tomorrow morning.”

“Curiosity will kill me just as readily in Sussex as it would in Upper Brickley.”

“And you’re the expert in ways to kill people, I’m sure,” grumbled John, falling in behind Sherlock.

“Alas, only with a béchamel sauce. Speaking of which, there’s a lovely little restaurant in town that I think you’ll enjoy. We should have lunch there.”

“Do you own that, too?”

Sherlock ignored him, and instead ducked under a low-hanging branch. John followed, and when he straightened up, Sherlock stood opposite him, so close that he could feel the other man’s breath on his forehead.

“Wait,” said Sherlock, and kissed him. Sherlock’s lips were warm, smiling into the kiss, and John could taste the creamy cheese and the sharp pepper from the omelet on Sherlock’s tongue. He reached up into the kiss and closed his eyes to better let the flavors wash over him.

When Sherlock broke off, he was still smiling. “We’re here.”

They stood in a small clearing, no larger than the dining room at the Empire. The ground was indented, with a circle of bare ground in the center, darkened and showing the remains of a thousand campfires. Several large stones were nearby, clearly placed to provide seating. On the other side of the clearing was a ramshackle little hut, nearly leaning over from disuse and neglect, the perfect size for a couple of children playing house.

“All right,” said John, glancing between the house and Sherlock. Sherlock waited patiently, hands clasped behind him, eyes wide with anxiousness. “Was this yours too?”

Sherlock nodded, and John turned back to the clearing. There was nothing left of the campfire except for the scorched ground in a center of rocks – clearly years in the making. The larger stones were worn smooth on the flat tops, but still rough along the sides. They’d be a bit small for two grown men to sit on comfortably, but just large enough for a teenager to sit with their long limbs stretched out, and a small child to curl their legs up and lick melted chocolate from their fingers.

The hut was in worse shape; a strong wind might have blown it over, but the trees were thick enough that the wind didn’t seem to touch the clearing. John peered into the hut – one room, quite basic, but with a weathered and beaten-up old chest in the corner, which surely held the necessary supplies for an impromptu meal cooked over open flame.

Sherlock pushed past John into the hut, and knelt before the chest. He opened it, and John saw that his guess was correct. Sherlock pulled out the blankets that lay on top, and John saw the mix of cast-iron cooking pans and pots, a few wooden spoons that might have been better off for becoming firewood, and chipped plates and mugs, all tossed in without much care for their longevity. Sherlock slammed the chest closed again, and carried the blankets back outside.

“Well,” said Sherlock. “Make yourself useful – we could probably do with some firewood.”

“The wooden spoons might do in a pinch.”

“For a few moments, no doubt. I know you weren’t a boy scout but surely you know what will burn and what won’t.”

“Wanker,” said John, and went into the woods again. It didn’t take long to find enough fallen sticks and tree limbs to fill his arms, and he pushed his way back into the clearing. Sherlock had done his own search, and was just lighting a small fire in the center of the circle. The blankets were spread out on the ground behind him.
“I know you can’t be planning to cook anything,” said John. He dropped the armful of wood on the outer edge of the circle. “Seeing as we just had breakfast, and you apparently have plans for us to eat lunch somewhere.”

“No,” said Sherlock, and he pulled John off his feet and to the ground and kissed him again. John responded, and then pushed at Sherlock.

“Sherlock—”

Sherlock clearly didn’t want to talk. He pulled at John’s shirt until he rested his cold fingers against John’s skin, and when John yelped, he pushed him down on the blankets, reached to grab another, and dragged it over them both, blocking them from view.

*  

The fire was crackling merrily away when John woke up again. He was alone under the blanket, naked and warm and fairly comfortable, considering the ground underneath wasn’t particularly forgiving. John opened his eyes, a bit bleary, and saw Sherlock sitting with his back to him, facing the fire as he fed it one stick after another. Sherlock was dressed again – although John wasn’t entirely certain that Sherlock had even removed all of his clothing – but his coat was open and hanging off his shoulders. He didn’t seem aware that John had woken.

John took a moment to consider. It had been an incredibly odd, unexpected day. He had been woken long before dawn, dragged into his car, driven halfway across the country, broken into a strange house, eaten another man’s eggs and cheese for breakfast, and then trekked into the woods to receive a blow-job from his….

What was Sherlock, anyway? Fling? Lover? One-night stand gone horribly long? Consulting restaurateur?

Boyfriend?

No, thought John. Boyfriend implied commitment, and despite journeying to what appeared to be Sherlock’s childhood home and meeting Sherlock’s elder brother, John didn’t think commitment was exactly in the offering. The only commitment Sherlock had made to John was to improve the Empire. Everything else was simply…recreation.

The fire was throwing off a decent amount of heat, considering the small amount of wood that Sherlock fed it. John shifted in the blankets; it was warm enough, under them, but the bits of his skin exposed to the air were forming goose bumps. He wondered where his clothes had gone.

“This is where I learned to cook, you know,” said Sherlock, and John stilled, and then continued shifting in the blankets, not quite so worried about making noise. “Not quite true, of course, I learned the details in kitchens, with ovens that control the temperature and measuring cups and scales and all the other trappings of a chef. But the first thing I cooked, by myself without any assistance, was here, over the campfire.”

“How old were you?” asked John.

“Four. Here,” added Sherlock, and handed him a small bundle of John’s clothing. “I put them near the fire to keep them warm.”

“Thanks,” said John, and took them. He began to struggle back into them. “Tell me what you cooked.”
Sherlock closed his eyes, and a soft smile spread over his face. John thought he recognized the smile – it looked so much like the one Sherlock wore, just after they’d made love, as if everything in the world was exactly right, in that moment.

“Trout. Salt and pepper, twist of lemon, watercress stuffed in the cavity. Small new potatoes, red-skinned so we didn’t have to peel them, but we’d put them in the ashes and the skins were burnt crisp, so you’d pop the potatoes out of their skins and straight into your mouth in a single bite. Berries, strawberries and brambles, with vanilla sugar sprinkled on top because they were early, and needed the extra sweetness. We didn’t wait for the sugar to sink in, so you’d take a bite and the granules crunched against your teeth before they melted on your tongue.”

John worked at the buttons on his shirt and grinned. “You’re making me hungry again.”

Sherlock’s eyes popped open, and he smiled. “Only fair. You cooked me the first meal you made yourself.”

John frowned and reached for his jumper. “What, the pilau?”

“No?”

John shook his head. “Spaghetti and meatballs, probably.”

Sherlock waved his hand. “Dried spaghetti hardly counts, John.”

“And I suppose you caught the trout yourself?”

“Mycroft, of course.”

John rolled his eyes. “Well, someone caught your trout; someone made my spaghetti. Anyway, I can make pasta now. Or I could six months ago. I just don’t do it very often.”

“All the more reason you shouldn’t count spaghetti and meatballs.” Sherlock got to his feet and reached for the nearby bucket of sand to put out the fire. “Come along, John – Mycroft will surely have left by now.”

John frowned. “How long was I asleep?”

“At least an hour. Do you find that you always sleep better after sex, John?”

John rolled his eyes and started to put his trousers back on. “I’ll just check my extensive sexual history to see if I can note any correlations between orgasms and restfulness, how’s that?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Sherlock, quite serious, and John grabbed the deerstalker and threw it at him, laughing. Sherlock caught it easily and perched it on his head.

“That hat is really ridiculous, you know,” said John as he tied his shoes.

Sherlock smiled, and doused the fire.

*  

The cottage was still when they arrived, the windows dark. It appeared that Sherlock was correct; if John hadn’t known that Mycroft had been there that morning, he would have assumed that no one had been in it at all.

“Do you think he left it locked?” asked John.
“I have a key,” said Sherlock, unconcerned, but the front door was unlocked anyway. The house was quiet, but there was wood made up for a fire in the sitting room, and Sherlock took the matches from the mantelpiece and lobbed them to John. “Do something useful, John – I’ll just get something to drink from the cellar.”

“Right,” said John, and crouched next to the fireplace. There were even newspapers already twisted together in ropes, and he lit one with a match to start the fire.

“John,” said Mycroft, and John fell over backwards, luckily remembering to drop the newspaper into the fireplace before he set the house on fire. “An enjoyable time in the forest, I see?”

“Christ, Mycroft,” swore John. He glanced at Mycroft, standing in the doorway, now dressed in a bespoke grey suit, with an umbrella hanging over his arm. Mycroft glanced at John’s head and his mouth quirked, and John suddenly had the horrible thought that there were leaves or worse in his hair, and ran his hand over his head. “We thought you were gone.”

“Not quite,” said Mycroft. “I actually wanted a word, before you left.”

“All right,” said John cautiously.

Mycroft glanced at the fireplace, and then pointedly at John, as if giving permission for John to continue his appointed task. John did, cautiously, and thus happily had his back to Mycroft when the man spoke again.

“Are you going to continue your relationship with my brother after the filming is over?”

John coughed, and nearly burnt his hand on the poker. “Christ, I’ll never get over the way either of you do that.”

“That would be a yes, then,” said Mycroft thoughtfully. “At least, you don’t plan on ending it. Four days – then the filming is nearly concluded, is it not?”

John didn’t say anything.

“Ah,” said Mycroft, inferring the answer anyway.

The fire was going well enough now; John didn’t need to babysit it any longer, and anyway, he was beginning to cramp. He stood and stretched his legs, and faced Mycroft, arms crossed.

“If this is the standard ‘hurt my baby brother and I’ll commit unspeakable things against your person’ speech, then rest assured that anything between your brother and me is both none of your business, and none of your business.”

“Hmm,” said Mycroft with a sanctimonious smile. “Very loyal very quickly, aren’t you – I’m sorry, I don’t know what you prefer. Doctor, Captain, or Mister?”

“Mister will do,” said John. “As I’m neither a captain nor a doctor at the moment.”

“A pity,” said Mycroft. “I’m afraid not even I can help with the captain, not with your medical record, but the doctor – now, there I may have a few connections. If you should find yourself in… well, in need of some kind of employment, I would be more than happy to arrange a…situation that would be beneficial to everyone.”

John didn’t move. Mycroft didn’t either.
“Why would I need employment?” John finally asked.

“Oh, Mr Watson,” said Mycroft smoothly. “Let’s not keep secrets, shall we? Unless, of course, Sherlock doesn’t know about the lien on the Empire.”

John’s heart went cold. “Who are you, really?”

“In this moment? Nothing more than a concerned brother.”

“A concerned brother who wants me out of Sherlock’s life? That’s what you mean by a beneficial situation, isn’t it? Me doctoring somewhere, far away from Sherlock?”

“As you say,” said Mycroft.

John stared at Mycroft for a moment. “No.”

“No?”

John didn’t answer. Instead, he took a seat on one of the wingchairs facing the fire. It was turning his back on Mycroft, which didn’t quite sit well, but it was as effective a way of ending the conversation as John could imagine.

“Interesting,” said Mycroft thoughtfully. “You’re different in every conceivable way.”

John glanced at him over his shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“From the woman,” said Mycroft.

“What woman?”

Mycroft looked up, an odd expression on his face – almost as if he was both surprised and not that John was questioning about what woman Mycroft meant.

Before he could say anything, however, there was a bang from the kitchen as a door closed sharply, and then Sherlock appeared in the doorway. “John,” he called, “please tell me the fire is warm enough for us to remove our clothing— oh. You.”

John covered his face with a hand.

“Hello, Sherlock,” said Mycroft. “I think give it a few more minutes.”

“Why are you still here?” asked Sherlock disdainfully. Sherlock glanced at John, and then at Mycroft. It was instantly obvious to John – and probably also to Mycroft – that the idea of leaving the two of them alone was very likely his worst nightmare. “Shouldn’t you be in London laying waste to yet another third-world nation?”

“My car is late,” explained Mycroft.

“Minor positions in the British government are subject to traffic like the rest of us, apparently,” said John from the chair, and Sherlock’s mouth quirked.

“Yes, heads will roll,” said Mycroft dryly. “I believe I hear it approaching now. A good day to both of you. Do be careful of the Turkish rug, Sherlock, you know it’s Mummy’s favorite.”

“Do buy some decent biscuits next time, Mycroft – I realize you’re on a diet but the plain Hobnobs I found in the back of the cupboard are hardly an improvement over the chocolate variety.”
“John,” said Mycroft, with a nod of his head.

“Mycroft,” said John, pleasantly. “A pleasure.”

“All mine, I’m sure,” said Mycroft, and left the house. Sherlock practically leapt to the window and pulled back the curtains to better watch him go. After a moment, John heard the familiar crunch of a car on gravel pulling away.

“There he goes, John,” said Sherlock gravely, full of pomp and foreboding, and for a moment, John thought he was making fun. “An enemy of which few have seen the like.”

“Your brother,” said John flatly. “He said he worries about you.”

“Did he?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t overestimate his ability to tug at heartstrings which he does not possess,” Sherlock glanced at John over his shoulder, and then let the curtain drop. “Did he offer you money?”

John let out a bark of indignant laughter, but Sherlock’s expression didn’t change. “Ah. Not quite. He offered me a job, actually. Doctoring.”

“Did you take it?”

John went still. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Only that, John – did you take what my brother offered you? I imagine it came with the caveat of never seeing me again, of course.”

“That was heavily implied, yes.” John paused. “Would you rather I had done?”

“It’s not up to me.”

“I rather think it is,” said John. “Seeing as I’ll be in Upper Brickley for the rest of my life, and you’ll be God knows where by Wednesday.”

Sherlock stared at the fire. “So you’ll stay in Upper Brickley, then.”

“The Empire’s in Upper Brickley. That’s the whole reason we met, you wanker – you’re meant to be giving us the chance to keep it afloat.” John paused. “Unless…Christ. You…you aren’t saying what I think you’re saying, are you?”

“Don’t read into things too closely, John.”

John laughed. “Oh, of course not. It’s just when the man who you’ve hired in to help you turn your restaurant around decides that maybe you should start looking elsewhere for work, it’s sometimes a little too easy to think that maybe he’s trying to tell you something.”

“Perhaps I am,” said Sherlock.

John stood up. “I didn’t accept your brother’s offer, you berk,” he said quietly. “Among other things, I still have hope.”

“For the Empire.”
John wasn’t sure what made him say it; maybe it was the fire, the closeness of the room, the comfortable settledness in his bones – the heady feeling of having been kidnapped and fed and loved and given the chance to see the bare bones of Sherlock’s personal life, the bits that he didn’t show on television, the soft smile on his lips when they were wrapped up in blankets with the fire nearby, and the cold air settling into their hair.

“Not just for the Empire,” said John, looking at Sherlock longingly, wishing the other man was facing him so he could read everything on his face. But Sherlock remained still, focused squarely on the fire, and John left the room without seeing him turn, mouth open as though ready to speak his surprise.
I’m in the lobby, come down when you’re ready. GL

Where are you? GL

It’s a quarter past five, you better not be sleeping. GL

I’ve been banging on your door for ten minutes, get up already. GL

Bloody fuck, Sherlock, where are you? GL

I’m at John’s door. Answer the fucking bell. GL

John’s car is not here. Why is John’s car not here? GL

BLOODY FUCKERING FUCK, SHERLOCK. YOU’RE NOT AT THE EMPIRE, YOU’RE NOT AT BAKER STREET, YOU’RE NOT AT THE HOTEL. YOU BETTER BE DEAD. GL

Is fuckering even a word? SH

WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU? GL

Not dead. SH

YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO MEET WITH THE STUDIO HEADS IN TWENTY MINUTES. GL

SOD OFF, SHERLOCK. I’ll go into the meeting for you, I’ll be damned if I make any excuses for you this time. GL

*

Mary figured it out first.

“John’s not coming in today,” she said at ten, and Molly looked up from the dough she was kneading.

“Is he sick? Did he call?”

“No and no,” said Mary, and she pinched a bit of dough and popped it into her mouth. “But he said he’d be here an hour ago, and we already know that Sherlock’s gone missing. I bet you tomorrow’s tips that John’s gone off with him.”

“John?” repeated Harry, stricken. She stopped stirring the soup on the range for a moment, and then kept going as if nothing was wrong.

“Maybe Greg’s found them and is bringing them back,” suggested Molly, almost hopefully.

“Moll, are you mad? Maybe if we’re lucky, they’ve finally pulled their collective idiotic heads out of their arses and admitted they might actually care for each other, and they’re off shagging like bunnies as we speak.”

“Funny hearing that from you, seeing as how you dated John,” said Harry.

Mary shrugged and stole another pinch of dough. “I like to think of myself as open-minded. And
anyway, you were just as eager to have John flirt with Sherlock as the rest of us a week ago. You can’t go changing your mind now.”

“Flirting is one thing,” said Harry. “Running off and leaving his responsibilities behind is another.”

“Lucky you’re here to hold down the fort,” said Mary, and she licked the last of the dough from her fingers. “I’m off for the deep freeze; if I find ravioli, can we have it for lunch?”

“Sure,” said Harry listlessly, and concentrated on the soup. When Mary found the ravioli, deep in the recesses of the freezer, she quickly offered to cook them upstairs, to keep out of the chaos in the kitchen.

It was less altruistic than the others supposed. Harry wanted a bit of quiet, a bit a space where no one was gleefully happy that John and Sherlock had run off into the night together. Mary and Molly seemed to think it was all some grand twist of a soap opera, EastEnders performed live in the Empire kitchen. Artie was keeping his mouth closed, though Harry thought he wasn’t quite so pleased, the way he didn’t join in the fun. He hadn’t been so anti-Sherlock early in the week – the punch to Sherlock’s nose, though certainly earned, had been the last thing anyone might have expected. Harry wondered what had changed Artie’s mind about Sherlock. She didn’t think it was jealousy. If anyone had the right to be jealous, it was Harry – and she knew herself well enough to know that jealous had nothing to do with how she felt about her brother and Sherlock Holmes.

She opened the door to the flat’s kitchen, and went straight to the cabinets to find a saucepan for the ravioli. She didn’t turn to the living room until it was on the hob and heating up, and saw Jim Moriarty sitting on her couch, idly reading her copy of *The Sound and the Fury*.

“Oh, hi,” said Jim casually. “What’s for lunch?”

“Get out,” said Harry, recovering from her shock.

“Mmm, no,” said Jim, without even bothering to pretend that he thought about it. “Frost-bitten ravioli? Yum. The anticipation amongst your staff must be overwhelming.”

“This is my flat, you can’t be here.”

“Matter of opinion.”

“Matter of fact.”

“Only if you think in chronological terms,” said Jim, and he tossed the book to the sofa. “I hear Johnny boy has fled the scene with his erstwhile lover.”

“Sod off,” snapped Harry, and went back into the kitchen to check on the water.

“Happy ending for everyone, isn’t it? Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah hurrah, finds love where he least expects it. The restaurant is a glaring success and John goes off into the sunset leaving you a successful business to run until you’re old and grey. Happy endings all around.”

Harry bit her lip and opened the refrigerator. A milk carton, half full, and a hunk of parm of indeterminate age, but at least not green and fuzzy. The hum echoed in the empty fridge, a bit of white noise that did absolutely nothing to give Harry any comfort at all.

“Anyway, just stopping by,” said Jim smoothly. Harry heard him walk across the floor towards the door. “I wanted to be the first to congratulate you on your unprecedented success. It’ll only be a matter of days now before you come in to pay off the rest of your loan, I’m sure. Of course, that’s
all you really have left, isn’t it?”

Harry didn’t say anything. She didn’t dare.

“Love to Johnny and Sherlock,” sang Jim, and the door closed with a sturdy click.

Harry closed the refrigerator door, and leaned against the wall. The only thing to do was to breathe, she decided, and did just that for several long minutes, in and out. The flat was quiet again, just the sound of the range clicking away behind her, the hum of the fridge, and her own breathing. In and out.

“What the fuck was that?” asked Artie, and Harry stopped breathing for a moment. “No, I mean— no, wait, that’s exactly what I mean. What the bloody fuck, Harry? What was Jim Moriarty doing in your flat?”

Harry took a breath and turned to Artie. She couldn’t remember ever seeing him quite so angry before. Artie stood in the middle of the kitchen, the door leading downstairs wide open. His face was bright red, and his freckles stood out in spots on his nose.

“Artie,” began Harry, but that was apparently all Artie needed to unleash another round of fury on her. “I don’t believe this. First John goes off with that posh wanker and leaves us all high in the weeds, and then you have to go slumming around with Jim fucking Moriarty—”

“Wait—you know him?”

“Well I know him!” shouted Artie. “Christ, Harry, I’ve only lived here my entire sodding life, you’d know him too if you paid attention. He’s been buying up failing businesses across Kent for the last five years and selling them off to the mass-market chain places. He’s the arsehole who turned the Janus into a sodding McDonalds.”

“I—” Harry stumbled to the kitchen table, and leaned over it, suddenly sick. “I didn’t know. I’ve been trying to keep the Empire afloat for six years.”

“Yeah, peachy keen job of that,” snapped Artie. “And you let that arse give you a loan?”

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice, Harry. You’re the sodding manager, you should have done something earlier—”

Harry had had enough. Bad enough to get the lecture from John, who actually had the right to shout at her. Worse to have had it from Sherlock, who at least had been called in to tell her what she’d already known. But to have it from Artie…

“What, Artie?” shouted Harry, turning on him. “What did you want me to do? Change the menu, change the wallpaper, put some fancy pop music on the stereo and stand outside offering free samples to the masses, set up a children’s menu and get Molly and Mary to wear ridiculous hats? Start offering the food at half price, drinks specials, quiz night, free snacks for the kiddies?”

“Yes!” shouted Artie. “You do what you have to do to keep the doors open!”

“You don’t get it, do you? This isn’t about keeping the Empire open, not at any cost! All weekend, all I’ve heard is how much John loves this restaurant, how much it means to him that something
our grandfather built that changed the way people looked at food has managed to remain open for so long – and how much he wants to honor his memory by keeping it going. Don’t any of you realize, I want the same thing. I’ve always wanted the same thing! I don’t want to resort to ridiculous gimmicks and throw away everything that my grandfather worked for just to keep the doors open to a restaurant nobody actually wants!”

“Well, I’m sorry for not understanding that,” said Artie icily. “But you checked out of this entire thing at the beginning – you didn’t want to have a bloody thing to do with any of it.”

“Because it’s not the same!” shouted Harry. “What Sherlock’s doing – it’s not what James wanted. It’s not what my dad tried to keep up. That’s not the Empire downstairs – it’s some bastardized version of a pretentious cook trying to be all the things he can’t be.”

“Which is what? Successful? I think Sherlock Holmes is pretty good on the success front, Harry. He sure as hell knows what he’s talking about – we’ve had customers. What’s more important to you – some out-of-date memory of a menu, or people actually paying the bills?”

“What’s more important to you, Artie?” challenged Harry. “Tradition, or money in your pocket?”

Artie’s voice was cold. “Tradition doesn’t mean squat if no one takes it seriously. And no one’s taken the Empire seriously for years.”

Harry exhaled and turned away. “Funny. You hate him so much, but that’s exactly what Sherlock said to me the first night he was here. Bet you didn’t think you were so much alike.”

Artie didn’t say anything; Harry wrapped her arms around herself and hugged tightly. She closed her eyes, burning now with unshed tears, and tried to calm her rolling stomach and her pounding heart. “Just…go, Artie. Please. I know I’ve messed everything up. I don’t need you to remind me.”

Feet shuffling on the floor; Artie on his way out. Harry drew in a shaky breath, and heard the water bubbling furiously on the cooker.

“He’s going to take over the Empire, isn’t he?”

“We owe the bank six hundred thousand pounds,” said Harry dully. “So not exactly.”

Artie scoffed. “That’s what he does. He’ll buy it from the bank for a song. We’ll be slinging burgers in less than a month. How’s that sit for tradition?”

Harry didn’t answer. The door opened, and Harry heard Artie go back down the stairs. Numbly, she put the ravioli in the water, and counted down the minutes until they were cooked, floating on the surface of the water.

She half expected the mood in the kitchen on her return to be sober, accusatory, quiet. But instead, Mary and Molly were laughing together, coming up with the most ridiculous and outlandish descriptions for the various new dishes that they could imagine. Artie dutifully wrote each one down as they imagined them. The music was turned up, but not quite enough to cover the hammers and the peculiar whine from a saw in the dining room, and Harry wondered how life had managed to continue as if the restaurant would always exist, when surely they all knew that the end was near.

“Oh, good,” said Mary, springing to her feet when she saw Harry approach with the bowl of ravioli. “I’m starving. Was it cheese or meat?”

“Should I be the least bit concerned that none of us actually remember what was in it before it was
“frozen?”

“That’s because none of us remember when it _was_ frozen,” said Molly.

“How old is it?” asked Artie, dubiously.

“Dinosaurs made it, I think,” said Molly.

“And Anderson took the day off,” said Artie mildly. “Well, let’s eat. What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger, and all that rot.”

Harry glanced at Artie, but he wasn’t looking at her. She didn’t think he meant it kindly – but perhaps he wasn’t thinking about it at all.

* 

Sherlock found John in the kitchen, rooting through the tea selection in the cupboard.

“John, I—”

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that your brother doesn’t actually _own_ any regular black tea,” said John. “Seeing as how he’s a poncy git.”

Sherlock couldn’t argue with that. “I wanted to take you to lunch.”

“Bit early for lunch.”

John hadn’t turned to look at him. He was still riffling through the packets of tea, the little jars of loose-leaf, all carefully labeled in Mycroft’s spectacularly neat handwriting with type and date purchased. Sherlock could just see John’s face in a quarter-profile, and even with that small sliver, he could tell that John was concentrating far harder than was truly necessary for the selection of tea.

He wondered what it meant that seeing John like this, cut off and separated, made him feel so stupid and queasy.

“We can pick up some black tea beforehand,” said Sherlock. “PG Tips, is that right? There’s a newsagent near the restaurant. I’m sure they’d have some. Or they’d know somewhere that does. There’s a Waitrose a bit further away, I’m sure they have a respectable selection of tea available.”

John’s mouth quirked. “Not a frequent customer at the local groceries, are you?”

“I don’t come here so often anymore,” admitted Sherlock, and John laughed as he put the tea away again.

“I don’t need tea,” said John, and he turned – _finally_ – and leaned against the counter. “Sherlock —”

Tension in his shoulders, fingers flexing in and out, a guarded look in his eyes, the pause after he said his name. John wasn’t just afraid of the answer – he was afraid of the _question_, of the reaction it would create, and Sherlock, seeing John afraid, became afraid of it, too.

He took a step forward and wrapped John up in his arms and kissed him, pressed their lips together, and was grateful when John clung to his shirt and returned the favor. Sherlock thought he could taste the relief in John’s mouth, that the question would remain unasked, and he wondered what it was, what Mycroft could have stirred up to ruin him now.
“Hey,” said John, reaching up to brush one of Sherlock’s curls out of his face.

“Are you hungry?” asked Sherlock.

“No.”

“Good.” Sherlock kissed him again, softer this time, and took John’s hands to pull him away from the counter, out of the kitchen, down the hall, up the stairs, small kisses and touches to ease the way and keep John focused on him, and not whatever had been worrying him before. Sherlock didn’t even give John a chance to look around the little bedroom at the top of the stairs; he pulled off John’s shirt and dropped it to the floor. He shoved down John’s trousers and pants and pushed him back to the bed so that he could pull them off his legs, along with his shoes and socks. Everything was dropped with a thud, and Sherlock stood back up to see John watching him with a glazed look in his eyes.

“You’re beautiful, you know,” said John quietly, and Sherlock, who had heard this all his life, been both grateful and ashamed of it in turns, was suddenly embarrassed. He quickly started to pull his shirt over his head – half to hide the blush from John, and half to just get naked faster than buttons might allow otherwise – and immediately became trapped, unable to pull his arms out of the tight cuffs, or the collar over his head.

John laughed, but it wasn’t cruel or mocking, and Sherlock felt his embarrassment ease into something a little more gentle, even though the heat in his cheeks grew more pronounced. He wanted to see John, watch the skin around his eyes crinkle with mirth, the smile widen into his cheeks. Sherlock struggled even harder, and only succeeded in choking himself.

“Stop,” said John, giggling, and Sherlock felt John’s hands between his skin and the fabric, carefully working to undo the offending buttons from the wrong side. As soon as Sherlock felt the button give way, he pulled the shirt over his head, and could only watch helplessly as John worked at the sleeves. John was still smiling, and when Sherlock’s hands were finally free of the fabric, he put them on either side of John’s face, framing the joy he saw there.

“John.”

He might have kept going, but John broke the eye contact, kissed Sherlock’s chest and then worked his way up his breastbone until he’d reached the little hollow at the base of Sherlock’s throat. Sherlock’s breath caught; he gripped John’s shoulders and held tightly, and when John started to work his way back down, wasn’t entirely sure if John went of his own volition or if he’d pushed him to it.

He didn’t know, and the way John was kissing him didn’t seem to indicate that he minded either way. When John reached his cock, and kissed the base of it, Sherlock exhaled his breath in one long stream.

“Christ,” said Sherlock, and his legs wobbled. John held Sherlock by the hipbones, and steered him around to sit on the bed. “Christ, John.”

“We’ll miss lunch,” added John, with a bit of a cheeky grin, and Sherlock grabbed John by the
shoulders and tried to haul him up onto the bed with him.

“Fuck lunch,” said Sherlock.

John laughed and kissed him, one deep and quick and possessing kiss, and then pushed away so that Sherlock could scoot himself up on the bed.

“Shite,” said John suddenly. “I didn’t think – even if you had stored lube and condoms here, they’d be twenty years old, wouldn’t they?”

For a moment, Sherlock forgot he was meant to be a genius. “Buggering hell.”

John began to laugh again, and fell on his back next to Sherlock. “Well put.”

“I didn’t plan this very well,” admitted Sherlock.

“Sometimes I wonder how much you plan anything at all,” said John wryly, and he rolled over and rested his hand on Sherlock’s cock, already hard and aching. Sherlock closed his eyes.

“Shite.”

John pressed his lips to Sherlock’s clavicle. “Christ, I love it when you curse.”

“Bloody pissing – ah, John – sodding wanking – oh, Christ – bugger blimey blooming – I, ah…” Sherlock sucked in a breath as John’s hand began working faster on his cock; his eyes closed and he reached out with his hand blindly, landing somewhere on John’s body (shoulder, the bad one, high in the air to keep his weight off it). Sherlock tugged, and John half fell on him, his mouth covering Sherlock’s in a frantic, eager, sloppy kiss.

He came, hard, and John instantly pulled back from the kiss – not away, but enough that he was able to redirect the intenseness into something softer, and when Sherlock floated back to himself, John was still pressed next to him, both hands around his face now, kissing him gently on the lips.


Sherlock pulled John over, until the other man was lying on top of him, John’s hard cock pressed solidly against Sherlock’s softening one.

“Not fair,” murmured Sherlock.

“Well,” said John. “We’re going out to lunch, you said. And I’m willing to bet the newsagent stocks more than just tea.”

Sherlock chuckled, and pressed into the next kiss John gave him – less to kiss him than to assess.

John was quiet with his kisses, lazy and willing, relaxed and comfortable. There was none of the tension, none of the hesitation, nothing left of the John who’d stood in the kitchen, ready to ask a question that didn’t want answering.

Sherlock wondered what John had not wanted to know but was ready to ask anyway.

It would have had to be something horrible, something that might potentially end them in a way that the conclusion of filming would not.

Something Mycroft would have known about, at least in part.
Sherlock thought he might know already. If he were a smart man, he’d tell John immediately, make sure John knew absolutely everything, lay the cards on the table and see what happened. And wouldn’t it be better to end it now, a clean break, before either of them were hurt too badly?

All Sherlock had to do was ask.

Instead, he kissed John, and let John kiss him back. They smiled in between kisses, and worked their way under the blankets, wrapped themselves in each other’s arms, and only eventually remembered lunch again at all.

*

The restaurant was busy, even though they arrived rather late for lunch. John had gone in to put their names down, and when he returned to Sherlock, waiting on the pavement, he reported a half-hour wait for a table.

“Hmm,” said Sherlock, glancing inside. “I’m sure I could shorten that substantially…”

“No,” said John firmly. “You don’t get to abuse fame by screwing over the people who actually got here on time. And anyway, we can buy the tea while we wait.”

“Only tea?” asked Sherlock, and watched as John tried not to blush.

“Wait here,” said John, and walked quickly away. Sherlock wondered what John was thinking, wanting to do the shopping alone, but then, if Sherlock was recognizable enough that he could skip the queue when having lunch merely by showing his face, who knew what buying condoms in the local Boots with another man would actually do.

Tabloid fodder, no doubt. Not that Sherlock cared over-much, but he supposed John might. Lunch was one thing – lunch could be two friends having a chat, or even Sherlock showing John what a well-run restaurant was supposed to look like. Nothing untoward about it.

Condoms, on the other hand. And lube. Not much room for interpretation there.

Sherlock watched John disappear into the corner store, and then turned sharply and went into the restaurant. By the time John appeared again, he was sitting quite happily at a table, near enough to a window but not immediately at it. Pedestrians wouldn’t be able to see him unless they were looking very closely, but everyone in the restaurant was perfectly aware of his presence.

One other customer in particular, at the table closest to him, who could not take her eyes off him. Sherlock was half surprised she didn’t abandon her dining companions and offer to sit across from him, but he had made a show of telling the waitress that he was expecting company, mostly to fend her off. It worked – she didn’t advance, but she didn’t stop watching him, either. At least she didn’t pull out a mobile and snap a photo – although Sherlock half hoped she would, so that he could then be justifiably angry and annoyed and cut her into pieces in front of the dining room.

Which was probably why she didn’t, come to that. One thing about his fans, they weren’t stupid.

“Tosspot,” said John as he took off his coat and draped it over the back of his chair. “You really couldn’t wait fifteen minutes?”

“No,” said Sherlock. “How long does it take to buy tea anyway, John?”

“You’d be surprised,” said John wryly, and sat down opposite him. “Is this going to be one of those meals where I don’t need to open a menu?”
“You can if you like,” said Sherlock airily. “But I’ve already ordered our starters, and I have plans for the rest. You were taking so long, I thought you might have had to fly to India for the tea yourself.”

John rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Fine.” He rested his hand on the table, almost as if he’d wanted to reach across and take Sherlock’s hand, but was aware that everyone in the restaurant was watching them. Instead, he started to flip the cutlery in circles, letting it thump back on the table. “So.”

“Did you buy them?”

John glanced up. “Buy what?”

“The…not tea.”

John swallowed. “Oh. Yes. They’re in my pocket.”

Sherlock nodded. “Ah. All right.”

Silence fell over the table again.

“So,” said John, clearly trying to decide how he was going to say it. He wasn’t tense, Sherlock noted, but he was still turning the fork over and over, so he was clearly nervous. “Um. We’re going to…use them?”

“That would be the point of purchasing them,” said Sherlock.

John glanced to either side, still entirely too aware of the audience. More precisely, Sherlock’s Number One Fan, still paying far too much attention to the both of them, to the point that she’d dropped her napkin twice purely for the fun of leaning over to pick it up, which brought her that much closer to actually hearing what they said.

Sherlock decided he’d had enough of pretending to ignore her. When the girl dropped her napkin a third time, he leaned over so that his head was nearly next to hers.

“To answer your question,” he said smoothly, and watched her eyes widen in shock. “Soufflé dishes. We are discussing soufflé dishes. And no, your dining companion doesn’t think you’re the least bit attractive. I think you’re very nearly done with your lunch, aren’t you?”

The girl sat straight up, dropped her napkin next to her plate, and didn’t turn around again.

John didn’t say a word; he sat, subdued and thoughtful, until the waitress had brought them their bruschetta and tapenade. By then, the girl and her date had paid for their meals and left, rather quickly.

“Is this what life is like for you? Strangers trying to listen in on your conversations, asking for autographs and photos and all that?”

Sherlock tried to read him. It was surprisingly difficult: all he could tell was that John appeared to be considering things, very very carefully.

“It’s easier in London, if you can believe it,” said Sherlock. He put some of the food on John’s plate. “Celebrities or near-celebrities are a dime a dozen, and there’s an unspoken rule to ignore them. It’s only the tourists who can be rather rude, or when I try to go somewhere where I’m unexpected.”
“I can’t imagine. It must be miserable.”

Sherlock paused. “I never thought about it. It simply is.”

“But you have a house nearby. And you knew about this restaurant. I’d think you must come here often enough that you’re not remarkable anymore.”

“Not really,” said Sherlock. He paused. “What I’ve found with celebrity is that complete strangers end up knowing your name, your face, and maybe a little bit about your private life, which then gives them license to pretend as though they know you. And perhaps in a way, they do. They know the Sherlock Holmes who they see on television.”

“But that’s not you,” said John, shaking his head. “I’m not saying it’s an act – but you can’t tell me that half the people in this restaurant aren’t hoping that you’re going to go off on the chef about a misplaced basil leaf.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t I?”

“No,” said John.

“You sound very sure.”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“I…don’t know,” said John, almost surprised. “But I know you didn’t terrorize anyone to get this seat. You might have manipulated the hostess just by appearing and giving your name, but she didn’t look the least bit cowed when I came in, just very excited and anxious to please, so I don’t think you gave her a show of your dazzling wit and ability to deduce what she’d had for breakfast this morning.”

“Toast with butter,” said Sherlock. “There’s a very small grease stain on her shirt sleeve.”

“You see,” said John. “And she doesn’t look the least bit mortified. You could have swept right in here, done your act, and been given the best seat in the house – and then the entire staff would be tiptoeing around you for fear of incurring your wrath. But you didn’t. And they’re all calm and cool and probably giving better service all around than they’ve given in the last two weeks.”

Sherlock glanced at the servers scattered around the restaurant, and saw that John was right. They were watching him, to be sure, but they were moving between the other tables, constantly filling water glasses and checking on patrons and clearing away plates with an attentiveness that bordered on annoying.

He wondered, briefly, if John perhaps wasn’t better suited to managing than he had thought.

“Eat.”

John took a bite of the bruschetta. Sherlock watched him chew, the way he was clearly thinking about the ingredients and flavors and composition. He could easily imagine the cool softness of the tomatoes, a bit flavorless for being out of season, but compensated by the sharp garlic and the bite of pepper. The chunks of basil, giving it a fresh, clean sort of flavor, and the crunch of the toast with only the barest drizzle of olive oil to soften it. John swallowed with a bit of a smile, and it matched the smile he’d worn earlier that day, curled up in Sherlock’s bedroom, naked and pliant and covered in sex.
Sherlock swallowed, and was very glad that both his fan had disappeared, and that his napkin was on his lap.

“ Aren’t you going to have some?” asked John.

“ Not hungry,” Sherlock managed to say, his voice a bit high, but only barely so. He rested his chin on his hand, the better to cover his mouth so he could bite his lips in peace.

John, damn him for a bloody provocateur, took another bite of the bruschetta. He kept his eyes locked on Sherlock and chewed slowly, as if he was relishing the flavors released with every bite. His chest rose and fell as his jaw worked up and down, and Sherlock couldn’t take his eyes away from him. When John finally swallowed, his chest rising and falling with the motion, he let out a contented sigh, and Sherlock had to blink himself awake again.

“You,” he started to say, and then couldn’t think of a single word that adequately described his opinion of John in that moment.

John took another bite of the bruschetta, and leaned back in his chair. He looked very smug, and Sherlock let out a long hiss of breath, anticipating another show. John pretended not to notice.

John finished the toast, and then sat forward again. “ So,” he said, his tone perfectly even and calm again. Sherlock, on the other hand, was still half hard under the napkin. “ Have you ever…made soufflés before?”

“That depends on your definition of soufflés,” said Sherlock carefully. “ I’ve made…types of soufflés.”

“All right,” said John. “ Let’s say the type of soufflé we were discussing this morning.”

Sherlock resisted the urge to drop his hand onto his lap. “ The reverse, if one wishes to be precise.”

John nodded thoughtfully, and took up one of the dry bits of toast surrounding the tapenade. He scooped up the olives and popped it into his mouth, chewing. Sherlock couldn’t take his eyes off him.

John swallowed. “ Damn. I was hoping for…well, that one of us had made that particular recipe before. Eggs being tricky and all.”

“I’ve made soufflés,” said Sherlock. “ But I made them in the role you were proposing for yourself. With…ah…the same ingredients we had this morning.”

John leaned back in his chair and covered his face with his hand as he burst into barely repressed laughter. “ Oh, Christ. I can’t take much more of this conversation.”

“It’s a bit painful, yes.”

“The conversation, you mean.”

Sherlock kicked him under the table, and John giggled again. “ Luckily for you, I know a few things about eggs and how to handle them properly, without causing much distress for anyone’s soufflés. And we should probably table the discussion before we have dessert.”

“Oh God,” said John, his eyes widening. “ You ordered soufflés, didn’t you?”

Sherlock smiled, and leaned forward.
“Tell me,” he said, his voice low and sultry, and he was pleased to see John inch a bit closer in his chair. “What do you think they put in the tapenade?”

John stared at him, and then started to laugh again. Sherlock smiled, and just enjoyed the sound of it, before joining in.

* *

They ended up closing the restaurant, more because they couldn’t stop talking than anything else.

The chef came out to say hello, clearly nervous and dreading the intrusion, but Sherlock was perfectly pleasant to him, and when he mentioned the excess garlic in the tapenade and the lack of oregano in the chicken parm, he did so in such a way that the chef nodded enthusiastically, thrilled to have received any criticism at all. By then, there were only a few other people in the dining room, but Sherlock was well aware of John watching him, and he knew he didn’t need to show off anymore. Not with certain supplies in John’s pocket, anyway.

The upshot of all this, however, was that it was nearly four in the afternoon by the time they returned to the little cottage, and Sherlock could already feel his mobile in his pocket, distractingly silent since the flurry of texts from Lestrade that morning.

“You want to go back,” said John quietly, while they were still in the car, staring at the path leading toward the cottage.

“Not exactly,” said Sherlock. “But…”

John nodded. “No, I understand. It’s all right. It was a stolen day, we should be glad for what we got.”

He sounded a bit resigned, with a touch of bitter. Sherlock turned to look at him; John sat, facing forward, his hands resting open on his knees. Sherlock tried to think of what to say to make him smile again.

“I…I still want to make the soufflés.”

It worked, almost. John’s smile was fleeting, and he turned to face him. “Plenty of eggs in my kitchen.”

“I don’t even want to think about what that’s supposed to mean out of context,” said Sherlock, and he started the car again. John chuckled and sat back, relaxed again. Sherlock wondered how he could be so calm about any of this. He himself was trying not to picture John naked for any reason whatsoever, because the seat belt was in a prime place to promote chafing.

“Will you need to check in with anyone?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock, thinking of Lestrade. He had to have returned from London by now, and was probably pacing up a storm at the hotel. Of course, it was entirely possible that Lestrade was sitting on the highway leading back into Upper Brickely with a cricket bat, waiting to bash Sherlock’s head in.

“I should stop in and see Harry,” mused John. “Make sure everyone at the restaurant is all right.”

“No peeking,” Sherlock warned him.

“No,” said John. He grinned, but it was a bit forced. “Have to keep my surprise for the big reveal
tomorrow morning, don’t I?”

Sherlock didn’t answer. He wanted to reach over and touch John’s shoulder, his neck, his cheek, his hair, but instead he started to drive back down the gravel path and toward the highway.

They didn’t talk; the gravel was noisy, and John didn’t seem to be interested anyway. Sherlock thought about the instructions he’d left for Sally and the rest of the renovation crew; he wondered, not for the first time, what John would think about the changes in the dining room, the way he’d already taken the changes so far with a resigned air. But there was a difference between a menu and a room; a menu was changeable out of necessity, based on the seasons and the supply, the moods of a public who were always looking for the next best thing. And even John had admitted, in his own way, that perhaps the menu needed refreshing.

The dining room was another thing altogether.

“It’ll be all right,” said John once they reached the main road and talking became easier again.

“I know it will be,” said Sherlock, and they were quiet for the rest of the ride.
“You can drop me off here,” said John when they were within a block of the house on Baker Street. Sherlock glanced over at him. “If you want the car, that is.”

“You’re not going to the Empire?”

John paused. “I think I’d better not. I’m too curious not to look. I’ll ring Harry once I’m at home, but I have to think if disaster struck she’d have been texting me all along.”

Sherlock pulled over to the side of the road, and John got out, and then leaned down to look through the window. “I don’t suppose you have any ideas what to do about dinner?”

“Are you hungry?”

John smiled. “No.”

“Good,” said Sherlock, and pulled away.

It had been a very lucky day, all things told, Sherlock told himself as he drove to the hotel. He had managed a clean get-away, Lestrade hadn’t come after him with a pitchfork (yet), there had been the minor kerfuffle in finding Mycroft at the cottage, but he had been more or less easily avoided, and there’d been terrific sex by the campsite as a result, which had not been part of Sherlock’s original game plan. John had clearly been worried about something afterwards, but Sherlock had managed to distract him, and now….now it was time to make payment for his unscheduled day off.

Sherlock found a parking spot on the street opposite the hotel – perhaps his last bit of luck for the day – and headed inside. He went straight up to Lestrade’s room and knocked on the door.

Lestrade was in, if the light behind the eyepiece was any indication, and sure enough, it darkened as someone peered through. If the bang on the door – a head hitting itself, no doubt – was any clue, it was even Lestrade.

Lestrade opened the door, glared at Sherlock, and stood aside, motioning for Sherlock to come right on in, be his guest, stomp all over his heart while he was at it. Sherlock brushed past him and into the ugly little room, looking around a bit disdainfully.

“Mine is bigger,” he said.

“Well, we’re not all of us the talent,” snapped Lestrade.

“You could have said, I would have let you use mine. I’m sure this made no impression on Molly whatsoever.”

“Fuck off, Sherlock,” snapped Lestrade, and he crouched in front of the mini bar. “I have had a crap day so far, and you are the sole cause of it.”

Sherlock watched as Lestrade dumped the bottle of scotch into a glass. “They didn’t need me there. They don’t care about explanations or promises. They simply wanted to tell me to my face, in hopes that I would beg.”

Greg downed half the scotch, and slammed it back on the desk. “Yeah,” he admitted, and hung his head. “Well, they almost got it. I begged. I admit it – I begged, I pleaded, I made promises I know
you’d never keep in a thousand centuries, and fuck me, they knew it, and they’ve axed the show anyway."

Sherlock nodded, his face schooled into a neutral, unaffected expression. “Did they give a reason?”

“They claim ratings and dwindling advertisement revenue, and no one said a word about the Norbury Arms or Irene Adler, which makes me think that’s got more than a part in it.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” mused Sherlock. “Restaurants have closed before. They’ve never seemed to mind.”

“Yeah, but this one’s different, isn’t it? This one, the restaurant closed a month after you’ve been there, and all the footage we have can barely be used. It’s all you and Adler making eyes and snide remarks at each other, picking each other to pieces. It’s not a cooking show, it’s a lesson in sexual tension, and half the audience is going to be convinced the two of you were shagging like bunnies when the cameras were in the other direction.” Lestrade paused. “Were you?”

Sherlock straightened. “What do you think?”

“Didn’t think I’d get a straight answer.” Lestrade drank the remaining scotch. “I think she wanted to. I don’t think you did. Shag her, that is. You might have wanted to. You put on a good show of it, anyway. The crew was laying bets.”

“What did you bet?” asked Sherlock.

“You’re shagging Watson, aren’t you?”

Lestrade wasn’t half drunk now, asking the question. He stood tall, his back to the mini bar, his hand still around the empty glass. He looked entirely sober in a way that was utterly frightening, and Sherlock looked right back at him, unwilling to cower.

“Because you don’t act like you want it,” continued Lestrade. “Not in front of the cameras, not behind the cameras, not when the rest of us can see. And I’m 99% sure you weren’t shagging Irene, for all that you acted in front of the cameras. It was all for show, wasn’t it? But Watson – he’s not. He’s not anywhere on your menu of things to accomplish, is he, Sherlock? He’s the special order from the kitchen that you didn’t expect to have on your plate. Irene might have thrown you off your game, but John Watson – he’s gotten you to forget the game even existed. Don’t even bother to deny it.”

“There’s no game,” said Sherlock.

“No, there isn’t,” said Lestrade, angrier and angrier. “I told you Sherlock – this is serious. This is more than my job or Sally’s job or Anderson’s or anyone else’s whose name appears in your credits. There’s no game because we’re done. The show is cancelled. You lost.”

Lestrade turned away, and reached for the whiskey.

“When?” asked Sherlock.

“We can edit and air the shows we have already, including The Empire. They don’t even want to waste more film on the next two restaurants – their words, not mine. Guess they’ll just have to close without us. We’ll do the return trips in a month, as planned, but that’s it.”

Sherlock nodded. “I can tell the crew if you think it best.”
Lestrade nodded. “I’d appreciate that.”

“When would you like me to speak to them?”

“Wait until we’re in London. Give them a day or two to get their heads wrapped around it before we all have to start looking for work again.”

“Of course.” Sherlock started to button his coat again. “The studio – are they making an announcement?”

Lestrade laughed. “That’s the best part. They’re not. Not officially, anyway – they’re just going to let us wrap up and air the series, but they’ll never actually admit that there won’t be any more.”

Sherlock closed his eyes. “So it will appear as though I’m the one who no longer wishes to continue, making me into the villain.”

“When in fact, you’re blacklisted from any further projects. Yeah.”

Sherlock paused at the door. “Those in the industry will know. You won’t be hurting for work.”

“No,” said Lestrade, grimly.

Sherlock turned up the collar on his coat. “I…I’ll go.”

Lestrade glanced over at him, as if he’d expected to hear something else entirely. “Yeah,” he said finally. “I think you should.”

*

There were still lights on at the Empire; Sherlock parked the little blue car just outside and turned off the engine, but didn’t get out. He looked at the lights burning in the windows, the ghostly figure of someone moving behind the papered windows. Sweeping up the newly-renovated dining room, most likely, and he rested his nose on the steering wheel and let the thoughts click away in his head, until he was interrupted by a knock on the window.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Mrs Hudson, startled. Sherlock quickly lowered the window. “I thought you were John; it being his car.”

“He let me borrow it.”

“I can see that.” Mrs Hudson nodded at the Empire. “Tomorrow’s quite the big day, isn’t it? Everyone is so excited.”

“I’m sure.”

Mrs Hudson turned her gaze back on Sherlock. It was surprisingly piercing. “There’s something wrong, isn’t there?”

Sherlock couldn’t look at her. “No,” he said. “The Empire will be fine now, I think.”

“All very well, but I wasn’t talking about the restaurant,” said Mrs Hudson. “John’s heart and soul is in that restaurant. It means everything to him. He’d do anything for it.”

“Oh, piffle. John might love the Empire, but at the end of the day, it’s only a building with a few chairs and tables and a bit of food. They say Upper Brickley will starve the day I close my doors
for good, but do you really think my life will crumble the day I retire? You’re much more intelligent than to believe that, Mr Holmes. It’s not the restaurant that’s important to John – it’s the family he’s made through it. He won’t lose them if he should lose the restaurant.”

The lights in the dining room switched off; whoever was doing the last bit of sprucing up was done for the day. Whatever changes Sherlock had requested were complete.

“He inspires a great deal of loyalty in his staff, doesn’t he?”

“That’s what good people do,” said Mrs Hudson.

Sherlock nodded, once, and stepped out of the car. “Will you be here tomorrow for the grand reveal?”

Mrs Hudson tittered. “Oh, my. Yes. The whole town will be, I think. Quite a bit of excitement. I’ve been taking my herbal soothers all day.”

“In the morning, then, Mrs Hudson,” said Sherlock, and impulsively, he leaned over and gave her cheek a kiss. Mrs Hudson giggled, and held her cheek, and watched as he crossed the street to stand at the Empire’s front door, just as Sally Donovan came out of it.

“There you are, turned up like a bad penny,” sighed Sally. “Oh, you’re in a mess of trouble now.”

“Thank you, Sally,” said Sherlock flatly. “I’ve already spoken to Lestrade and received my demerits.”

“Hmph,” snorted Sally, and held the door open. “Come to check over our work now?”

“In a word, yes.”

Sherlock stepped inside the dining room.

His footsteps echoed on the laminate, but the sound was muffled a bit by the Afghan rugs hanging on either side of the room. The walls were painted a dove-grey, and the resulting lightness made the room appear much brighter and larger than it had been just the previous day. There were mirrors fixed in the corners, ornate ones with gilded frames, and here and there along the walls were small floating shelves, with a few assorted souvenirs from the extensive collection that had once lined the walls. The chairs and tables were simple wooden affairs, and Sherlock saw the new, brightly colored tablecloths folded neatly on each one, ready to be laid out for the next day’s opening.

Along the back wall, as promised, hung the four portraits of the Johns, James, and Hamish, now properly lit, still looking over their domain. Sherlock gazed into James’s face, and tried to find a bit of John in him.

“Not done quite yet,” said Sally. “I had Harry pick out what to put on the shelves – didn’t tell her what we were doing, exactly, but I thought she’d appreciate the input.”

Sherlock nodded absently, still looking at the portrait.

“Where did you spend the day, then?”

“Sussex.”

“Nice for some,” said Sally, and Sherlock ignored the bitter tone in her voice. “They’re still in the
kitchen, if you want to check in. Molly and Artie and Harry, that is.”

He didn’t. He really, really didn’t. He wasn’t sure if he’d see reprimands or relief on their faces. He didn’t want to see the former and didn’t feel as though he deserved the latter; the only face he really truly wanted to see was John’s, standing where he stood now, and Sherlock wasn’t entirely sure he deserved to see that, either.

“No,” said Sherlock, and walked back out of the dining room.

“That it, then?” called Sally.

Sherlock got into John’s car and started the engine.

“Tosser,” said Sally, and Sherlock drove away.

Sherlock parked the car at Baker Street, turned off the engine, but stayed seated, looking at the squat little house through the windshield. It reminded him a bit of John, in a funny way: small and inconsequential, until you knew what it was like on the inside. And on the inside: warm, comforting and comfortable, the sort of house you wanted to sit and spend time in, even when you had other places to be.

Sherlock couldn’t remember ever living anywhere that he hadn’t wanted to escape. Even the cottage in Sussex had been stifling as a boy; he’d race out first thing in the morning, spend his hours in the woods and school and looking over the cliffs to the sea, and Mycroft would have to go looking for him at the end of the day to drag him back by his collar.

But this little house – it had just been natural to come back here after filming every day. Sherlock hadn’t even thought about it, really, he’d just wrapped up and come here, as if the day wasn’t complete without a bit of time spent in John’s house.

The passenger door opened, and for a moment, Sherlock thought John had caught up with him. And then the man slipped into the seat next to Sherlock, and shut the door again.

Sherlock stiffened.

“Fantastic day,” said Jim Moriarty, stretching out his legs in front of him. “Do you know what I did today? Nah, of course you don’t. Made a few phone calls, had lunch with a few friends. Had a delicious sandwich, you’d probably approve. The bread was toasted just right.”

“Get out of my car.”

“Would, if I were in your car.”

“Get out of John’s car.”

“Oh, now, Sherlock, I’m hurt. Really. Here I am to have a nice little chat, and you’re throwing me to the pavement.”

“What do you want?”

“Oh, so many things. I really don’t know where to begin. And anyway, it’s not as though you’re Santa Claus; if I sit on your lap you’re hardly going to deliver my presents under the tree.”

Sherlock wrenched the keys out of the ignition and turned to open the door.

makes a grand entrance, doesn’t he, but when it’s time to leave, he just slips out the backdoor as quiet as you please, without a fuss.”

Sherlock’s blood went cold, and he slowly sat back in the car and closed the door again.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, low, and Jim laughed.

“Of course you do. My favorite part is that no one’s going to even bother to announce your departure from television. How long before your fans descend into a vapid, bitter mess?”

Sherlock gritted his teeth.

“I admit, taking you down wasn’t part of the original plan, but everything worked out so nicely, don’t you think?”

“I’m not down.”

“No, not yet. One day left of filming, one day left to shine. Ooo!” Jim clapped his hands together in mock glee. “Do you suppose you could pull such a lovely, tear-jerking performance tomorrow that the studios will sign you up for another year despite themselves? The redemption of the Empire, the redemption of John Watson, the redemption of Sherlock’s very soul? Assuming you have one.”

Sherlock turned to face Jim. The man continued to grin at him, and Sherlock wondered how he’d ever looked at this man and not realized what a little spider he was. Sherlock looked at him…and blinked.

Because nothing added up. Tailored suit, but not bespoke. Excellent cut, but two years old at least. Wrinkles in predictable patterns based on sitting at a desk for most of the day. No tan line, no visible piercings or tattoos. Hair cut some three weeks previously. Shaved that morning.

Enough connections to know that Restaurant Reconstructed was cancelled, that John Watson had liens on the Empire, and clearly motivation to use knowledge to his own advantage…but what?

Sherlock didn’t like not knowing. But he looked at Jim Moriarty, and had no idea who it was who looked back.

“Oh, look at that now,” said Jim softly, noting his confusion. “How boring. How ordinary. You used to be fantastic, you know. Give you a restaurant to fix, and watch you dance. And now…you’re nothing. Just another restaurant owner, looking out for his bottom line. You’re ordinary. You’re one of the plebeians now.”

Sherlock felt his blood boiling. He leaned over the gear shift, nose to nose with Jim Moriarty. “I might stand with the plebeians, but don’t think for one moment that I am one of them.”

Jim smiled; just a little smile, the barest hint of a smile. “Oh,” said Jim Moriarty. “Aren’t you? My mistake.”

Jim turned and opened the car door. “That’s me off then. Lovely evening, Sherlock. Enjoy your last day of filming tomorrow. I’ll be watching.”

The car door slammed behind Jim, hard enough to shake the car. Sherlock stared at the seat where Jim had sat, breathing, and waited until the man was well and truly gone before going inside.

*
John watched as Sherlock pulled away from the kerb, down the street and around the corner to his hotel and Lestrade. He wondered, idly, if Sherlock would stop by the restaurant for a peek; if he’d watch some of the footage Anderson had surely shot that day. There was little doubt that Sherlock would eventually make his way to Baker Street; John wondered how late he would be, and if there was any way he could delay going there himself. The idea of home, despite his words to Sherlock, seemed cold and somewhat alien, particularly if he found it empty and dark. The Empire was even worse, even full of people and the warm, comforting scent of something cooking.

But Harry would be wondering. John pulled the mobile from his pocket and rang her.

“John.” Harry sounded exhausted. “You fucking tosspot of a wanker.”

“Hello, Harry.”

“I hope you had an absolutely epic shag. Rose petals and singing woodland creatures and the whole lot.”

“Christ, Hare. Woodland creatures?”

“I know, that’s why I’m wishing on it for you.”

“Was today that awful?”

There was a pause; John could hear Harry swallowing something. “Not really, no. It went really well actually.”

John frowned. “I can’t tell if that’s sarcasm or alcohol.”

“Neither, it’s orange juice.”

“Harry—”

“I know, I’m surprised, too. It was all right, John. I mean, apart from my baby brother skipping out on us to have epic woodland-creature sex.”

“Harry…”

“We’re set for tomorrow,” said Harry. “Menu’s all done, food’s all prepped, I’ve checked and double-checked the veg and fruit order for tomorrow morning. We’re just finishing the clean-up now.”

John took a breath. “And the telly crew?”

“Oh, the bulk of them went home an hour ago; Sally’s just doing a bit of polishing, she says. She won’t let me help, I have to wait for the big reveal tomorrow morning, but she looks a damn sight pleased about it. You know, that smug little look she gets when she thinks she has one over on you.”

“Yeah, I know,” said John, and he let his breath out in relief. “Do you want me to come over?”

“Of course not, you great ponce, did I not just say we’re all right? Unless you want to rub my feet, I’m bloody spent.”

“Pass,” said John.

“Yeah, you’ve got other things to rub, haven’t you?”
“Harriet.”

“I really truly don’t want to know.”

“Then really, truly, don’t bring it up.”

“I’m regretting it already.” Another pause while Harry swallowed again. “So did himself whisk you off or have you been lying around in bed all day in your jammies?”

“Yes,” said John. “Without the jammies.”

“Oh, piss off,” said Harry.

John grinned. “Love you too, Hare.”

“See you in the morning, wanker,” said Harry, and hung up.

John watched the cars drive by, and felt freer than he had all day. The Empire, tucked up for the night, its kitchen overwhelmingly familiar, and its dining room…an unknown quantity, but in John’s mind, it was still the dark-paneled familiar room from childhood. Even if he knew that was no longer the case.

He wondered how long Sherlock would be with Lestrade. A while yet, he decided, and turned and went into the nearby grocery, thinking first to kill a little time, and then wondering what they’d make for dinner. Assuming they were ever actually hungry, of course. He wandered the aisles for a little while, let the various boxes and bottles float past and merge together, until he found himself standing in front of the seafood counter, staring at one of the tuna steaks.

“John,” said Mrs Hudson, clearly surprised to find him out of his usual element. “Here you are turned up like a bad penny; I’d have thought you wouldn’t want to be cooking anything for ages.”

“Bit barmy, yeah,” said John with a self-aware grin, and then thought of something. “Oh, Christ – I’m sorry, all the commotion the last few days hasn’t been bad for business, has it?”

Mrs Hudson waved it away. “No, nothing of the sort. If anything, there’s been more foot traffic, everyone wanting a bit of a peek in your windows. I doubled the number of biscuits baked today and sold every one.”

John laughed. “Good to hear.”

“Eye on the tuna, have you?”

“Yeah.” John turned back to look at it. “Lemon pepper, you think?”

“Mmm,” said Mrs Hudson thoughtfully, and John could hear the You could do better that went unsaid, and agreed. “There’s some lovely asparagus in the produce. Imported, but I had some last night and it was quite good.”

“Ta, Mrs H.” He thought, and tried to remember what they’d had for lunch. Ages ago. Several conversations ago. A packet of condoms ago. “Were there oranges?”

“Might have been.”

“Orange teriyaki marinade,” said John. “And a sesame seed glaze for the asparagus.”

“Lovely. When shall I come over?”
John grinned at her and, on pure impulse, kissed her cheek. “Another night, Mrs H. We’ll make a date of it.”

Mrs Hudson’s eyes brightened. “It’s so good to see you happy.”

John blinked, just a bit surprised. “Sorry?”

“It’s been so hard, watching you since you came home. I know it’s been much worse for you, but – just seeing you like this, John, with a smile on your face and that light in your eyes. I can’t remember the last time I saw you so happy.”

“Before the war,” said John.

“No,” said Mrs Hudson thoughtfully. “I think perhaps when you were small, before James passed on.”

John felt his back stiffen, just a little, and the memory came to him in such a flash – his grandfather in the Empire kitchen, cooking, and John standing on a stool beside him, mixing the mango and the peaches and the mint together in a large bowl. He’d felt it then, too, the great joyful expanse of his chest, as if the wonderful, loved feeling inside was much too great for his child-sized chest.

He felt it now, watching the fishmonger wrap up the tuna steaks that he’d make for Sherlock that night, before they went upstairs and spent one last night together before the end of everything. Strangely, the relative size of his chest didn’t seem to matter at all; he still felt too small in comparison.

“Mrs H,” said John, and couldn’t think how to continue.

But Mrs Hudson didn’t seem bothered. She patted his arm. “It’s so good to see,” she said again. “Give that Mr Holmes a kiss for me, dear.”

John loaded his basket with the tuna steaks, with imported asparagus and fresh garlic, the hot-house tomatoes that wouldn’t taste half as good as summer tomatoes but would do in a pinch. Parsley and oregano he had in the little herb garden in the kitchen window-box, and he knew there was a can of peaches in the cupboard which would still taste better than any of the rather dim specimens for sale.

The food was purchased, bagged, and then John found himself on the pavement again, looking up at the darkening sky.

Sherlock was waiting. Or at least on his way, and the thought of him, already at Baker Street, propelled John along, meandering slowly just to savor the thought of him already there, Baker Street warm and inviting. Not because Sherlock would have turned on the lights – he wouldn’t – or turned on the music – he wouldn’t. But simply because somewhere in the dark, quiet house, Sherlock was waiting. For him.

The little blue car was sitting in the drive already when John walked up, and he picked up the pace, strode to the door, and threw it open.

There was a light in the sitting room, music on the radio, and the scent of something that John couldn’t place. Sherlock’s coat hung on its peg, and his shoes sat under it.

“Sherlock!” called John as he closed the door behind him. “I’ve brought stuff for dinner.”

Sherlock popped his head out of the kitchen. “Good, because the state of your pantry is
unforgivable,” he said seriously, and John laughed as Sherlock pulled the bag away from him and began unpacking it on the table.

“Two fresh oranges, straight from Florida,” said Sherlock, pleased, and John toed off his shoes and hung his coat. “Cancelled out by the hot-house tomatoes. And…tuna steaks? John. You’re learning.”

“Berk,” said John as he crossed into the kitchen, and kissed Sherlock on the cheek. “That’s from Mrs Hudson.”

He half expected Sherlock to ask for a proper kiss, but the man was already preoccupied with the new purchases. “And asparagus. South America, of course.”

“Argentina, or somewhere equally distant. Brazil, maybe.”

“Where they are so well known for their asparagus. Learn to pay attention, John.”

“My mind was on other things,” said John lightly. “All well with Lestrade?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock, but didn’t elaborate, and John didn’t press. “And Harry?”

“She says the Empire’s put to bed for the night. Everything went swimmingly, apparently. Sally was walking about like a cat fed with cream.” John paused. “Did you stop by on your way home?”

“I did.”

“And…?” John couldn’t actually put it in words. Nor could he look at Sherlock, so he was caught off guard when the man’s hand touched the back of his neck, and turned him around for a kiss.

“You’ll see,” said Sherlock, and smiled at him before letting him go. He turned back to the groceries, sorting and shifting them in order to put them away.

“Wanker,” said John.

“Promises,” said Sherlock with a leer, and John laughed again. 

*Maybe this is what Mrs H meant,* he thought as the laughter bubbled up easily. He couldn’t remember laughing half this much in years.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “Because what I’d really like…”

Sherlock looked up and looked him over. Up and down, his eyes sweeping over John slowly. John stopped talking and smiled, holding his arms out, palms up, and let him finish. It didn’t feel creepy or seductive, though it probably ought to have felt one or the other.

“Ah,” said Sherlock, and John wondered what exactly he had discovered. Sherlock leaned in, brushed his lips over John’s. They were dry and warm, soft with the gentle pressure, and John reached up into the kiss, a smile ghosting over his features before Sherlock could pull his warmth away.

“Dinner could wait,” said John.

“It could,” agreed Sherlock, and kissed him again, his arms resting on the countertop on either side of John. It felt as if Sherlock might be settling in for a long snog – and then he pulled away, the wrapped tuna steaks in his hands. “But I find anticipation is an excellent ingredient in the bedroom.”
John laughed and rolled his eyes. “Tell me no one ever falls for that line.”

Sherlock smirked. “In that case – I think seared, since grilling is out. I’ll do the asparagus as well, and chop anything you’ll need for the salad if you assemble them.”

They set to work. John juiced the oranges while Sherlock washed the vegetables. The water splattered noisily in the little tin sink, making talk impossible. John didn’t seem to mind; Sherlock dropped a kiss on his shoulder when he handed him the washed garlic, and John turned his head, as if to reciprocate, but Sherlock moved quickly away. Best not to be distracted.

“Broil the asparagus whole, Chef, or chop it down?” Sherlock asked him, pulling out the cutting board, and John chuckled.

“Oh, whole, it looks better that way.”

“Baking sheets?”

“In the side cupboard.”

Sherlock brushed against John on his way to the baking sheets, and again on his way back. He arranged the asparagus, and then reached up above John to the spice jars, where the sesame seeds waited. John turned his head, just slightly, to rest against the heat of Sherlock’s shirt, and then moved away again, a bit of almost choreographed kitchen dance, and Sherlock smiled, before turning back to the vegetables.

The dance continued, the noise of knives and shuffling feet; the gasp of the flame from the oven and the creak of drawers and cabinets opening to reveal their tools. And in between, small moments where Sherlock would touch John’s back as he slipped behind, more of a “be still, heavy tray coming through,” and John would look up to smile at Sherlock, his eyes both appreciative and suggestive, and then look away before anything could be said that would preclude finishing their appointed tasks.

The tuna steaks were delicious, seared on the outside and nearly translucent pink on the inside. The peaches were brightly sweet and Mrs Hudson had been right about the asparagus. They ate and talked, and John told him about the meals in Afghanistan, the one time he’d been able to eat in one of the American canteens and had been amazed by what they were consuming on a regular basis, and how it’d flavored his dreams for a week solid afterward. Sherlock told a story about the first kitchen he’d worked in, where the owner became more and more obsessed with the anonymous little love notes that were left for him nearly every day, to the point that he confessed his undying love for the waitress he believed wrote them, in front of the entire staff, to the horror of his wife, the head chef.

“And had she?” asked John, riveted.

“Miss Scott? Hardly. She was left-handed, and the notes were written by a right-handed individual,” said Sherlock. “No, his embarrassment carried him clear to India. He exports tea now.”

They were done eating. John set his napkin on the table and reached for Sherlock’s plate. “I’ll do the washing up.”

Sherlock rested his hand on John’s arm. “No.”

“You can help,” said John, and Sherlock did. They washed and dried, without speaking, the only music the clink and clatter of the dishes, the chimes of the glassware, the thunder of the water
spilling into the sink. Sherlock’s breathing, which matched John’s own, slow and steady as a heartbeat. When he finished the last dish, and laid it to rest on the draining board, Sherlock was already behind him, his arms wrapped about John’s waist.

“Come to bed,” whispered Sherlock into his neck.

John stretched in his arms, comfortable. “All right.”

They went upstairs, Sherlock leading the way. Sherlock pulled him into his own bedroom, and John closed the door behind him. They both undressed; Sherlock folded his clothes neatly and placed them on the chair, and John threw his clothing in the laundry bin in the corner. They stepped together in one fluid motion, the natural extension of the dance they’d done in the kitchen earlier, so that neither one was sure who took the other in their arms, and they kissed, and did nothing but kiss, for the longest time. Quietly, assuredly, with growing confidence (as well as growing other things). John walked Sherlock back to the bed, and he fell on it, sitting with a bounce, and looked up at John with eyes wide open.

“John.”

John covered Sherlock’s mouth with his hand; he didn’t want to break the strange spell over them. It was a bit like being wrapped in a warm and soft blanket; John was only dimly aware of anything that happened beyond the little circle created by himself and Sherlock. The only air in the room was the air between them, the only light diffused and gentle.

John climbed up on the bed to straddle Sherlock’s legs, and kissed him, open-mouthed, letting his tongue caress Sherlock’s teeth and tongue and lips slowly. Sherlock’s hands rested on his hips, held him steady, pulled him close, and John felt Sherlock sinking back, until he was lying on the bed, angled, and John was over him, braced by his elbows. Sherlock’s thumbs moved in circles over John’s hipbones, pressing gently, and every time John breathed, his cock brushed up against Sherlock’s.

Slowly, he lowered himself, until he lay fully on Sherlock, who arched his back and stretched beneath him, and reached up with one long, lanky arm to pull John down for another deep kiss, and then nearly effortlessly flipped John onto his back with a wicked grin.

“Told you I could.”

John chuckled, and pushed himself up on his elbows as Sherlock moved down John’s body. “Sherlock…”

Sherlock was working his way down John’s chest, pressing open-mouthed against his skin. Not kisses, not exactly, just breathing in and breathing out, and when he pulled his mouth away, John’s skin was faintly damp, tingling in the cold air. When Sherlock reached his cock, John held his breath, and Sherlock glanced up at him, the devilish grin still in evidence, and kissed first the tip, then the shaft, then the base, before giving it one long swipe with his tongue and taking it all in.

John groaned, and watched, unable to tear his gaze away. Sherlock gave him three deep pulls into his mouth, before letting John’s cock fall back to his stomach.

“Do you want…?”

“All of it,” gasped John, not quite knowing what Sherlock asked, and not at all caring.

Sherlock crawled back up to the head of the bed, stretched out on John’s body, and kissed him again, before springing up to the little paper bag on the side-table, where John had left it. He threw
the lube to John, and fought with the cardboard package of condoms for a moment before successfully managing to extract a foil package.

“Bloody things,” he grumbled, and John giggled. “You aren’t helping.”

“Resting up,” said John cheekily, and Sherlock reached down to John’s cock and gave it a gentle squeeze, twisting his hand up as he went. John’s breath caught, and his head fell back against the pillows. A moment later, he heard the foil rip, and felt the strangely cool latex roll onto his already hard and spit-damp cock.

“I need,” started Sherlock, and then he paused. “I’m not sure how to do this.”

John laughed. “Have you ever admitted that about anything in your entire life?”

“No,” said Sherlock, and sounded completely disgruntled about it.

“On your hands and knees,” decided John, and they shifted on the mattress together until John sat next to Sherlock, who was breathing a bit heavily – though from desire or nerves, he wasn’t sure. John popped open the lube and squirted it onto his hand, rubbing the slickness between his fingers to warm it up.

“John…”

“Hold on, I’m coming.”

“No, John.”

John looked over at Sherlock, who looked back at him over his shoulder. His eyes were wide, but he was smiling, just a little. He opened his mouth, as if to say something, took a breath, and closed it again.

John smiled back. “I know.”

Sherlock was hot inside, hot and tight and the lube made him slippery-slick, and John feathered kisses on Sherlock’s spine as he tried to remember everything, set it all in memory and not forget. Sherlock sighed and flexed and shook beneath him, and John felt him shudder and tense and relax in turn, felt the beating pulse against his fingers, found the little silky little bit inside that when he moved his fingers against it, made Sherlock cry out, his head lifting and falling, shaking back and forth.

“Shh,” said John, and when it happened again, he slid his fingers out and turned Sherlock over, because more than anything in that moment, he wanted to see Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock lifted his legs up and pulled until John was between them, their heads together, breathing hard.

“Now,” said Sherlock.

“You’re not—”

“I am. Please.”

John kissed him, almost an apology, and pressed into him, carefully at first, slowly and in bits, until Sherlock growled under him, and then he was lost, pushing and pulling and pushing, until he was in, and they were both gasping. Sherlock caught his breath and held it, his eyes closed tight,
his fingers digging into John’s arms, and for a moment, John thought Sherlock might have been in pain.

And then he let out the air, in one full rush, and when his eyes opened again, the pupils were blown, and Sherlock reached up and kissed John hungrily, frantically, and John held him tightly and was moving within Sherlock before he even was really aware of it. Sherlock’s cock was hard between their bellies, and Sherlock gasped and keened in John’s mouth.

It went on forever, and was over too soon; Sherlock came as they kissed, and John followed within moments, and they kept kissing, holding each other, little presses of their lips against each other’s mouths and cheeks and noses and eyes, until John felt himself slipping, and he slid off Sherlock, and didn’t let go.

*

The house on Baker Street was quiet and dark. It smelled of warmth and comfort, of oranges and pepper and the tang of teriyaki. It smelled of something sharper, too, salt and musk and an underlying, cloying sweetness.

Upstairs, in the bedroom on the left, Sherlock Holmes lay awake, his head propped up on his hand. He was pressed against his companion, who lay on his stomach, arms wrapped around a pillow, eyes half closed. Sherlock stroked his back with his long fingers, walking up and down the bare skin on either side of his spine, counting out the vertebrae.

Index finger on L4: The Cross Keys. It had taken some thought, but Sherlock remembered it eventually. Gary and Billy, two men who could not have been more unsuitable for each other, and yet they fit together in such a way that Sherlock had trouble telling them apart even while filming. He’d actually tried to write their names on their foreheads, which sent Lestrade around the bend, because they hadn’t looked anything alike.

“Stop it,” Lestrade had said, but Sherlock hadn’t listened. “Why are you being such a berk to them?” Lestrade had demanded. “Don’t tell me you’re homophobic.”

“Please,” said Sherlock. “They’re idiots. That they’re also gay is inconsequential and bears no impact on the fact that they’re idiots. It’s just that usually, the idiocy is not doubled and reflected back on itself.”

Middle finger on L1: It was only now, three years on, that Sherlock thought he understood. Gary and Billy, the proprietor pair of a failing, ridiculous restaurant. Ordinary, boring, day-to-day running and cooking and squabbling and “we’re out of milk” and “stop snoring” and “what do you want for brekkie, love”. It was everything Sherlock hated about family-run restaurants.

It was exactly why he focused on his show. If he was making television, then he’d never become that.

Ring finger on T9: And now the show was cancelled.

Little finger on T5: And now he was in John’s house, in John’s bed, in John’s arms, in John’s restaurant. In John’s life.

Back to the beginning.

Index finger on T2: The Empire. Turned around, new, ready for its unveiling, for its second life, his rejuvenation, John’s renewal.
Middle finger on C7: John. Himself and John. Sherlock and John. Sherlock thought of them, in the kitchen, cooking together, a seamless unit, one ending where the other began. It had been so easy, so simple. Much like how Sherlock fit into John’s house, he fit snugly into John’s kitchen.

John, fitting into the cottage in Sussex as if he’d been there a thousand times before. Warm and laughing near the camp-site, starting the fire in the drawing room, clattering about the kitchen, kissing him in his childhood bedroom upstairs.

Sherlock couldn’t imagine the cottage now without John. He wondered if John would imagine the new Empire without Sherlock. His first glimpses of the dining room would be with Sherlock at his back, Sherlock pointing out the features, Sherlock nearby. They would be entwined together from the very start: the Empire’s redefinition would include Sherlock, always and forever. No escape.

Ring finger, C4: But that Sherlock didn’t exist anymore. The BBC had killed him when they axed the show. Who was he, if not Sherlock Holmes of Restaurant Reconstructed? Was he Sherlock Holmes of the Empire? Could he be that Sherlock Holmes?

Little finger, C2: Did he even want to be?

“I have secrets,” said Sherlock into the dark room, and beside him, John huffed.

“So do I.”

“You’re an open book,” said Sherlock dismissively. “You have every intention of taking the kedgeree off the menu and you think I don’t know.”

John turned his head in to look at Sherlock. “How did—?”


“I do. I don’t want you reading my every intention like a book,” complained John, and he turned away again.

“I meant I don’t mind about the kedgeree. Although if you’re going to drop any item, I would suggest the pizza.”

“I like the pizza.”

“You like Marmite,” said Sherlock, unable to hide the disgust, and John chuckled. Sherlock pressed his palm on the curve of John’s back and felt the chuckles reverberate through his bones. His fingers slid over to John’s side, searching, and John chuckled again.

“Tickles,” said John, squirming, and Sherlock let his hand rest against the skin.

John settled back down, shifting on the pillow until he was more comfortable, and Sherlock kept balance on the gently rocking bed. When John had settled and stilled again, Sherlock leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the back of John’s shoulder blade.

“Add the pilau to the menu.”

John was quiet. “Not exactly English fare.”

“No. But I think you should. It’s important to you.”

John turned, his body twisted under Sherlock’s arm until he was facing up. Sherlock waited patiently as John studied him.
“Why’s it important to you?” asked John finally, and Sherlock gave a half shrug. “No, don’t do that. You haven’t asked my opinion about any of the changes you’ve made to the menu. You haven’t even told me what you wanted done, you just went ahead and did it, with an audience so that if I really did object, I would have to either wait to do it in private, after the fact, or I’d have to make an arse of myself in front of the cameras. But - now you’re telling me you want me to put a family dish on the menu, and you’re doing it when no one else can see – oh, Christ. Anderson’s not behind the door or hanging out on the trellis, is he?”

Sherlock burst into laughter. “No, John.”

“Right.” John shifted again, and sat up in the bed. Sherlock fell onto his back, still smiling. “Why does my opinion suddenly count?”

“It always counted.”

“No, it didn’t.”

Sherlock didn’t answer. John stopped looking at him, and swung his legs out of the bed. “Molly’s already—”

“Not Molly,” said Sherlock. “You should make it. It’s your recipe.”

John glanced back at him. “I’m not a chef. I’m barely competent in my own kitchen.”

“You have more ability in a kitchen than you think. And pilau is largely made in advance; you could make it before service begins and then continue to work in the dining room with Mary. If that’s what you want to do, anyway. Harry might want the role back.”

“I don’t know what Harry wants,” said John.

Sherlock decided not to enlighten him – it wasn’t his place, at any rate. Harry would tell him – or not – on her own good time. “It should be you.”

John was quiet; Sherlock watched the muscles in his back ripple. “I’ll do it if you show Molly how to make your chicken and tomatoes.”

Sherlock frowned; it took a moment to remember. “The dish she served the first day. The one I remade for you that night.”

“Yes,” said John firmly. “Let me have that, anyway. And I’ll make the pilau for you.”

It was a trade. Leave it to John to make a trade – and Sherlock wondered if John wasn’t actually more perceptive than he’d initially believed. “All right,” said Sherlock, keeping his voice even, as if he didn’t care in the least what happened to the chicken and tomatoes.

“Good,” said John, and he turned and fell on Sherlock in one swift move, coming together in a kiss that was more to seal the deal than it was to comfort either of them, though it served both purposes very well.

*

In the morning, when John woke, the bed was empty beside him.

He rolled, and caught a whiff of Sherlock’s shampoo on the pillow, and smiled. The smile stayed on his face while he got out of the bed, tied the dressing gown around him, and headed downstairs.
He half expected to see Sherlock in the kitchen, but the room was dark. There was no note. Sherlock’s coat and shoes were gone; there was a coffee mug on the draining board and enough for one more cup in the pot.

But the only important thing Sherlock had left him to find was his recipe for Chicken and Tomatoes in the center of the kitchen table, secured with a carving knife standing straight up into the air.

By the time John pulled the knife from the table, chuckling, to read over the recipe, Sherlock was already in London.
Chapter Eighteen

Most people have no idea what a roller coaster the restaurant world can be, and I don’t know one chef – celebrity or not – who doesn’t have to get his hands dirty with the gritty realities of the business to stay afloat. I’m not talking about the manufactured theatrics you see on reality shows; I’m talking about the responsibility of dozens of livelihoods resting on your shoulders and the really fine line between profitability and disaster.

--Marcus Samuelsson

On Wednesday morning, Greg Lestrade found Sherlock in the BBC’s basement Viewing Room C. Sherlock looked as if he’d been waiting for a while, patiently looking straight ahead at the blank screen, tapping his fingers together near his chin, deep in calm and rational thought.

For a moment, Lestrade thought about turning right back around and watching the raw footage safe in his flat in Watford.

After a moment, he walked into the room as if Sherlock weren’t sitting there, and popped the DVD into the player at the front of the room. He went to sit a few seats away from Sherlock, and began to set up his notebook and pencil, ready to take notes.

“The filming went well, of course.”

Five years, and Sherlock had said and done plenty of worse things. This, for some reason, pushed Lestrade over the edge. It was all he could do not to march over, grab Sherlock by the hair, and drag him to the floor so he could kick him.

But Lestrade was a professional, and Sherlock was…well, Sherlock. And there were worse people Lestrade could work with, and he knew it, and probably would, since he wouldn’t be working with Sherlock anymore. Anger mixed with a heady sense of nostalgia didn’t sit well.

“You’re not supposed to be in here, you know. Your contract is cancelled and this is trespassing.”

“Then they shouldn’t have made the entry codes so bloody obvious,” replied Sherlock.

There were a thousand ways Lestrade could have responded. Fury, resentment, sorrow, righteous indignation. Most of the ways involved physically hurting Sherlock in some way. None of them were particularly appealing, because under all of them, Lestrade was just tired. Tired of Sherlock, tired of playing games, tired of everything.

Lestrade picked up the remote control to start the show.

The images flickered on the screen; below them were the rapidly moving numbers indicating the exact minute and second of the footage, as well as date, time, and a few other technical details which it was safe to ignore for the moment. Lestrade started scratching notes almost immediately, but Sherlock barely blinked.

Upper Brickley, the street outside the Empire, filled with people looking quite excited. Mrs Hudson was near the front of the pack, laughing with a few others. Lestrade recognized the faces, if not the names – the butcher from the market who delivered the chickens, the porter from the hotel where they’d stayed, even the thin-faced man with the sour expression, though he stood a bit away from the crowd, as if he wasn’t entirely sure he was pleased to be there.

The crowd shots took a while – long establishing shots of the mass of people; close-ups, where
Anderson had focused on one or two smiling and chatting happily. They’d only need about ten, maybe fifteen seconds of them, really. Lestrade marked numbers for the ones that he particularly liked, and glanced over at Sherlock, who hadn’t moved a muscle.

The scene changed to the Empire’s kitchen, and Lestrade heard Sherlock shift in his seat.

Molly, already quick at work, sautéing mushrooms in olive oil, and Artie, creating some kind of mischief in a bowl, right behind her. Mary, bouncing on her heels, clearly anxious for something to do, and unable to go into the dining room to do it.

And then there was John Watson, holding hands tightly with Harry, both of them looking somewhat anxious. The smile on John’s face seemed forced, if his inability to keep it steady was any indication.

The camera remained focused on John for an incredibly long time. He turned to Harry and spoke, and Harry answered. Their voices were lost in the noise of the kitchen; John had been wearing a mike, because it wasn’t as if they’d have the chance for looping later, but no one had turned it on yet. But even on film, Lestrade could see the same brightness in his eyes that he’d seen that morning when John came into the restaurant. The same questioning, searching look. John looked well, a bit different from any other manager he’d seen over the years. They had all faced the last day as a sort of hurdle before returning to a normal life. But John – John didn’t seem to take it as a hurdle at all, apart from his general inability to keep a straight face. He looked as if it were Christmas morning, and St Nick was behind the door.

Greg heard his own voice in the background. It ought to have been Sherlock – but Sherlock wasn’t there.

“Are you worried about what you’re going to find in the dining room?”

“A little,” said John, and he laughed, a bit self-conscious. “I mean – I’ve never seen the dining room any other way, than how it’s been. I…I don’t know what to expect now.”

“We think you’ll like it.”

“I hope so. I suppose if I don’t, it’s better footage.”

The laughter sounded real enough; Lestrade scratched down the time in his notebook, adding pre-reveal interview, and glanced back at Sherlock.

Sherlock still hadn’t moved, but he was entirely focused on John, almost leaning forward in his seat. But perhaps more telling were his hands – his fingertips were no longer pressed together, but the first two fingers on his hand had opened, just enough, to press full against his lips. Lestrade wasn’t sure if he was holding in his breath, or holding in something else entirely.

“Ready to go in?” said the off-screen Lestrade.

John glanced at Harry. “Yes,” he said, and pulled his shirt down, as if to make sure he looked his best, and for a moment, he looked almost hopeful, before the nervousness took over again.

The scene switched again – Anderson’s establishing shots of the dining room. It looked beautiful, clean and open and cheerful, with the sunlight streaming in through the windows, now free of their heavy curtains. Textured wallpaper, a sort of rippling wave pattern, lined the walls in a soft pearly grey, with newly framed antique-style maps of various places around the world, drawings of various British military dress from days gone by, and a few precious curios collected by the Watson clan over the years. A hat, a sword, a beautifully carved wooden doll.
And of course, along the back wall, the four portraits of the Watson forefathers, watching over it all.

The kitchen door opened, and John stepped in.

He took three steps into the room and stopped halfway into the fourth as the massive changes sunk in. For a moment, he simply stood, looked around him, carefully turning in place, so very slowly that it was obvious that he didn’t miss a single alteration, catalogued every map and every picture. His expression didn’t change from one of carefully choreographed impassivity. No emotion – not on his face, at least. His shoulders, his bearing, even his hands, were showing other things – nervousness, shock, surprise, and as he turned to see the portraits along the back wall….

John stopped when he saw the portraits. His shoulders relaxed, his hands squeezed into fists, and then opened as he closed his eyes and sighed. Relief.

He continued his inspection as if he’d never stopped at all, and when he finished his slow circuit, Lestrade spoke to him again.

“John. Say something.”

“I…I can’t,” he said. And he laughed, just a little, and reached up to wipe his eyes, quickly, before rubbing the back of his neck, as if that had been his intention all along.

The emotion was in his voice and not on his face. It wasn’t quite relief anymore. And it wasn’t quite disappointment – but it was close.

“It’s all right if you don’t like it,” said Lestrade gently, and John was quick to respond.

“No, I do. I actually really do. It’s…it’s great. It’s fantastic. I think it’s beautiful. I can’t wait to see it filled with people.”

“But…”

“And you kept the portraits – thanks. I mean, really – thanks. I was hoping.”

“Sherlock told you he would.”

“Yeah,” said John, and he turned his back to the camera, as if to look at the portraits again, but now his back slumped a little, for just a moment, before he straightened again. “Yeah. He did. Trustworthy sod that he is.”

In the viewing room, Lestrade turned to look at Sherlock.

Sherlock still had not moved. He watched John just as hungrily as John had looked for him in the dining room the day before. On the screen, the scene changed as Harry, then Molly and Artie and Mary, all piled into the dining room and were suitably dumbfounded and impressed. Molly had burst into tears and Mary had gone around and touched every table, and Artie had examined the maps and said they should put stickers on the places people had been, to which Mary had replied that they ought to remove the glass and use pushpins. Harry had stood in the center of the room and stared at the portraits along the back, without moving, for five minutes, and John had gone to stand next to her, and put his arm around her shoulders. There was a truly lovely long shot of the two of them, and Lestrade noted the time on his notebook, finally breaking his gaze from Sherlock.

“He was expecting something different,” said Sherlock.
“He was expecting you,” said Lestrade, unable to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

Sherlock sat up straighter. “You think I should have stayed.”

“Frankly, I don’t understand why you didn’t. It’s the last day of filming, you’re always there for one last look at the restaurant and to wish them well—”

“Repetitious,” said Sherlock. “I said my goodbyes on Sunday. It was even on film. I discussed the day’s plans with John the night before. There wasn’t much more I could show any of them, and thus no reason to return for only a few hours.”

“Bollocks. You gave up on them. You heard that the show was cancelled and you…you ran for the hills.”

“I resent the implication—”

“Do you know what I thought when you didn’t show up on Tuesday, Sherlock?” demanded Lestrade, turning fully to face the chef. “I thought you’d come into London to talk to the studio heads. I thought you were going to fight for your show. Tell them what utter wankers they are because it’s not your goddamn fault that Irene Adler or any of those tosspot managers couldn’t keep their restaurants going. That the viewership might be dropping but the interest in your show is only skyrocketing with sites like YouTube and Tumblr and that the forums dedicated to your show explode after every new episode. People don’t watch shows like this for the educational value; they watch for the train wreck.”

Sherlock lowered his hands and clutched the armrests. “You…you think I ran because of the show?”

“Well, you sure didn’t run because you love John Watson,” countered Lestrade dryly.

Sherlock laughed softly. “Is that what you think?”

Lestrade glanced at the screen: more footage of John now, talking to Mary, smiling, eyes bright with unshed tears.

“How am I, if I’m not Sherlock Holmes?” said Sherlock, and Lestrade’s eyes tracked back to Sherlock.

“What?”

“Has it possibly penetrated your thick skull that perhaps I don’t want to cater to the train wreck any longer, Gregory? Don’t you think I know what the studio executives think of me? I’m a one-trick pony to them – do you need a little livening up, a way to ensure an enraged public? Graham Norton not causing enough controversy this week? Then out comes Sherlock Holmes, who will undoubtedly take whatever target you throw at him and rip it to shreds for public amusement. Whenever the BBC is accused of being a bit too high-brow and boring, that’s when they call me. Here, have a Sherlock Holmes, he’ll show that we actually do care about the little people getting a bit ahead. Assuming they have the stamina to stand up to his tirade of truth.”

“That’s how you see it, is it?”

“That’s what I do, Lestrade. I tell people what they don’t want to realize they need to hear. And they never listen. It’s pointless and boring.”

“So that’s it? You’re bored, so you’re done?”
“I see no reason in continuing,” said Sherlock stiffly. “As you say, restaurants can close very well without our interference.”


“He wanted to,” said Sherlock. “I was there to destroy his childhood.”

“Yes, but he trusted you. And look how shabbily you treated him at the end.”

Lestrade picked up the remote and jumped ahead. The images on the screen shifted into high gear; people moving rapidly into the restaurant, taking their seats, Mary taking orders, Molly and Artie moving like a well-oiled machine, laughing silently and quickly when Artie ran into Molly with a tray of pizzas, splattering her jacket. Lestrade remembered it happening – in real time, Molly had almost cried, and then when Artie had been unable to talk for horror, she had burst into laughter instead, and it’d all been all right.

He had taken the memory of the way her hair had swung from her ponytail, and she had helped Artie pick up the pieces, giggles escaping every few minutes, and set it in a careful corner in his mind, and now it wouldn’t leave him.

But there – Lestrade slowed the footage down again, and slammed the remote onto Sherlock’s lap.

“There,” he snapped. “Watch that, and then tell me that none of this mattered.”

Lestrade left the room, the image on the screen frozen on John’s face. He knew what the first bit said; he didn’t need to see it again.

He didn’t know what was in the second bit, and he had no doubt that Sherlock would never tell him. Besides – for Lestrade, it wouldn’t matter anyway.

*

[Raw footage: The Empire dining room, busy and bustling. JOHN stands at the bar, watching with a small smile on his face. LESTRADE, off screen, interviews him.]

LESTRADE: So what do you really think?

JOHN: Really?

[He glances out at the full dining room again.]

JOHN, cont.: It’s brilliant. It really is. It’s everything I grew up with, distilled. The best bits. This is how I remember it, you know. It didn’t ever look like this, but I didn’t spend a lot of time in the dining room when I was little. I was always in the kitchen, you know, sitting at that table by the door doing my homework or watching my grandfather cook. Those are my best memories of the Empire, before he died. I’d watch him in the middle of all these gleaming, glistening stainless-steel towers, the trays and the white hats and coats, and hear the hiss and the steam of the oven, and I’d think, cor, I want to cook with him when I grow up. See, I didn’t think he’d ever die. I thought I’d just get bigger and then I’d be one of his cooks, too.

LESTRADE: When did he die?

JOHN: I was ten. He worked every day, you know. Six days a week here, and one day when the restaurant was still closed, and he was still here, because he liked the quiet. He got a lot of work
done, but he didn’t mind if we came along. I did, when I didn’t have school. And he’d let me cook with him, and those were the best days of my life.

[JOHN stops for a moment, and turns away. When he’s turned back again, his eyes are a little wet, but he’s still smiling.]

JOHN, cont.: The pilau in the back, that we had for lunch, that’s his. He started to show me how to cook that one the week before he died. It was on the menu his whole life; Dad took it off after he died, said it was too hard to keep it up. Sherlock asked me to put it back on.

LESTRADE: Oh, I had some of that. It was good.

JOHN: Thanks.

[JOHN bites his lip; there’s a bit of a pause.]

JOHN, cont.: This is what Harry’s been saying we should have done years ago. But I couldn’t hear her say it. I guess you can’t listen to your family sometimes. You have to hear it from someone else before the truth becomes real to you.

LESTRADE: That’s one way of putting it, yeah. So you’re glad you had Sherlock come here?

JOHN: Glad?

[JOHN appears to think about it.]

JOHN, cont.: Yes. And no, a little bit. I mean, this isn’t the Empire I knew as I kid. But this isn’t the country I knew as a kid, either. What’s that quote, when you grow up you put away childish things? I suppose I never put away my memories of the Empire as being a sort of a safe haven for me. I kept going into the kitchen expecting to see my grandfather at the stove, or into the manager’s office thinking I’d see my dad sitting at the desk. But they’ve been dead for years, and I’ve been away, and I forgot that the Empire and the world changed while I was off trying to protect it, to carry on the legacy my grandfathers left for me. They’re supposed to change, you know? Nothing’s meant to stay the same. And I think we know that, instinctively. Maybe that’s why we sometimes cling to things we should discard.

LESTRADE: The Empire’s décor, you mean.

JOHN: Yeah, but not just that. Everything the Empire stood for – the restaurant, not the whole sun-never-sets thing. I’m not trying to make a political statement, I’m just a bloke who owns a restaurant, what the hell do I know? Change hurts, but it’s good for you. You’d be amazed how quick a body can get used to a new routine. Look at Mary, she’s already so used to the new dining room, you’d never realize it was new. Look at Artie, taking to cooking like he was born to it. Look at me, even – three days of going home to find someone waiting for me, and now…

[JOHN trails off.]

LESTRADE: Now?

JOHN: He’s not here, is he?

LESTRADE: Called back to the studio.

JOHN: He didn’t….everything all right?
LESTRADE: Yes, I’m sure it is.

JOHN: All right. Would have liked a chance to talk to him again, that’s all.

LESTRADE: He’ll see the footage, you know.

JOHN: Him and half the country!

LESTRADE: Tell you what. I can set something up, let you send him a message. We won’t use it. I won’t even watch.

JOHN: …Yeah. Yeah, that’d be good, thanks.

[Cut to: HARRY’s upstairs flat. The camera is pointed at the sofa, and there’s a great deal of noise, as if someone is messing with the camera, getting it focused and ready to go. And then a figure walks past the camera, into view. It’s not JOHN.]

HARRY: Hello, Sherlock. Sorry, I know you probably thought John was going to say something, but there’s a bit of a crisis downstairs – Artie dropped four of the dessert pies so it’s back to Eton mess again, and John had to run out for whipping cream. Lestrade’s anxious to beat the traffic home, so I told him I’d have a bit of a word with you. On film, of course, since you’re too much of a wanker to stay here and face us yourselves.

[She says it without venom. She even smiles.]

HARRY, cont.: So. I think I should apologize, first. I was a bit…well, I wasn’t quite pissed that night you came up here when you first arrived, but I wasn’t sober either, or I wouldn’t have told you everything that I did about the loan and how much we owe the bank. And I’m sorry I put all that on your shoulders, because that shouldn’t have been your problem, that was all ours. Mine. And expecting you to come in and fix it – well, that was asking for one more miracle from you, and it’s not as though you grant them indiscriminately. You make us work for them. You made us work for them. You didn’t just show us better, you showed us how to be better. That whole tale about teaching a man to fish and all that.

[She takes a breath.]

HARRY, cont.: I think we’re going to make it now. It’s going to be a close thing, don’t get me wrong, but I’ve been looking at the numbers and there’s a couple of other options that I need to discuss with John, but I think…we might be able to pay off the loan. And we’d never have been able to manage it if you hadn’t come and helped. I know you hear people telling you thanks all the time – it seems like the last five minutes of every show is exactly that, and you always look as if you’re walking through fire and can’t endure another minute of it, so I’m not going to subject you to hours of being grateful. I’m just going to tell you that the only reason we have a chance to fix the muddle I got us in is because you came here. So…yeah. That’s all.

[HARRY stands and walks to the camera.]

HARRY, cont.: John won’t get the chance to say it, so I will. Thank you, Sherlock Holmes.

[There’s a moment, and the screen goes black. There’s no more footage to be seen.]

* 

John hadn’t thanked him.
Sherlock had barely had the presence of mind to walk to the player, pop out the DVD, and put it in
its case.

It was the scene that had run through his head, those last few hours, the scene he’d been desperate
to avoid. Standing next to John at the doorway of the Empire, a dining room full of happy, hungry
people behind them. John grasps Sherlock’s hand in both of his, smiles, and says the words.

*Thank you, Sherlock, thank you so much, thank you, you've changed our lives around.*

Horrible.

John hadn’t thanked him.

Sherlock headed into the corridor, expecting to find Lestrade sitting on a chair, waiting.

Lestrade was nowhere to be found, and any other day, that would have been all right. At the
moment, however, Sherlock wanted something from him, and the idea of actually needing
information that only Lestrade could give him was making his skin itch.

Lestrade was not in his office. He was not in the cafeteria. He was not in the test kitchens. He was
not in the lavatories, which Sherlock was only able to determine by going in and frightening two of
the interns, who would very possibly harbor complexes about urinals for the next few months.

Sherlock had just determined that Lestrade was not in the building at all, when he finally spotted
him at the end of the corridor, coming in from the smoker’s alcove, and took after him.

“Oh, there you are,” said Lestrade mildly, when Sherlock grabbed his arm and spun him around.
“Did you lock the room when you left?”

“Why did you leave early?” Sherlock demanded.

“I promised John I wouldn’t listen to what he had to say,” said Lestrade, shaking off Sherlock’s
arm.

“No, not just now, yesterday in Upper Brickley. Why did you leave before John could leave his
message for me on the camera? You told Harry it was traffic but that’s completely false, traffic
would never have been so bad going back into London, so clearly you made the decision to leave
before John was able to say his piece.”

Lestrade frowned, and he pulled Sherlock by his sleeve. “I’m not having this discussion here,” he
said, and dragged Sherlock back into the smoker’s alcove, where a few other addicts were still at
it. Lestrade kept walking until they reached the other side of the car park. Sherlock shook
Lestrade’s hand off his sleeve and continued moving, pacing back and forth. He couldn’t keep still,
couldn’t look at Lestrade, could barely look at the cars surrounding them – they were too close.
Everything was too close. Everything was crowding him in and making him small and holding him
tight, hemming him in, and Sherlock half wished he had come back to London to get high, to just
let his mind expand until it popped. It would have been a relief.

“Look at you,” said Lestrade, wonderingly. “Not bored now, are you?”

“You left without letting John talk,” snapped Sherlock.

“What are you talking about?”

“It was Harry, not John. You left the camera running in the upper flat, didn’t you, thought John
would go up and say a few words, and then you could go off and deliver me a message. Except John didn’t go up to leave the message. Harry did. You never waited for John. *Five bloody minutes*, and you couldn’t wait for John to finish, you had to go racing back to London to beat the *traffic.**

“Christ,” groaned Lestrade. “I thought you hated the bits where the managers get all touchy-feely and thank you for your time and attention.”

“It’s not John’s *thank you* I wanted to hear!” shouted Sherlock, and took a deep breath as Lestrade looked him over.

“All right,” said Lestrade finally. “First of all, I am not your personal messenger service; if John Watson truly wants to talk to you, then he’ll bloody well pick up the phone and talk to you. Bad enough I used up five minutes of footage to let anyone tell you anything at all, particularly since the show’s being cancelled and the studio heads are going to be scrutinizing every second and will no doubt have my head for allowing the footage to be used as a fax machine.”

“A *fax* machine?”

“*Second of all,*” continued Lestrade, warming up and railroading right over Sherlock, “We’d spent three hours at the restaurant collecting footage, of which we’ll probably air only five minutes, which is a great deal more than we usually spend on a last-day, because we had to film everything and presume what you’d want to keep, and it’s surprisingly bloody hard to film Sherlock Holmes in a restaurant when _Sherlock Holmes is not in the bloody restaurant._ Believe it or not, Sherlock, we all have jobs and duties and things we needed to accomplish on returning to London, and staying in Upper Brickley even that extra hour meant we’d have to rush about to do them before the close of the day. And in the meantime we’re covering your arse because no one understood where you went, least of all *us,* and trying to play as if this happens all the time. Which thank God it won’t be, because if you’d pulled this kind of shite the first series, I would have bloody killed you during the second.

“And third of all – *you* were the one who decided to up and return to London without so much as a bloody *note.* Frankly, if I were John Watson, I wouldn’t have wanted to talk to you, I’d have wanted to punch you in the nose. He spent the entire morning *looking* for you, or did you not notice him on the footage scanning every face as if it might be yours? And there I was, not knowing where you were, if you were faffing off in London or maybe around the corner getting high, and him looking like a sad puppy who just lost his shoe.”

Sherlock’s frown deepened. His chest was still heaving, but now he looked away from Lestrade’s face, not entirely sure how to react to the accusation he saw there.

“Fuck,” said Lestrade. “Don’t you dare tell me – you *were?*”

“Were what?” snapped Sherlock.

Lestrade slumped against the nearest car. “You know, I had this absolutely barmy idea. That – I don’t know, that you were struck with a sense of actual responsibility to your crew. Or at least had half a heart for the two poor sods running the restaurants we’re giving a miss. But no, instead I came back and you were nowhere to be found, no one had seen hide nor hair of you. So for all I knew, you *were* high on cocaine somewhere. Christ, what a fool I was. Thinking you’d actually care about another person. You didn’t even care enough about John Watson to tell him the truth, did you?”

“Everything I told John was true.”
“Yeah, but left a few things out, didn’t you?”

“Omissions are not lies.”

“Good as.” He crossed his arms and glared at Sherlock. “Just funny, that’s all. You shag the bloke rotten and then up and leave him in the morning, without so much as a note, and then you accost me in the hall because I didn’t let him give you a tearful goodbye on camera? Seems an awful lot like sentiment, but I know you don’t do feelings, so…”

“I don’t,” snapped Sherlock, and he turned away.

“Does John Watson even matter to you, Sherlock? Because you matter to him.”

Sherlock pulled his coat closer around himself and started to walk back to the building. He tried to put John out of his mind – there was no point in it – but John was a persistent sort, even as a memory.

“Bloody fool that he is,” continued Lestrade, raising his voice to ensure that Sherlock heard it. “God, I hope he wasn’t going to do something so ridiculous as to thank you. Should have warned him that it’s not a good idea to put any sort of faith in Sherlock Holmes.”

The words were said easily, if with a certain amount of resignation. Sherlock stopped and let them settle on his shoulders for a moment before turning, letting his shoes scrape against the pavement.

“And yet, you still do it.”

Lestrade snorted. “Never.”

“No, you do.” Sherlock took a step closer. “You’re doing it even now. You’re still playing the game, aren’t you, Lestrade? That’s what this is, just a game.” Sherlock’s eyes narrowed as Lestrade gazed back at him, waiting. “That conversation with John, about his grandfather. And then Harry. That’s what this is about, isn’t it? It’s not about your job security at all. It’s about those last two restaurants.”

“Like hell it is,” said Lestrade quietly, without verve.

“No, it is,” insisted Sherlock, and he stepped even closer to Lestrade. “You watched the footage at least once before coming to find me. No, twice – once last night when you returned to London, and again this morning. You were taking notes today but only intermittently. Most of the time you were watching me, to see my reaction, which meant you knew exactly what was coming. Oh, yes, of course you would know in general, but not with such precision. You knew exactly where the scene with John would start – you and he had been talking for three minutes on film before the mark you’d set to start me in on it. There was no reason to show me that footage with John – you wanted me to hear his story, listen to his voice, and then listen to whatever Harry had to tell me.” Sherlock caught his breath. “This is about the last two restaurants.”

“Sally already cancelled them,” said Lestrade.

“No, she didn’t,” said Sherlock. He didn’t avert his gaze from Lestrade, and to Lestrade’s credit, he didn’t look away.

“No, she didn’t,” agreed Lestrade.

Sherlock studied Lestrade. “The show is cancelled.”
“Like you’ve ever given a toss for what the studio says. Like you really want to go back to sitting in your office in your poncy, pricey restaurants, watching people eat the food you make without really understanding what goes on behind the scenes. You think you’re bored on the road, Sherlock? You were never so bored on the road as you were when everything was perfect and running smoothly and everyone thought you were brilliant. You were bored the day I met you and this whole damn thing began, and you haven’t been bored for a moment since. And admit it – the thought of going back to that is scaring you shitless.”

Sherlock was quiet for a moment. “Even if we provide the footage, pay for the equipment ourselves—”

“Because the BBC has ever turned down free programming worth a few million quid?” Lestrade snorted. “And anyway, I haven’t lost all my privileges yet. And it’s not like any of us have anything better to do the next few weeks.”

Sherlock frowned. “Privileges?”

“You really think anyone was happy to see me without you in tow on Monday morning? I’m lucky they’re still letting me in the door. It’ll be a bloody miracle if they give me a show that doesn’t involve puppets, not in the next decade, anyway.”

“They wouldn’t punish you for something I did not do,” said Sherlock, and Lestrade snorted.

“Well, there it is. The stupidest thing ever uttered by Sherlock Holmes. I should put up one of those little blue circles.”

Sherlock stiffened. “This is extortion. You’re trying to guilt me into continuing this farce.”

“Like that would work. You’re a bloody machine. Put in your time, get your footage, get out. You don’t care for anyone or anything but yourself.”

Sherlock stiffened. “Half the restaurants we profile close within a year. Caring about them is hardly an advantage.”

“Of course not, machines can hardly care about people. You even played Irene Adler for a fool, didn’t you? Strung her along like you strung John Watson, I should have recognized that from the start. You didn’t even stay in Upper Brickley long enough to say goodbye to John. If that’s not cruel, I don’t know what is.”

Sherlock said nothing. There was nothing more to say – he turned, and left the car park, and this time, Lestrade didn’t call after him.

* *

It took him a day to decide that what he really needed was to go to Bristol. He didn’t particularly want to go. After all, going would be admitting that perhaps he was at fault, somehow, for the Norbury Arms closing. That maybe he’d missed something that the public wanted, overestimated the abilities of the kitchen staff, and underestimated the idiocy of Irene Adler when it came to following instructions.

The last was really the only certain thing: he’d underestimated Irene Adler, yes. She clearly did not understand what it took to run a successful restaurant. She was enormously clever, but even clever people failed once in a while.

Of course, the fact that Bristol was on the opposite side of the country from Upper Brickley had
nothing to do with anything.

Sherlock was in Bristol by noon. It was snowing, just a flurry, barely even touching the ground before it melted away. It was a quick walk from the train station to the Norbury Arms; he pretended not to see any of the other pedestrians giving him a second glance as he slid by them.

The Norbury Arms, of course, was closed, with the shades drawn. There was already a paper pasted to the window: “CLOSED. COMING SOON: PALACE OF SHOES”, followed by the fine print citing zone regulations and council permissions and hearings and all the rest of the necessary steps to turn one business into another.

Sherlock read the notice twice, and did not actually catalog any of it.

He walked around the block twice.

“I know plenty of very influential people who eat here regularly. I know exactly what they like, and I give it to them.”

It was such a ridiculous concept for a restaurant, run by an impossible woman who would not listen to reason. A food critic, of all things, who thought she knew what her customers wanted better than they did, and thus, a restaurant with no menu, because if there was a menu, people would be able to order from it.

“But isn’t that the point of going to a restaurant, to order food you want to eat?”

“No one really knows what they want to eat until I tell them. Pakistani is the new Indian. Portuguese is the new roasted chicken. Sushi is the new Thai which was the new Chinese. Why should we go through the charade of them picking a meal at all?”

But a concept which ought to have been dangerous was utterly predictable – the staff simply made whatever they felt like making, with little repetition and thus little chance to improve or build on prior successes. There was no chance to build a customer base with customer favorites – had there been any customers drawn in at all.

“This restaurant is my life. I’ll die before I let anyone else have it.”

And a manager who was so headstrong that she resisted every change Sherlock wanted to make. Every attempt to create a menu that would draw people in, would keep them coming back. That bloody – single-minded – infuriating – egotistical woman, who despite having called him herself, nonetheless thought of Sherlock as an imposition and a trial which must be borne. She fought him at every turn, pushed back on every suggestion, hounded his every waking moment, staying at his elbow and questioning everything, to the point that even the crew was completely convinced that there had been something between them from the start.

They weren’t entirely wrong.

“My battle dress,” she’d said silkily that first night, in the hotel room, when she slipped into his room wearing the clean-cut suit and the dark look in her eyes. She hadn’t touched him, hadn’t even given indication that she might have liked to, but she sat, watching him and eating him up with her eyes, leaning forward with her lips just parted, as if she might swallow him down at any moment.

And he played it right back, because playing along was more interesting than crushing her immediately. Because he was curious how far she’d take it - how far until they both found themselves either gouging each other’s eyes out with the off-set spatulas, or in bed.
She threw the new menus away; Sherlock went digging in the skip for them. She sabotaged the dinners as they headed out the door; Sherlock made sure to have an extra plate headed into the dining room behind her back. She fired her reasonably competent head chef when he expressed relief with having a menu; Sherlock stepped in and trained the sous.

In the end, there was a menu. And a staff who knew how to cook from it. And Sherlock had absolutely no doubt that she would throw it all away when he left, out of sheer pique.

“This is how I want you to remember me, Sherlock. As the woman who almost made you lose.” The last morning, before filming began, Irene had come to his hotel room to give it one last try. Sherlock hadn’t slept the night before, despite the exhaustion. Her hair was down, she wore a simple wrap dress and nothing underneath. One last attempt, Sherlock supposed, and hoped she wouldn’t undress before him in a desperate bid.

“Lose what?”

She stepped forward, and touched his chest with her perfectly manicured fingers. (Proof, quite positive, that she was never meant for the Work.) “This,” she said softly, and ran her fingers down his chest, just a few inches, above his heart. “Control. Power. Everything.”

He didn’t even dare breathe, for fear that his rising chest would give her the wrong impression. “You never came close.”

She held herself so still, looked up at him as if he’d admitted the opposite. “Didn’t I?”

Sherlock stopped again in front of the Norbury Arms. The lights were out, but the windows weren’t papered. He stepped closer to the glass, and peered through.

The leather-covered chairs and tables, just as he’d left them a month before. She hadn’t changed the décor, then. That was something.

He could see the hostess stand, the potted plants, the ornate screen that decorated the entryway. Quiet, intimate little tables tucked into mirror-lined corners, with curtains to draw closed for privacy. It was all a bit over the top, but for some reason had suited her and it was the only version of the restaurant upon which they could agree.

He hadn’t lost his heart to the woman. Of course not. He’d just lost his show to a room of frightened executives.

In a way, it almost didn’t matter if Irene had kept the menu or not – she’d still won in the end, same as she lost. She no longer had the Norbury Arms – but then he no longer had his show, so perhaps it evened the scales.

Except.

“Goodbye, Mr Holmes.”

And she closed the door, so softly behind her, that it was ten minutes before he realized he was alone in the cold hotel room. When she thanked him the next day, with the cameras rolling, he honestly thought she meant it.

The dining room: just as he’d left it. She really had tried.

Sherlock turned and walked back to the train station.
He boarded the train, ignored the other passengers, and when the train reached Paddington, boarded the tube and headed not for the BBC, but for the little flat in Watford.

He pounded on the door, waited fifteen seconds, and then pounded again.

Lestrade opened it after the fourth iteration. He looked tired, bitter, and a bit as if he’d come off a bender. Which he probably had, considering he was about to be out of work.

“All right,” said Sherlock, bitterly. “When do we rescue the chippy from the inevitable fate of a high sodium diet?”

Lestrade grinned.
Cooking is a way of sharing, even expressing love.

--Judith Jones

John did not dare sit down.

He had smiled and waved to Lestrade and his crew as they headed out of Upper Brickley on Tuesday. He spent the rest of the day in the dining room, greeting every customer and pouring every drink, clearing every table and replacing every dropped fork. He paused, once, to gulp down a glass of water, but otherwise stayed on his feet until the doors had closed and it was the end-of-lunch respite from cooking.

But while Mary hoovered and changed the tablecloths and folded napkins and separated cutlery, John disappeared into the deep freeze and went through the stock, noting what needed replacing and what needed discarding, and posting the note on the deep freeze door because there wasn’t time or space in the bin to handle it before Wednesday afternoon.

Dinner service found him on his feet again, but this time, he split the face time with Harry, and washed dishes the rest of it.

By then, he was almost grateful for the steamy little room, because at least the pots and pans and dishes and glasses didn’t ask about Sherlock, didn’t take his hand and say, “I love the menu, I can’t decide what to order!”

Or, “It’s so different and lovely!”

Or, “You must be so glad Sherlock Holmes picked you!”

Yes, thought John, while he smiled and shook their hands and laughed in all the appropriate places. He was so glad that Sherlock Holmes had picked him, chosen him out of a lineup and placed him on a shelf, and then left without a note and without a goodbye and without any indication of when he’d return.

At least there wasn’t an if – Sherlock would have to return in a few weeks in order to film the last five minutes of the show, to see how far they’d strayed from their initial success.

In the darker moments, John half thought that the reason Sherlock had let him fuck him that last night was because he knew perfectly well that he was going to fuck John over the following day.

Those were the very darkest moments, however, and John knew it was only the circular flow of the rationale that made it attractive. Sherlock hadn’t fucked John over; he’d simply flown the coop, escaped the sinking ship, disappeared into the night. He’d still left John the restaurant, and the restaurant….was doing fine.

Tuesday night, John stayed at the Empire and went through five decades of old menus, receipts, reviews, letters, resumes, orders, recipes, cooking magazines, trade magazines, catalogues. He worked until three in the morning, by which time the bin outside was full to bursting with papers and spoiled food, grease-stained cardboard and the broken remains of the soufflé dishes, and when
the rubbish men came through, shortly before the vegetable delivery at seven, John woke to their cursing and shouting as they carted it all away. The filing cabinets weren’t quite empty, but for the first time, there was room for the massive amounts of papers on the desk and the floor, and the room looked neat and clean. Well, neater and cleaner, which was still improvement.

He stretched, walked across the street to Mrs Hudson, who gave him coffee and scones with jam and clotted cream and a lecture he didn’t hear, and then he went back to the Empire and started washing vegetables.

On Wednesday, he washed dishes for the lunch service, shouted at the vegetable suppliers for forgetting to include tomatoes, went out to the grocery twice for supplies, talked to a journalist who wanted the inside scoop on being Sherlock’s guinea pig (John thought of half a dozen inappropriate replies before settling on “No comment”), called the supplier to add another case of red wine to the weekly drinks order, and started emptying the deep freeze of all the things they wouldn’t need any longer. He cleared a shelf before dinner began, and then showered in Harry’s upstairs flat and changed into the extra shirt he kept in the manager’s office and smiled at the customers as he served their drinks and cleared away their plates.

He said:

*Yes, we’re very proud of the menu we’re offering tonight. Try the kedgeree, it’s a favorite and not terribly large so you’ll leave room for dessert.*

*I know, the décor is fantastic, isn’t it? We love how bright and airy it is. The portraits really fit in well, don’t you think?*

*Yes. We’re very lucky. Sherlock Holmes was a great help.*

John locked the door after the last customer and switched off the lights in the dining room, and went to finish clearing out the deep freeze, and when he was done, he started on the shelves of cans and jars and dry goods.

“John.”

John heaved the bag of mayonnaise and pickled carrots into the skip; it landed with a crash and a sickeningly moist plop. He turned and saw Harry standing in the doorway, her robe pulled tight around her and her hair standing out on ends.

“John, it’s one in the morning – what the bloody hell are you doing?”

“Clearing out the dry goods.” John brushed by her to grab another bag – bread crumbs, he thought; the bag was much lighter.

“Yes, but at one in the morning?” Harry watched him throw the bag into the skip, where it landed with a slide.

“Has to go sometime. I called the removals company in the afternoon, they’re coming by first thing to pick it up.”

“John.” Harry reached out and grabbed John’s arm and spun him around to face her. “When was the last time you went home?”

“Cor, Harry—”

“No, seriously. You look like hell, and you smell like three-day-old garlic toast. How much sleep
did you get last night on the office floor, three or four hours?"

“Christ, Harry.”

“Go home.”

“I have work to do,” said John, and he shook Harry’s arm off him. Harry reached out and grabbed him again, holding on tightly.

“Not tonight.”

“For fuck’s sake, Hare,” snapped John, and he wrenched his arm and was surprised when he didn’t immediately break free. Harry’s grip was painful, it was so tight, and her fingers dug into his muscles. “Let go.”

“What, are you afraid the Empire’s going to disappear if you leave it? That the bank’s going to come and repossess if you take one bloody moment away from it?”

“No!”

“We’re fine, John, we’re going to be fine, we’re bringing in a couple thousand quid a night. People are excited when they leave, they’re happy and you should see Mary counting out her tips at the end of the service, she was practically in tears and says she’s going to quit and go to Disneyland.”

“I know we’re fine, I’ve been running the numbers every night.”

“Then what the fuck is your problem? Why don’t you want to go home?”

“Shite. You don’t want to go home, do you? Because he’s not there.”

John shook his arm again; this time, Harry let go. “Great. I’m that transparent. Thank you.”

“No, John—”

“No, I don’t want to go home!” shouted John. “Because for four nights running I’d go home and he’d be there, he’d be in the sitting room watching the daily footage or in the kitchen cooking dinner or upstairs just waiting for me, and you know what? I got to like it. I got to expect it. And that’s about the dumbest thing I could ever possibly have done because it wasn’t like he was ever going to stay. I mean, come on, Harry, think! He’s rich and he’s famous and he’s got more cooking talent in his little finger than any of us have put together, why the hell would he give it all up just so he can faff around in my house waiting for me to come home?”

“So, no, I don’t want to go home, because I don’t want to walk into a cold house and remember that a few days ago, he was in it. And I’ve got plenty of work to get done here so if you don’t mind I’ll get back to it. I’m done emptying the shelving; I’m sorry if the noise kept you up but you can go back to sleep now.”

Harry didn’t say anything. She pulled her robe tighter around her body, and looked at John quietly.

John looked back, heaving a little, and realized now that the confession was off his chest – never actually properly voiced, or even thought to himself – how exhausted he actually was.

“Come on,” said Harry, and she didn’t touch him, just turned and went up the back stairway to the flat upstairs, trusting that John would follow. He did, numbly, and Harry took him to the bedroom, and pushed him on the bed, and took off his shoes. She pulled back the covers and John fell onto the pillows. His eyes closed almost immediately.
“Love you,” whispered Harry as she tucked the blankets around him.

John was asleep before she’d even turned out the light.

* 

Explosions in the far off distance, but close enough to rattle the ground. He could feel the reverberations in his bones, as if he were on a roller coaster ascending and nearing the top, the kinetic energy of the upcoming fall building anticipation.

Three more meters. Two more meters. One.

John opened his eyes to sunlight streaming in through the window, the blanket wound around his legs, trapping him. Coming out of the nightmare, his heart ought to have been pounding, his skin should have been throbbing, his legs kicking out, trying to find release.

Instead, he breathed easily, if a little quickly. It took a moment to realize where he was, and then he sat up in the bed and looked around for a moment before glancing at his watch, shaking it, and looking at it again.

Half past two.

John laughed softly, not quite believing his watch. But the sunlight didn’t lie; it angled low across the room, the pale yellow of mid-afternoon, and John pulled his legs out of the tangle of blankets, and stretched. He felt grimy and twisted, though whether it was from sleeping so long or sleeping fully dressed, he didn’t know.

There was a pile of clothing on the chair across from the bed. His clothes – Harry must have gone to the house during the day and collected them for him. She’d even left a bottle of his own shampoo next to them as a hint. John picked up the bottle and went to shower.

He could let his mind go numb while the water pounded on his muscles, blistering hot and dependably steady. He scrubbed the shampoo into his scalp, took his time rinsing it back out again. He didn’t think of Sherlock – he very pointedly did not think about Sherlock.

Instead, he thought about the empty shelves in the freezer, the icy cold scent of stale air as he’d worked. The sweat he’d built up under the parka, the way his muscles had flexed and shifted under his skin. He felt sore where the hot water beat against his back, and John stretched up to touch the low ceiling in the shower stall. His joints popped, and John groaned and rolled his shoulders with relief.

He felt…good. Rested. A bit groggy still, but fourteen hours of sleep would do that to a body. The hot water and the steam woke him up, and John filled his lungs with the damp air. He stood under the spray and catalogued all the aches and pains until the pads on his fingers were wrinkled.

Dressed, still feeling warm and clean from the shower, John stepped out into the flat proper, and listened.

He could dimly hear it now, the hustle and bustle of the Empire closing up from the lunchtime service. The clatter of the dishes in the washroom, the crash of trays being stacked in the kitchen. Mary cheerfully whisking customers out of the front door, and Harry in the midst of it all, chivvying Artie along for some transgression while Artie half-heartedly tried to defend himself, in a jokey sort of manner that he intended to elicit a smile and not a reprimand.

The Empire, swimming along without him, while he slept upstairs. For a moment, John felt guilty.
He’d slept the day away, and they’d been depending on him…

*Crash.*

“Artie!” hissed Molly. “John’s still asleep. Can’t you be a *little* more careful?”

“Sorry, sorry,” said Artie, and John went to find his shoes and socks to join them, which was when he saw the items sitting on the kitchen table.

One, the framed recipe for pilau.

The other, in Sherlock’s handwriting, the recipe for chicken and tomatoes.

John thought of Harry going to the house on Baker Street, finding the recipes on the kitchen table with the carving knife, and wondered what she’d thought. Whatever it was, she’d brought the recipes with the clean clothes and shampoo, almost as if they were as much of a hint as the rest of his belongings.

John picked up Sherlock’s recipe and read over it again, carefully. There was another crash from downstairs, another set of reprimands (this time from Mary), and John folded the recipe and put it in his pocket. He found his coat on the sofa, and slipped out the front entrance while everyone was busy in the kitchen downstairs.

Afterwards, John was never sure if people had spoken to him while he shopped; he was even less sure if he had replied. Perhaps he’d managed a rational conversation, but he doubted it. He purchased the items on the recipe with a single-minded focus, not even stopping to consider if any of the ingredients were already in Harry’s cupboards, because he had the feeling they weren’t.

It was only back in Harry’s kitchen that he started to allow himself to think while he arranged his mise.

*Always take the time to arrange your mise, Johnny. Make sure you have what you need close to hand.*

John had never really cooked alone; even as an adult, he’d always had James looking over his shoulder, offering suggestions, reminding him to taste as he went. But now James had company. Sherlock was in the kitchen with him, but instead of looking over John’s shoulder, Sherlock lounged at the table, leaned against the far counter, wandered between the kitchen and the sofa, tossed oranges from hand to hand or tried to balance the salt shaker on his nose. He didn’t offer suggestions, he didn’t comment on John’s decisions. He was completely out of character from the egotistical toff John knew in real life. But he was still there, out of reach, on the periphery, and John found that even if he ignored him, he was still aware of him.

And so, John cooked, with company.

Remove the chicken from its packaging, rinse under cold water. Butterfly, pat dry. Sprinkle with salt, pepper, ground ginger. Heat the milk, toast the saffron, crumble into the warm milk, set aside. Slice the onions thin, grate the fresh ginger, chop the coriander.

What did he need? Not Sherlock Holmes, no matter how much he’d have liked to say so. Oh, he *wanted* him, John was willing to admit that. He’d shout it from the rooftops, even. He’d put it in bold letters at the top of the menus if he thought it’d do any good at all.

But John didn’t *need* him. John had no doubt that Sherlock didn’t need him, either.
Sherlock would be back in a few weeks for a few hours. He’d want to see the Empire open and thriving, the customers happy and the kitchen running smoothly. Nothing out of whack, everything freshly prepared, the deep freeze startlingly empty. John let himself wallow for a moment, think about Sherlock moving through the kitchen, cameras at his back, eyes brightly alert, looking for John, finding him, and his stern face breaking into a welcoming smile…and then shoved the image away.

He didn’t want Sherlock for a few stolen hours under the microscope of the camera lens. He wanted Sherlock cooking in his kitchen, the two of them moving together seamlessly, trading chef and sous back and forth. He wanted Sherlock sprawled across his sofa, watching cooking shows and shouting out Wrong whenever the host did something ridiculous. He wanted Sherlock to criticize the way he did the washing up, the type of flour he used in his pasta, the audacity of using tinned tomatoes over fresh.

And yes, he wanted Sherlock in his bed, naked and gasping. If he was going to be honest about it. But he didn’t need him.

Rinse the rice, set to drain. Preheat the oven, melt the butter, open the can of tinned tomatoes, start heating the sauté pan with oil.

What did he need? The Empire? Mary, Molly, Artie?

Harry. Good, selfless, kind, generous, flawed, desperate Harry, who had never wanted the Empire in the first place, not the same way John had wanted it. She’d grown up there, same as he had, but only for a little while. John remembered doing his homework at the kitchen table when he was young, but Harry had found her escape early on, gone to friends’ houses or pushed to do her work in the upstairs flat where James had lived. “It’s too noisy and hot in the kitchen,” she complained, and pointed to the importance of grades and the pressures of exams, and how her teachers were more and more demanding.

Their parents relented; Harry was seldom in the kitchen after that.

As a teenager, John had done the washing up, learned the business from the bottom up. Harry had waitressed for a little while, and then became too busy, taking photographs for the school newspaper, entering competitions, spending more time in the darkroom than the washroom. John came home smelling of garlic and onions; Harry smelled of bleach and fixer, a strange, unpalatable scent that clung to her fingers like the scent of garlic clung to John. He’d catch her sniffing her fingers in the morning sometimes, the same secret, contented smile he felt when he caught the scent of garlic on his own.

John wondered when everything had changed. It couldn’t have been when James had died and Hamish had taken over the Empire’s kitchen. But somehow, John had moved away from the restaurant, turned to doctoring, gone to university, taken his exams, and never really returned. And Harry…hadn’t. She’d set aside her camera and stepped into John’s place, as if the camera was just Harry sowing her wild oats, branching out a little as she determined if she really wanted something else all along.

Maybe not. John had always assumed. But John had come to depend on the idea of Harry running the Empire, because without Harry, the Empire wouldn’t run. There was no one left to run it, and more than anything, John wanted a world with the Empire in it. In the darkest days in Afghanistan, under the bright sun and the firefights, knowing that somewhere, the Empire’s kitchen was a flurry of steam and heat and shouting, scuffling feet and sizzling oil – knowing that everything and everyone he loved was safe had been a comfort. It’d been his rock.
Count out the cardamom pods, the cinnamon stick, measure out the sugar and salt and raisins and almonds. Start the chicken frying, start the spices, start the rice.

What did he need? The Empire open, or the idea of the Empire, something continuing on past death? His grandfather’s memory in the scent of ginger and tomatoes, the crackle of chicken skin browning under a broiler, the gentle fall of parsley as it finishes a dish?

Maybe. Wasn’t that the reason half the men in his company talked about their wives and girlfriends in the field, the last night they’d spent having eschewed the contraception, for the chance of leaving something behind if they didn’t return?

John didn’t have a wife or a girlfriend. He had the Empire, and Harry to run it, but businesses were ephemeral, and the Empire that existed downstairs wasn’t the Empire that James had left.

Then again, neither had it been the Empire Sherlock had found the week before.

Sauté the chicken until browned; set aside and brown the onions, the ginger, the tinned tomatoes. Boil off the water from the rice, add the saffron milk and put in the oven to bake.

Which led back to the question: what did John need?

Add the chicken back to the pan.

Which was an entirely different thing from what John wanted.

Turn the chicken as necessary to heat evenly.

He wanted Sherlock. He needed the Empire. He wanted Harry to run the Empire, but he wanted to…he needed to…

John washed the lime, sliced it thinly and set them aside. He pulled the rice from the oven and dug out the cardamom pods, the cinnamon sticks, and mounded it on the serving platter, topped it off with the chicken, the tomatoes and onions, and twisted the lime over each piece before sprinkling the entire plate with lime juice. He made sure everything was turned off, and headed downstairs.

The laughter and talk from the kitchen grew louder as he carried the platter down, and for a moment he stood in the doorway looking in and just watched them. Mary leaned at the chopping block, laughing, her arms twisted around each other. Molly stood at the stovetop, stirring something in a pot. Artie draped himself against the far counter, gesticulating wildly in the air, and Harry sat at the far table, under the window, smiling as she wrote something on paper.

The four of them, tightly-knit and relaxed, comfortable without him. Maybe…maybe he could have what he wanted. Maybe this was all he needed, just to know that they were there, always, going on the same as they ever did, without him. They didn’t need him, not in the same way he needed them.

And then Mary looked up, and the smile that broke across her already smiling face brought that quiet, hopeful thought back down to earth.

“John!” she exclaimed, and stood straight up.

“Me,” said John. “Turned up like a bad penny.”

“Never,” said Mary, and she pulled him by the hand into the kitchen. “Harry said you were sleeping, I hope we didn’t wake you.”
“Lunch was a bit noisy,” said Molly.

“It was an accident!” protested Artie.

“Oh, John!” exclaimed Mary. “You cooked.”

“I can, you know,” John told her, as he set the platter down on the chopping block.

“I hope that’s for us,” said Molly, glancing over her shoulder. “Because I don’t think this sauce is going to work the way the recipe claims it’s going to.”

“It’s Sherlock’s version of the Omani chicken,” said John.

Artie passed around the plates and forks, and Mary pushed a plate laden with the food into John’s hands.

“Eat,” she said, and a glass of wine appeared in his hand, put there by Molly.

“Drink,” said Molly.

“But be merry on your own time,” said Artie between swallows, and he took another bite of the chicken. “Cor, Boss, this is good. You angling for my job? ’Cause you could just fire me.”

“And give you the thrill of a lifetime?” said John. “Not bloody likely.”

“Harry, you have to try this,” called Mary, and Harry, still at the table with her paperwork, waved her away.

Molly returned to the chopping block and picked up a plate. “I’m sorry it didn’t end well.”

John held tightly to the plate in his hands, and glanced at Mary and Artie, who were talking to each other and hadn’t heard. “That obvious?”

“Yeah,” said Molly, and sucked in a breath. “It…it ended, didn’t it?”

“He left without saying goodbye, so yeah, I think so,” said John. He set the plate down; the food smelled good, and he hadn’t tasted so much that he was full, but he didn’t think he wanted another bite.

Molly didn’t say anything; she set her own plate back down on the chopping block, and leaned in quickly to kiss John’s cheek. Her hand lingered on his shoulder for balance, a warm and steady pressure, and then she joined in Mary and Artie’s conversation, a bit quieter, but eating no less enthusiastically.

John watched as they dug in, ravenous. Harry finished up her paperwork and came to stand next to John, who stood just a bit away from them.

“All right?” asked Harry quietly.


“It’s what I do,” said Harry, and she nodded to the meal. “Smells good.”

“Tastes good, too. Sherlock’s was better.”

Harry nodded absently. “Think we should put it on the menu?”
“He asked. He also said we should put the pilau on the menu.”

Harry took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “We’ve got the ingredients. Most of them. Might need more basmati, though.”

“I can run to the store.”

“Tomorrow,” decided Harry. “We’ll introduce them on Friday night.”

“John, this really is fantastic,” said Mary enthusiastically.

“Good, because Molly’s going to learn to cook it,” said John, and Molly smiled gamely at him.

“Can’t wait,” she said, and John half thought she meant it.

Chapter End Notes

Today’s recipe: Sherlock’s Chicken and Tomatoes with Saffron Rice
Chapter Twenty

The first weekend with the new menu and without Sherlock was a success. There was a steady stream of customers, and if the house wasn’t nearly as packed as it had been that first day, with cameras and crew, then it at least was respectably full. John finished out the days so exhausted that he barely had time to think, much less make the journey back to Baker Street; he slept on Harry’s sofa upstairs, and didn’t even mind the lumps.

Halfway through the Sunday afternoon service, Mary caught him in the kitchen.

“We'll need another waiter at this rate,” she said, gleefully, and John wondered how it was that she wasn’t dead on her feet.

“A waiter?”

Mary laughed and tugged on his arm. “You’re a peach, love, but you’re not here to deliver people’s water and breadsticks.”

“We don’t have breadsticks anymore.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“I can’t think about this right now,” said John, and plunged back into the role of happy host again.

Mary was right, he thought, as he went from table to table, pouring water and clearing plates. She moved twice as quickly as he did in the dining room, but that wasn’t just a function of age or ability: people wanted to talk to John. They wanted him to pull up a chair, sit down and have a gab. They offered him one of the drinks he delivered, they leaned forward conspiratorially for the intimate details of the week Sherlock had been there.

“Tell us,” they’d ask, eyes gleaming, “is he really that awful in person? Or is it all for show?”

“Both,” John would say, thinking of the Sherlock falling on the floor from his bedroom window, staring intently at the television in his sitting room. The seamless shifting in the kitchen from chef to lover.

And John would move on, not so much because there were other tables to clear (which there were), but because if he stood any longer, the details he divulged might become more intimate than anyone really wanted to hear.

The kitchen was a hot, clattering chaotic mess – but organized chaos, to an extent. The tendrils of Molly’s hair were plastered to her face by sweat or steam, but she was managing to keep up with the orders as they came in. Every time John went to collect more food, or to dump the dirty dishes into the sink where Harry was busily scrubbing away, the mood was lively, the conversation was quick and mostly centered on temperatures and times and how many eggs were left in the walk-in.

“…in Blackpool,” said Molly, and John’s ears pricked up of their own accord.

“Blimey, rotten time to be in Blackpool,” said Artie.
“Filming is now, they can’t wait until summer. Anyway, Greg says they’re in poor shape, they wouldn’t last two months.”

John walked faster through the kitchen with the plates, his mind suddenly full of warm beaches and the sound of seagulls; Sherlock in a skin-tight swimsuit, wet skin glistening in the sun.

_Oh, for…_

“I should be helping you,” said Harry when John dumped another load of dishes.

“Other way around,” said John.

Harry shook her head. “John, you’re the one carrying the load out there. I’m just in the back with the washing up.”

“Important work, too.”

“We should….” Harry trailed off, and busied herself with scrubbing at a particularly stubborn pan.

“Hire someone?” filled in John. “Mary was just saying so.”

“What’d you tell her?”

“I didn’t.”

Harry nodded, her lips thin. “Well. I guess we’ll have to talk about that sometime.”

“Tomorrow,” said John. “We can sit and go over the books tomorrow. I’m not going to do it now in the middle of Sunday lunch.”

“All right,” said Harry, and John went back into the kitchen.

“So worse off than us?” Artie was asking.

“Heaps,” said Molly. “Greg said they hadn’t even _tried_ to clean up their walk-ins; Sherlock found —”

“Molly, the soup?” John gently reminded her, and Molly threw up her hands with a groan.

“Sorry, sorry,” she apologized, and reached for one of the bowls. “Bit in the weeds today. I’ll catch up as soon as the chickens are done roasting.”

John leaned on the warming table. “You all right?”

“Absolutely knackered. I’m looking forward to tomorrow, I’ll tell you that much.”

John frowned. “Tomorrow?”

“Monday, boss!” shouted Artie from the chopping block. “Unless you’re going to make us come in and work like dogs.”

“No,” said John, and tried to think of how it was one week since he’d been kidnapped to Sussex, met Sherlock’s brother, seen Sherlock’s home.

Slept in his own bed.

“Excellent, I’ve got _plans_,” said Artie.
“Who’s throwing the party this time?” asked Molly as she put the soup in front of John.

“Me,” said Artie.

“How can you possibly have the energy for a party?”

“I’m young.”

Molly shook her head; she gave the spoon in her hand a jerk, and the whipped cream landed with a practiced plop on the top of the soup. She sprinkled the parsley over it, and John caught the strange mix of frantic calm in her eyes. “Are you all right back here, Molly?” asked John.

“I’m fine,” said Molly, eyes wide. “I told you, I’ll be out of the weeds once the chickens are out.”

“I meant…” John stood back up again. “Sorry. I don’t know what I meant.”

Molly gave him a quiet, supportive smile. “I can spare Harry, if you want a break.”

“What, only another three hours,” scoffed John, and went to deliver the soup.

Better to keep working flat out, John decided. John would have liked to sit and rest his head against the wall and close his eyes. But doing so would have meant thinking about Sherlock in Blackpool, saving another restaurant from certain doom, finding fault with another manager’s decisions and another cook’s abilities. That would have meant thinking about hiring more servers, or even a dishwasher or porter, the need to go through the finances in the morning with Harry, to determine what they were going to do about the loan.

John didn’t want to think about the loan. He didn’t want to think about hiring more staff when they were already on the edge. And most of all, he didn’t want to think about Sherlock in Blackpool, moving on as if the week spent in Upper Brickley had been nothing more than just another—

“John?”

John blinked; it took a moment to recognize Sarah’s voice, and he woke from his reverie to see her sitting at the table, a bit of a worried expression on her face.

“Sorry,” he said, and set the soup down in front of her. “This was yours, right?”

“You looked a million miles away there,” said Sarah. “All right?”

“Yeah, just…bit of a long weekend, that’s all.” John glanced at the other tables; they appeared to be all right for the moment. He crouched next to Sarah. “God, I hope I didn’t take your order and forget you were here.”

Sarah laughed. “I promise not to tell if you did. So it’s going well?”

“Think so.”

“I’m so glad. Although I suppose it means I don’t have a chance of hiring you back now.”

“I don’t know,” said John. “Harry might—”

“John,” said Sarah cautiously, and then shook her head.

John frowned. “What?”
“I really just wanted to check that you’re all right,” said Sarah, and laid a hand on his arm. “What with…well, Sherlock leaving.”

She stumbled over his name, and just that small stumble made the difference, reminded John of the conversation he’d had over a week ago in Sarah’s office.

Is it serious?

God, and he didn’t even know now how to answer that question, and he was a damn sight further along than the idiot who’d wandered the streets that day, trying to buy up vegetables. It felt like a thousand years since he’d sat with Sarah, talking about Sherlock Holmes.

“No idea,” said John. “I’ve been too busy to think, really.”

Sarah nodded, and squeezed his arm gently. “I’m here if you want to talk.”

“Bit noisy for conversation,” said John. “I don’t think the decorator took that into account.”

Sarah laughed, but her eyes were still sympathetic. “Well, you know where to find me. We’ll tell someone you’ve got a massive infection and it’ll take an hour or two for me to examine you.”

“Sarah Sawyer,” said John, raising his eyebrows. “And here I thought you didn’t approve of playing doctor.”

“Shut it, you,” said Sarah, and she popped him gently on the arm, smiling. “Or I’ll tell them it’s genital warts instead.”

“Much better, ta,” said John, and stood up to brush a kiss over Sarah’s cheek. He thought she watched him, as he went back into the routine of restaurant manager, but he managed to avert his gaze. He didn’t want to see Sarah looking at him, assessing him – pitying him.

No. Definitely not pitying. John thought he was only two steps away from doing that very well on his own.

*

“You have to go home sometime.”

Harry’s voice echoed in the empty kitchen. Mary and Molly and Artie had long since gone home, exhausted but happier than he remembered seeing any of them. John had spent the last half hour of service, when things were slow enough that Mary could handle the dining room on her own, to work at the accounting long enough to write their paychecks. That might have accounted for the smiles they’d worn as they left, but John didn’t think so. The smiles had been there before he’d handed the paychecks out.

“We need to restock baking supplies,” said John, without looking up from the price list.

“John,” said Harry gently. “I know you were looking at the accounting.”

John sighed, and set down the papers. Harry slid into the seat opposite him.

“Well?” Harry prompted. “Go on. Give me the worst.”

“Not worst, not exactly. Just…we’re not completely in the clear yet.”

“Tell me we’re at least breaking even on a nightly basis.”
John shook his head. “Hare, it’d take a month or two of nights like the last three to make up for the months where nothing was coming in. I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

Harry nodded, and didn’t seem the least bit insulted. She could have been; the Empire at its worst had been under her watch, after all. “Here’s the question, though. Do you think we can sustain it? This level of service, this level of income. If we didn’t owe our lives to the bank already, do you think we’d be okay?”

“It’s a moot question—”

“It’s not a moot question. Do you think we could make it?”

“Yes,” said John frankly.

“Then that’s what we do,” said Harry. “We go to another bank, we get a loan from them with more reasonable terms, we pay off the loan to Lloyds.”

“Harry, we’re never going to be able to get another loan. Our credit is shot and we don’t have anything for collateral…”

“We’ve got the restaurant.”

“No, Lloyds TSB has the restaurant.”

“No after we pay them off. John.” Harry leaned forward and tapped her finger on the desk angrily. “What’s wrong with you? Three weeks ago, you were willing to make the absolutely ridiculous move of making us the laughing stock of national television by putting us in the hands of Sherlock Holmes, a man who was surely going to rip us from limb to limb for pure entertainment value. And now you’re ready to throw in the towel without even looking at your options?”

“We don’t have any options, Harry.”

Harry stared at him, her finger still poised on the desk. John glanced at her once, saw the fury in her eyes, and turned back to the books.

“Fuck that,” said Harry, her voice full of barely repressed anger. “You….sodding coward.”

John huffed. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me! You might have invaded Afghanistan but you’re nothing but a coward.”

“Just because I’m trying to be sensible and realistic about our situation—”

“Sensible! When in your entire fucking life have you ever been sensible, Johnny? When in the last month have you been sensible? Because a sensible man would have said, ‘No, wait, I won’t put my life in Sherlock Holmes’s hands because he’s got a bloody awful track record when it comes to actually rescuing restaurants’. A sensible man would have said, ‘No, thanks for the dinner invite, Sherlock, but I really need to stay here and work with my crew a little more’. A sensible man wouldn’t have run off on the last full day of filming to go have sex with the one man who might have actually saved us – and you know what? Your attempt to seduce him obviously didn’t work, because the sensible man in the relationship ran off to London the next day without so much as a by-your-leave! Sensible is the one thing you haven’t been in three weeks, so don’t you dare start being bloody sensible now, because frankly, I don’t think you know how!”

The phone had hit the wall before John realized he’d thrown it. It let out a crash and an ear-
blistering *brinnng* as it broke and clattered to the ground. He stared at the pieces on the floor, felt the pounding of his heart in his ears, heard Harry breathing hard by the door.

The ringing faded, and the room fell still. John stared at the phone, thought about James making numerous calls on it, talking to other chefs, talking to suppliers. Hamish, doing the same years later. John would call the restaurant when he was away at school, talk to his dad for a few minutes in between the lunch and dinner rushes, and he’d picture him sitting at the desk, the reliable black receiver at his ear.

When he’d been small, John wanted to sit behind the desk and make calls from that phone. He’d gotten to do it, once in a while. Not often enough, really, as the internet took over.

“I’m the coward, eh?” said John slowly, staring at the phone. “You should talk, Harry. You never wanted this. You think I don’t know, but I do. You think my earliest memories are of watching Granddad in the kitchen? They’re not. They’re of you, trying to get out of it. Joining every activity and every club you could find, just to have an excuse not to be here. To find something you loved more. Well, you did, or at least you made a play of it. And then…what, Harry? Why’d you stop? What made you stop taking photographs? What was so horrible that you had to run back here to hide behind the bar and drink your life away? You think I’m a coward? It’s only because you’d know one when you saw one.”

“Piss off,” said Harry, but there wasn’t any venom in it. Just a sort of tired, weary resignation.

“So here we are,” said John, and he sat down on the chair again. “Two cowards in a failing restaurant. Tell me, Harry, have either of us done anything successful in our entire lives? Is there anything we can point to and say, ‘That. I did that, and I’m proud of it’?”

Harry pushed her hands against the desk, head bowed. “I made Clara laugh once. It was a bloody awful joke, but she laughed like it was the funniest thing she’d ever heard. She kissed me, after.”

John nodded slowly. It wasn’t enough, but it was something. He thought of medical school, correct diagnoses, the day he signed up for the Army, the gunfire and the bombs of Afghanistan.

“I made Sherlock dinner.”

Harry looked up. “He ate it?”

“The whole thing.”

“Bloody hell, there’s a miracle for you,” said Harry, and she sat down. “There was a car accident.”

John looked up; Harry wasn’t looking at him. She appeared to focus on the corner of the desk; her fingers twisted on the wood, as if making intricate bits of lace. “Awful one, one of those huge lorries and a few passenger cars, right in the center of London. Couple of buses, too. I had my camera and my press credentials, and I just sort of slid into action. Put the camera up and saw the whole thing through the lens, didn’t take it down for ages. Ambulances and police cars and fire engines – everything. Took photos of it all, didn’t even see what I photographed.”

Her voice was flat, even, dull. John reached for her hand; she didn’t take it. She was too lost in the story, in the memory.

“It wasn’t until later, processing everything, looking at the contact sheets. Not double-deckers. Not even tourist buses. School buses, full of kids. Little ones, on a field trip to London for the day.”

Harry voice caught. John leaned across the desk and grabbed her hand, and her fingers squeezed
“Half of them were dead and I didn’t even know it.”

Harry broke, doubled over to her knees, and John had to scramble around the desk to wrap his arms around her as she sobbed. He kissed her head, her cheek, her shoulder. Every part he could reach, he touched with his lips and he kept his arms around her, holding her close, rocking her gently, saying nothing. There was nothing to say, and he knew it all too well.

The sobs subsided. John pressed his lips into Harry’s hair again.

“You get into a rhythm,” said John slowly. “You stop seeing people as people, you see them as figures. The shalwar kameez with the fancy lacing. The burqua with the mended tear on the left-hand side. This one’s beard is shot with grey, that one has enough space for a suicide vest underneath. You forget they wake up same as you, put on their clothes same as you. Go out, try to get the shopping done, pray they’re not in the wrong market at the wrong time today. Thank God or Allah or whoever when they’re home again, when the sun sets and they’re still alive. Horror becomes routine. That’s the worst.”

Harry swallowed, and burrowed her face into John’s chest for a moment. She took a deep, ragged breath, and clung to him tightly, before letting go and sitting up.

“Sorry,” she said, wiping her eyes. “I shouldn’t have…”

“You were what, twenty?”

Harry nodded. “I thought – if I stayed with it, I’d always lose myself. You know the pictures you see of war, the ones with the kids? The little girl running down the road in Vietnam, naked and screaming, and I thought, I don’t want to be that person, who takes the photo, and doesn’t try to help. How could I look at myself in the mirror? How can you possibly be fully human, and still take photographs that make someone want to cry?”

Harry sniffs, and wiped at her eyes again. “Maybe that makes me a coward. But at least if I’m a coward, I’m still human.”

“Not a bad thing to be,” said John. He reached for her hand. “I never thought of you as a coward, you know. I was just…I was angry.”

Harry shoved at his shoulder. “I’m angry at you.”

“Me?”

“Do you want this restaurant?” Harry demanded. Her eyes were still red, but her mouth had stopped trembling, and somehow, Harry wasn’t the deeply fearful and mourning woman anymore. John thought he saw the steel resolve he remembered in the nine-year-old girl desperate to get out of the kitchen. “I mean, do you really want to save the Empire?”

“Harry, I don’t think—”

“Don’t think! Just answer, yes or no. Do you want the Empire? Because otherwise we’re going to have to sell it off piece by bloody piece, all at auction where people can fight to pay the highest amount for the rugs and the masks and the maps and the portraits of the Johns and James and Dad —”

“No,” said John quickly; the word came out with the force of a freight train. “What are you, Harry,
mad? We’re not selling off the Empire—"

“So, you want it?”

And then John noticed the smile on Harry’s face, and realized what she’d done. “Christ, Harry. You gave me a heart attack, talking about selling Dad’s portrait.”

“Got you to stop thinking, didn’t it?”

John sat down on the floor, exhausted. “God, I hate you.”

“Mutual,” said Harry. “So. Tomorrow morning, we get our papers in order, we head into NatWest, and we apply for a loan. Seven hundred thousand ought to cover the one we’ve got.”

“They’re never going to give us seven hundred thousand pounds, Harry.”

“They will if we show them what we’ve taken in the last few days, and if we pepper them with what we bring in for the rest of the week.”

“Harry…”

“Also,” said Harry, “I happen to know the loan officer there.”

John frowned and stared up at his sister.

“Oh, stop it. It ended very amicably, long before Clara, ta.”

“Harry…”

Harry waved her hand. The tears were still in her eyes, but she was past it now, John could tell. “Stop with the details. You worry too much about details. It’s late, you’re tired, I’m bloody exhausted, and I’d like to go to sleep for a thousand years. The bank opens at ten, do you think it’ll take more than three hours to gather all the papers we’ll need?”

“About that.”

“Great. Go home, I’ll see you tomorrow at seven. Come upstairs, I’ll give you breakfast.”

Harry stood up; John remained on the floor.

“John…”

“I should double check the order for Tuesday—”

“John,” said Harry, this time more forcefully. “Go. Home.”

John thought of the empty house on Baker Street, cold and dark. He hadn’t been back since Tuesday, and with a sudden chill in his stomach, he wondered if he’d made the bed that last morning or not. If Sherlock’s scent was still on the pillows, or if it’d had time to fade away.

“Coward,” said John, a bit sheepishly.

“Berk,” said Harry gently, and reached down for his arm. John gave it to her, and she helped him to his feet. “You have to go home sometime.”

“You’re one to talk,” grumbled John as they left the manager’s office. “You were living at Baker
Street when I came back because you didn’t want to live in the upstairs flat.”

“I went back there, though, didn’t I? Not that listening to you wank off wasn’t illuminating.”

“Harry…”

“Walk around the neighborhood until you’re so exhausted you can’t think, and then go in and sleep on the sofa. Fewer memories than your bedroom, makes it much easier to sleep, believe me.”

“In that case, the sofa isn’t going to work.”

Harry groaned. “Piss off, I’m never going to sit on that sofa again.”

John laughed, and watched as Harry turned off the lights and locked the door. “Do you really think we can get another loan, Hare?”

“John,” said Harry, and she turned to him. “I owe you. I owe you everything.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is,” insisted Harry. “You’re right, you know. I never wanted the Empire. I looked in every place I could think of in order to find a way to get out. But when I needed it most, it was here waiting for me. And it needed me. I might not have been able to carry the load myself the last few years, but I needed to keep it running. For you, because I knew you needed it to be here, waiting. If it hadn’t been for that…” Harry shrugged. “I didn’t always hide behind the bar, you know. I hid behind Dad, and then I hid behind Clara. But at least I was around to hide at all.”

John didn’t know what to say. Harry smiled at him, her eyes still red, and for a moment, it seemed as if she would turn away, letting nothing be said at all. John didn’t want to let her, not without acknowledging something.

Too many things unsaid in the last few days, some by him, some by others. John didn’t want to have to regret additional words unspoken.

“Harry,” he said, and didn’t know where to go from there.

“John,” agreed Harry, and she chucked him on the shoulder, and turned to the entrance to the flat upstairs.

*

John walked home, much as he had almost every night since coming home from Afghanistan. Dark winter night, weariness in his bones, empty and dark house waiting for him.

The only difference was that he didn’t need his cane, and now Harry’s confession lay heavy on his heart. It was one thing to think of Harry running the Empire, bitter because he’d left and she had not. It was another to think that Harry had actually needed the refuge and sought it out, when the world outside was too much for her, when she thought she was slipping further away from herself.

John had seen photographers out in the field, taking photographs of the horrific scenes. He’d seen them grow despondent, depressed, near suicidal in an effort to get the one photograph that would say everything they couldn’t say because they’d forgotten how to speak, give credence to the drinks they downed every night back at base. Not every photographer was that way – some of them managed to keep above the crippling weight of conscience; some of them found other ways to help. John had heard the rationale: *I take this photograph so that it might stop other scenes from
occurring to be photographed. It had always sounded a bit twee to him. But it worked for those who believed it, and he wasn’t going to knock it, if it helped.

He thought of Harry, becoming one of the men and women drowning their guilty consciences at the bar, and it made him sick to his stomach.

He was at Baker Street before he knew it; he paused for a moment, and kept walking.

It was hard to keep his mind on nothing. Instead, he let himself dream a little. The menu, first of all. It was February now, not much time left before the fresh veg dried up for early spring. Leeks were just coming in now – maybe a soup to replace the carrot ginger, though that’d be more prep work for Artie. Brussels sprouts had another few weeks in them, at least – better do something with them before they had nothing but cabbage and kale for months on end. With butter and garlic, or maybe lemon and herb – or both, that could be intriguing. Give the customers a choice with the veg, they’d be more likely to eat it, less waste on the plate.

And then May: rhubarb and asparagus. John half wondered if there wasn’t some combination of the two, some way to make the rhubarb interesting without resorting to a dessert – roasted rhubarb, with chilis and lime. Served over noodles, sprinkled with black sesame seeds. John could see it in his mind, vaguely Asian, the sweet and the tart working together. It could work; he’d have to write it down before he forgot it, to try when the rhubarb started to appear.

June, when the really good stuff was growing. Peas and strawberries and courgettes…

John rounded the corner and saw the house again, standing dark and dim and small, and came back to himself with a lurch.

June. A week ago, he wasn’t even sure they’d see the end of the month. And now he was thinking ahead to menus for June.

John nearly let out a laugh when he saw the movement, just behind the hedge blocking the house from view, and his heart leapt. Dark hair, lean body, long wool coat.

Sherlock.

John walked a bit faster, and tried to calm his beating heart.

He’s a bloody wanker who up and left you without a word and you should absolutely not, under any circumstances, kiss the bloody smile off his face.

John fumbled with the gate; the latch stuck, and John kicked at the frame in frustration before it finally opened. He stepped inside, words already on his lips, and stared at Jim Moriarty, leaning casually on the doormah of the house.

“Oh,” said John, and the disappointment dripped down, sliding along his bones as if he were a balloon being filled from the inside.

“Hullo, John,” said Jim easily, and he jumped off the steps. “Thought I’d catch you coming by. Not true: thought you’d be by every night this last week, but you’ve been avoiding your own house. Isn’t that funny?”

“Bit late for a social call,” said John.

“Yeah, well, I thought to myself: good old John Watson. Likely to be a bit lonely tonight. Assuming he doesn’t crash on his sister’s sofa again.” Jim stood at arm’s length, and peered at
“Give up on the sofa, have you? Probably better, it’s not doing you any favors.”

John tried to grip his cane, before remembering he didn’t have it anymore. “It’s late, and I’ve got some work to do, so why don’t you just tell me how I can help you, and I’ll let you bugger off afterwards?”

“Oh, John,” said Jim, striking a hand to his heart. “I’m hurt. And here I thought we were becoming, I don’t know, *friends*.”

“No.”

“Not going to invite me in for a nightcap?”

“Not so much.”

“Walked around a fair few times before you stopped in, though,” said Jim thoughtfully. “So I’m not quite sure how much of a *rush* you’re really in. Thinking good thoughts, were you? Daydreaming? Yeah, I suppose he’s quite a lot to dream about, isn’t it? Where is he now, Bristol?”

“Blackpool.”

“Ah. Off-season, but that’s the best time. Much better for hunkering down under blankets and letting your breath provide the weather patterns.” Jim leered at John, and John lifted up his shoulders.

“I was thinking menus.”

“Mmm. The kedgeree? I’d lose it too.” Jim danced on the pavement before John, swinging his feet over the frost-covered grass, as if playing a strange game of footie with invisible partners. He was so easy, so comfortable, so pissing *satisfied*, that John wanted to punch him.

“We’ve replaced it with the pilau.”

Jim froze, one foot poised over the grass. His eyes narrowed as he lowered his leg, and he turned to look at John coldly. “The pilau. James Watson’s pilau?”

“That’s the one,” said John.

“That hasn’t been on the menu in twenty-five years.”

“Well,” said John. “We thought it was time to bring it back.”

Jim let out a little laugh. “Did you.”

The laugh was cold; the voice was frozen. John knew his confusion was plain on his face; he was about to speak, to ask Jim what it meant to him, really, if the pilau was on the menu or not, when Jim had every intention of shutting them down anyway, when Jim straightened and flicked the collar of his coat up around his ears.

“Well,” said Jim. “Nice seeing you, John. Do stop by to say hello, have a spot of tea. One week left on the loan, isn’t it? Wouldn’t do to be unfriendly about it. I do so hate closing a thriving business down.”

“We’ll be by,” said John, and watched Jim leave, the gate slamming closed behind him.
The house was quiet, dark, and cold.

John took his coat and hat off in the dark foyer. He hung them on the pegs, shucked his shoes and lined them up neatly.

He stood in the doorway of the kitchen, examined the pattern the yellow streetlights made on the floor. The knife Sherlock had used to pin the recipes still lay on the table where Harry had left it.

Across the hall, the sitting room: pillows in disarray, the knitted throw in a puddle on the floor where they’d kicked it. The telly remote on the table.

Up the stairs, then. John passed the school photographs, the family holidays by the sea (always too short, always involving deep discussions about the menus of the restaurants where they’d eaten), the snapshots and studio shots, the frames of long-dead ancestors John never knew.

The landing. John took a breath, didn’t think, and went into his bedroom.

The bed hadn’t been made; the duvet was a crumpled heap, the sheets still bore the impression of his body. There was a double impression on the pillow: one for him, one for Sherlock. It looked exactly as he remembered it, as if it’d been preserved since that morning.

John supposed, in a way, he had. He’d woken, alone. He’d sat up, listened for Sherlock, heard nothing. He’d thrown the duvet away, swung his legs out, stood. Put on his dressing gown, went downstairs, expecting to find Sherlock in the kitchen, but all he’d found was the recipes, pinned to the table with the carving knife.

And he’d chuckled, and went on about his morning, whistling, never realizing.

John took a breath, exhaled, and sat on the bed. He rested his hand on the pillow, the indentation that had been Sherlock’s. John closed his eyes, pretended he could feel the soft curls beneath his fingers.

No. Now he was being a sentimental, stupid fool.

“Enough,” said John. He rose from the bed, and opened his eyes. It had been a week; he had mourned and moped and drove Harry to such desperation that she had divulged what had to be her most horrifying nightmare.

No more.

John turned from the room. “Enough now,” he said quietly, hoping that by saying the words, he might believe them.

When he fell asleep that night, his own pillow under his head, his hand curled against the pillow Sherlock had used, he expected the nightmares to be of sand and sweat and cars and children.

Instead, he dreamed of nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

Endnote A/N: The photograph that Harry references is the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph taken during the Vietnam War by AP photographer Nick Ut.
probably know which one she’s talking about. It was taken of nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phúc after a napalm attack on her village in 1972.

What Harry does not mention is that Ut, after taking the photograph, set down his camera and went to help Kim Phuc, and stayed with her until she was at a hospital for treatment before delivering the film to his editors. He and Kim Phuc remain in contact with each other at this time of this writing. (According to Wikipedia, anyway.)
Chapter Twenty-one

Our food tells us where we come from and who we have become.

--Bill Neal (Biscuits, Spoonbread, & Sweet Potato Pie, intro, via Judith Jones)

They got the loan.

John’s head was still swirling when he and Harry left the bank. Canterbury whirled around them, busy people with busy lives, talking on their mobiles and heading to work or lunch or assignations with secret lovers, and John was the pin in the center of it all, everyone spinning around him rapidly, and he felt dizzy and giddy and strangely calm, all at once.

“Congratulations, Mr Watson, Miss Watson,” the loan officer had said with a smile. “The transfer should be in your account by the end of the day.”

John had been so surprised, he had only laughed. Harry had needed to pull him to his feet so that they could leave the office.

Harry…Harry was gleeful. Harry was brilliant, she’d taken the man’s hand and shaken it, thanked him, made jokes about a comatose, shocked John. She’d signed the requisite papers and provided the necessary bank account numbers, and when John needed to sign, she pointed out exactly where so that he could think as little as possible about it.

They had the loan. The money was theirs. The Empire was safe.

John laughed again, standing on the pavement outside the bank, with Harry next to him, bouncing on her toes, talking a mile a minute. She grabbed John’s arm, tugged on it in excitement, let go, then grabbed it again. He threw his head back and stared at the cold white winter sky and laughed and laughed.


John couldn’t process it. He felt like he couldn’t process anything just then. He stood on the pavement outside the bank, and doubled over in giggles.

“Maybe I am,” he said, chortling through it, and Harry rolled her eyes and pulled him away.

“Keep on like that, and they’ll start to think they gave the money to a madman,” she said, but she didn’t sound as if she meant a word of it. John grinned as Harry pulled him.

“Harry, the car’s the other way.”

“We’re not going to the car,” said Harry triumphantly. “We’re going to buy a notebook and we’re going to have lunch and we’re going to come up with menus for the next six months and we’re going to order champagne and we’re going to celebrate the fact that we won.”

“Harry!”

“Oh, fine, I’ll have orange juice. Someone has to drive home.”

“Brussels sprouts,” said John. He was dizzy with relief and he felt like his internal organs were still in that nervous-energy stage, where they’d been since the moment they had walked into the bank in the first place. But he remembered, with utter clarity, the thoughts he’d been thinking the night
before. “We need to do something with Brussels sprouts. They’re in season.”

“So they are,” said Harry. She stopped walking; John stopped next to her. “I’m just going to duck in and buy a notebook, can I trust you not to spin off like a top while I’m gone?”

“Yup,” said John, grinning at her.

“You’re a loon,” said Harry lightly, and went inside.

John felt like a loon. Not the crazy sort, but the large gangly bird with the feathers, like if he stretched out his arms they’d turn out to be wings, and he could flap right up over the buildings and straight out to sea. Shoot across the Channel, circle around England, along the coastline, and straight on to Blackpool. Imagine Sherlock’s surprise when he saw John, the delight when he learned that the Empire would be all right…

Maybe he was a loon, thought John. The crazy sort, not the bird. The last person he should want to tell was Sherlock.

Better to think about Brussels sprouts.

Harry came out of the shop, clutching the notebook in her hands. “All right,” she said. “Where should we go?”

“Home,” said John, and Harry frowned.

“But—lunch.”

John shook his head. “I don’t want to sit in anyone’s restaurant but ours.”

“But I bought a notebook! And I’m hungry.”

John laughed, and took Harry’s hand to drag her back to the car. “So we’ll get sandwiches. Or I’ll cook you something.”

Harry followed, grumbling under her breath, but John could tell by the quickness in her step that she didn’t really mean it. The world was still spinning around him, but not quite as quickly now. John’s step was light and he kept imagining Brussels sprouts in lemon sauces, or sautéed with garlic, or roasted with bits of bacon…

“Oh,” said Harry, and stopped so suddenly that John’s arm was nearly yanked off.

“What?” asked John, turning back to look at her.

Harry stood transfixed, staring down one of the side streets. John frowned at her; she looked as though she was caught in a fairy tale, or had just seen something that had hit her so hard she couldn’t breathe properly. John followed her gaze, curious.

Even John had to admit it was a bit like looking at a picture postcard. The little side street, nestled in between the larger, more modern buildings, was narrow, barely enough room for a single car and a handful of pedestrians. The little houses in it were vaguely Tudor in style, with overflowing baskets of ivy and holly. The sunlight streamed down in patches, highlighting the bright red paint on the doors, the deep blue of the coats people wore, the sea-foam green on the car parked on the side of a road that by rights ought to have been cobbledstone.

John turned back to Harry, who was still staring. “Harry?”
“I—” Harry shook off the spell, and turned with a half smile to John. “Sorry, I just…it’s pretty, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” said John, the smile creeping back on his face. “I’m thinking Brussels sprouts, but you – I don’t think you are.”

“No,” said Harry, with another glance down the street. “Not really.”

“You could, you know,” said John, and he shoved his hands into his coat pockets. “Not think about Brussels sprouts, I mean.”

Harry’s eyes snapped back to him. “But…The Empire. We just got the loan, and you—”

“It’s not like I’m going back to Afghanistan, you know.”

Harry pressed her lips together. “I thought…maybe you’d go to London.”

John shook his head. “That’s…I think that’s over.”

He didn’t want to meet Harry’s gaze, but when he met her eyes, he was surprised not to see the pitying he expected. Instead, Harry looked…nervous. Almost afraid.

“You should go. If you want,” added John, quickly. “God knows what Artie would get up to, if you weren’t there.”

“Like I can control Artie.”

“Your mere presence is keeping him from throwing parties at 2am in the kitchen.”

Harry chuckled.

“But if you do go, let me fire you in front of him. He might actually start fearing me.”

“Oh, John,” said Harry, and she threw her arm around his shoulders. “No one actually fears you.”

“Some people do.”

“No, they don’t, sweetie,” said Harry, and when she kissed his cheek, John looked at her with surprise.

“What was that for?”

“Thanks,” said Harry. She started walking again; her arm slid from John’s shoulders, and he walked alongside her. “I…I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” said John.

They reached the car park, paid the fare, and were just pulling out into traffic when Harry spoke again.

“So…tomorrow, you think?”

John didn’t have to ask what Harry meant.

“Once the money’s in our accounts,” he agreed, and they grinned at each other.

“So,” said Harry, and she opened the notebook and uncapped her pen. “Tell me about those
Brussels sprouts.”

* 

John didn’t own a laptop, was using Harry’s old mobile, and had usually found temptation very easy to ignore.

He had a notebook crammed full of ideas for recipes, menus, concepts, and lists of ingredients. Special menus for catering, wild parties, event nights, free tastings – every increasingly impossible idea that he and Harry had thrown at each other during the ride back to Upper Brickley and the incredibly excitable lunch they’d had in Harry’s flat. Most of it would never happen – the ten-course meal they’d serve at an Oscar party, for starters – but neither of them had cared. They’d been having far too much fun thinking of dishes they could serve under any circumstance.

He had a house with a thick layer of dust which desperately needed attention.

He had a refrigerator which probably needed clearing.

He had a backlog of telly to view, come to that, and a pile of texts and notes from people in the town congratulating him on the return of the Empire.

Not to mention scads of accounting and bill-paying and the like.

John did none of these. Instead, he walked in his house, sometime after nine that night, stared at the darkened stairs, and headed straight to the telephone.

“You just left here,” said Harry when she answered.

“Is it there?” asked John.

A pause; John could picture Harry tucking the phone under her chin. He thought he heard her typing the website address on her laptop, sighing with impatience as the page loaded, and then he heard her breath catch.

“It is,” she said, almost as if she couldn’t believe the zeros. “Oh my God.”

John grinned. It was a completely stupid, silly grin. “Tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, and the delight was catching.

John flopped on the sofa in the sitting room, still smiling. It smelled familiar, comforting, homey – a bit like Sherlock, in a strange way, because he couldn’t describe Sherlock as those three things if he’d been held at gunpoint.

Tomorrow morning, thought John, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

* 

John met with Harry in the square outside the bank. She was sitting by the fountain, with two cups of tea and a bag of pastries from Mrs Hudson, when John spied her. She waved him down, and handed him a tea.

“I thought coffee, but my stomach can’t take it,” she confessed. “I bought one of Mrs Hudson’s raspberry Danishes and I can’t even stomach that much.”

John frowned. “Nerves.”
“Nerves.” Harry gulped at the tea.

“Look, we’re going in with enough money to pay off the loan plus interest a week earlier than the loan is due. He’s going to take the cheque and shake our hands and that’ll be that. Won’t take more than twenty minutes.”

“Do we even have to see him?”

“Probably. I imagine there’s paperwork to sign and all that. We’re talking over half a million quid, it’s not like we borrowed a hundred for kicks or anything.”

“Mmm.” Harry gulped another mouthful of tea, swallowed with a wince. “I let Molly and Artie know we might be late coming back, and they should go ahead and open for lunch without us.”

“It’s barely ten, we won’t be that long.”

“Covering my bases.”

John nodded, blew on his tea before trying a sip. “Did you tell them where we’re going?”

“They don’t even know about the loan,” said Harry, and John could tell she was thinking of something. She wouldn’t meet his eyes, and she fiddled with the pastry bag. “Anyway, if we’re going to pay it off, it doesn’t really matter.”

John wasn’t sure that was entirely true, but he shrugged it off. “Ready?”

Harry closed her eyes briefly, and stood up. “All right then. Let’s get this over with.”

John rolled his eyes and started walking in the direction of the bank. “Way to show enthusiasm, Hare.”

“What? I am showing enthusiasm. I brought tea.”

“That’s not enthusiasm, that’s breakfast.”

“Are you going to eat your Danish?”

“I’m good.”

“Ha! You’re nervous too.”

“I just don’t want to get crumbs on my suit,” countered John.

It was a quick walk to the bank offices. They dropped the empty cups in the rubbish bin just outside the doors, and went inside. Harry was half a pace behind John, so he was the first to reach the receptionist. He was momentarily pleased to see the same woman from his first visit. It was a nice way to bookend the entire experience, really.

“Hullo, Anthea,” said John pleasantly as he leaned on the counter. “Nice to see you again.”

Anthea glanced up from her computer, something of a blank expression on her face. “Sorry?”

The lack of recognition was something like a shock – John thought he’d spent too much time in his own circle, among people who knew him from childhood and people who knew Sherlock from television. “We spoke a few weeks ago,” John tried. “About a loan?”
Anthea shook her head slowly. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. We’re here to pay it off, actually. Should we do it at the counter, or do we need to see the officer who made the loan?”

“Personal loan?”

“No, business.”

“Name?”

“Harriet Watson,” said Harry.

Anthea typed the information into the computer. After a moment, she turned back to them, frowning. “I’m sorry. I’m not seeing a loan under that name.”

“Try the Empire, that’s the name of the restaurant,” said John, but his stomach was already starting to twist. What the…?

Anthea typed the name in, and then kept shaking her head. “Would there be another name on it?”

“John Watson.”

Still nothing.

Harry started to tug on John’s arm. “Maybe we should just go…”

“No,” said John sharply. “Look, there has to be some record. We’ve got the original loan paperwork here.”

He handed the sheaf of papers over to Anthea, who scanned them quickly. “Let me try something.”

Another minute of furious typing, clicking, and nothing being said. John’s thoughts swirled in his head.

Maybe, said the little voice. Maybe he paid it off. Maybe that’s why he went to London the day early, why he didn’t come in to film. He was arranging for the loan to just…disappear.

No, stupid. He didn’t even know the loan existed. How would he know to pay it off?

And anyway…I wouldn’t have asked for that. I would never have asked for that. Too much like…like solicitation.

“Ah,” said Anthea, and she reached for the phone. “Just one moment, please,” she said to John and Harry, and then into the phone. “Yes, they’re here. Shall I send them back to you? Righty-o.”

Anthea set down the receiver. With a pleasant, bland smile, she turned back to John and Harry. “Just go on back to Mr Moriarty’s office. He’ll sort you out.”

“Thanks,” said John, not entirely sure he meant it, and went, with Harry close behind.

The office where he’d met Jim Moriarty was different. When he’d seen it before, it had been clear of debris, smooth and metallic, sleek and finished.

It was still just as clear and clean as John remembered it – but there was a stale scent in the air, as if
no one had actually used it in months. No pictures. No pens. No papers. No books, nothing on the wall, the blinds closed as if to conserve heat from leaking through the glass.

“There you are!” sang Jim Moriarty, spinning in the chair. “I thought you’d be by. I understand there’s a problem?”

“No problem, not exactly,” said John. He stepped into the office and set the cashier’s check on the empty desk. “We’re here to pay off the loan. Six hundred thousand quid, plus interest. All there.”

John slid the check across the desk toward Jim, and then pulled away.

Jim slowly stopped spinning, until he was still in the chair, fingers pressed together. It reminded John of Sherlock, a little, and he shoved the thought out of his head, because Jim’s expression wasn’t Sherlock at all. Jim looked…shocked, almost. Amazed. And when he started to chuckle, it wasn’t amused in the slightest.

“Isn’t that special,” he said, and leaned over to look at the check. “Would you look at that. That’s just so….I don’t know. Adorable. That’s what you are, John Watson. Adorable. You think you’re going to walk in here and hand me a check and walk right back out, transaction closed, free and clear? That’s just so…normal.”

John didn’t say anything. He could feel Harry practically trembling behind him.

“That’s the deal,” she said. “Six hundred thousand, no payments for one year, full amount due. The year’s up next week, we just thought we’d come in early.”

“You just thought.”

John clenched his teeth for a brief moment. “The receptionist couldn’t find the loan. Any idea why?”

“Oh, that.” Jim waved his hand. “That’s because there isn’t one.”

John thought he was falling. Or maybe everything around him was falling, while he remained stationary. Beside him, Harry clutched his arm, her fingers digging into the skin under the cloth of his coat and shirt.

“Oh, come on!” groaned Jim. “You can’t honestly tell me you thought a loan like that was legal? I would have been sacked the day I made it.”

“But—” stammered Harry. “You gave me the money. It was in the bank account the next day, all of it.”

“Me, darling,” said Jim. He leaned back in his chair and kicked his feet up to the desk. The check rustled in the puff of air, fluttering on the desk toward the edge. “I gave you the money, not the bank. You didn’t even check to see where the loan came from, did you? You just looked at the zeros and did a little dance of joy. Probably a drink with the wifey to celebrate, maybe a bit of fun in the bedroom after? And here you are, one year later – no wifey, no drink, no fun in the bedroom. Well, not for you.”

Jim glanced at John then, and John’s ears started to burn.

“Leave it,” he said gruffly. “Regardless of who made the loan – we’re paying it off. There’s the money. We’ll sign whatever we need to sign, and we’ll be done with it.”
“This?” Jim picked up the check, looked at it, front and back, and then, looking directly at John, ripped it in two. “No.”

“No?!?” cried Harry. The two halves of the check fluttered to the desk; Harry reached out and plucked them from the air before they even reached it.

“Read the contract, darling,” said Jim, and he kicked away from the desk again.

John pulled the contract out of the folder. He wondered why he hadn’t bothered to read it before – stupid, stupid, stupid. It was evident from the first paragraph what Harry had signed.

It wasn’t a contract for a loan, so much as a bill of sale. To be finalized in one year’s time, at the new owner’s discretion, though the previous owners were allowed that period to continue running and taking in whatever earnings they could manage.

John felt sick. Harry covered her mouth and slumped against the doorframe.

“Understand yet?” asked Jim, his voice floating on the air as if far away.

“No,” said John. His left hand trembled, and he set the contract down on the desk very carefully.

“Why… Why would you do this? What possible reason would you have for wanting to buy the Empire like this?”

“Why why why,” said Jim. He was still facing away from them. “I don’t suppose just knowing that I hate you and your bloody restaurant would do, would it?”

John didn’t answer.

“Didn’t think so. I remember going to the Empire when I was a kid. Two, three years old. Once every other month or so, I’d sit there in the corner, under the elephant. Do you remember that elephant, John? I was scared of it at first, I’d crouch in my seat and barely eat a bite. Months go by, and I can’t open my mouth, because if I do, the elephant’s gonna reach in and grab my tongue and rip it out by the roots.”

John remembered the elephant head – a baby elephant’s head and trunk, stuffed and shaped and mounted on the wall in the back of the restaurant, near the manager’s office. It had finally fallen to pieces when he was twelve, and Hamish had sold it in the paper to some collector in Yorkshire, who was crazy enough to drive down and buy it. John had never particularly liked the elephant – it’d always given him the shivers – and in anyone else, he might have admired the imagination it took to think of the stuffed thing pulling anyone’s tongue out.

Not Jim, though. He was already wishing the beast had actually done it.

“So I’m sitting there, scared to talk, and out comes this…man. Older. Grey hair, thin as a whippet, but strong, you can tell looking at the burned and scarred muscles on his arms. He puts this plate of food in front of me, and I’m not sure if I should be more afraid of the elephant or the man. And he looks at me, and you know what he says? He says: ‘Eat.’ That voice. That deep, gravelly voice. I decide he’s more frightening than the elephant, and I eat.”

John exhaled. He pictured it, all too easily: the little boy, the old man, the elephant overhead. But worse: before Jim even says it, he pictures the plate of food, and he recognizes it instantly.

“You know what he served me, of course,” said Jim.

“Afghan pilau,” said John.
“Yes,” said Jim, and the room is quiet for a moment. The chair doesn’t squeak, they don’t breathe; John thinks their hearts have stopped beating, even.

“So James Watson served you Afghan pilau and scared you more than the elephant,” said Harry suddenly. “And you want to close the restaurant?”

“No,” said Jim, and the chair turned around again until he faced them “You’re so close, the pair of you. Almost twins. I remember watching you, when I sat under the elephant and ate my pilau. I could see you when the kitchen door opened, sitting at your table, drawing or reading or whatever it is you did to pass the time. You were always happy, laughing, being fed bits and pieces of this and that. And the old man, he’d pass your table and rest his hand on your heads, chuck you under the chin. I’d watch and I’d think, ‘That’s a family. That’s what family looks like. They’re so…”’

Jim seemed to search for the word. “Happy.”

He scoffed. “Happy. As if that’s anything to strive toward.”

“As goals go, it’s not a bad one,” said John quietly.

“Stop showing your ignorance,” snapped Jim. “Happy never got anyone anything. You and Sherlock Holmes, you were happy for a week, and now you’ve both lost the things that mattered most.”

“I never mattered to Sherlock Holmes.”

John rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t talking about you. Moron. Ugh, ordinary people are so boring. I don’t know why I bother putting up with you.”

“Then take the check,” said Harry, and John could hear the edge of anger in her voice. “Take it and we’ll go.”

But Jim had already turned away, back to spinning in circles in his chair. “I told you. The Empire’s mine now. You lost. Bye!”

“We’ll fight you,” said John. “This contract – it’s not legal. We’ll go to court and we’ll win.”

“No, you won’t,” said Jim, bored. “The legal fees alone would run through that loan you received yesterday. And then you’d still have to pay back the money I gave you. You might win the case but you’d still lose the restaurant.”

“If you’re trying to scare us, it won’t work,” said Harry. “The Empire has been owned by the Watsons for three generations. It’s ours. If you think we’re going to let it go to someone else without so much as a fight…”

Jim glanced at them. “You…don’t get it, do you?” He stood, hands on the desk, and stared at John. Jim’s eyes were cold, angry, and suddenly strangely familiar.

“The Empire is still, and until I close it down, burn it to the very ground, it will remain, as you say, in the Watson family.”

“I don’t—” began Harry, but John reached back and took her hand and squeezed it. He stared at Jim’s eyes – Jim’s very familiar, very dark, very angry eyes, and he thought about an old man wearing a chef’s toque and coat, a pair of hands guiding his as he learned to shape the pastry dough, the smile on his face as the plate of pilau was set before him.

_Eat, John. This dish, this is a dish for family._
“I don’t want to close the Empire because I was scared of an elephant,” said Jim Moriarty. “I want to close the restaurant because its owner and chef – my *grandfather* – served me Afghan pilau.”
Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As chefs, we definitely are in the memory business: We are creating a memory with ingredients.

--Marcus Samuelsson

“I don’t understand,” Harry was saying. “How – no. No. We don’t have cousins. You can’t be James’s grandson. He had only Hamish, our dad and…” Harry sucked in a breath. “Hamish wasn’t your dad. He couldn’t have been.”

Jim rolled his eyes in a move that seemed to take up his entire body with annoyance. “John, do you want to explain this to her?”

Harry stiffened next to him. “John? You…you knew?”

“Of course he didn’t. Well, maybe he did, but I was referring to the preponderance of soldiers at war to have their little flings. A bit of how’s your father after the shooting’s done, getting a leg over instead of getting a leg blown off.”

“Granddad didn’t cheat,” said Harry.

“Nooo,” Jim mocked her. “He was a model of Christian purity and faithfulness.” Jim snorted. “Don’t be stupid. Your grandmum was stuck in this dump of a town for what, seven years? And there’s James, out on the high seas surrounded by WACs and WAVEs and any minute they’re going to be hit by a German torpedo and sink into the bonny blue. You better believe he got a leg over the first opportunity.”

“Shut it, just shut it,” Harry hissed. “John—”

Harry turned to him and grabbed his arm, as if to pull him into the conversation. But John couldn’t say a word. He stared intently at Jim, and barely saw him.

James, in the dining room, talking to the customers, resting a hand on a woman’s shoulder as he spoke.

James, blithely telling tales of his time in the Navy, and leaving off certain parts with a “Well… when you’re older.”

James, who’d loved his wife, cherished his grandchildren, called Hamish “my son, my only son”.

“Oh, but Johnny isn’t going to tell me to stop,” said Jim. “He wants to hear it, doesn’t he? He’s already running things through his head. He was always the thinker, the watcher, the one who sat there knowing things while you went off trying one thing after the other. I remember. He knows that James always liked the birds, always a bit of a flirt, wasn’t he, Johnny?”

“I want proof,” said Harry. “If you’re trying to take our inheritance from us—”

“Oh, please. I’m not trying to take anything, I already have!” Jim ended the statement on a shout. “The Empire’s mine, it doesn’t matter if I prove anything to you or not. And anyway, you want proof, you can go find it. St Bart’s hospital, December 17, 1943. Margaret Moriarty, born to Anna
Moriarty and father James Watson. It was never a secret. Except from his family.”

The scorn and bitterness with which Jim said that word – family – John could see it all too well. And Bart’s – of course, Bart’s. John closed his eyes, saw the hallways, this time wracked with soldiers in uniform, and one faceless, pregnant woman, alone and afraid.

“I sat in the corner of your bloody inheritance, two or three times a year, knowing who he was but never allowed to say it. And he’d slip little envelopes to my mum, give us lunch on the house, try to assuage the guilt he didn’t feel. I could see how nervous we made him, how he looked back at his wife, worry that she’d catch on, realize who we were to him. Gran always said his wife wouldn’t give him the divorce. But I think he was never brave enough to ask for it. He’d always breathe a sigh of relief when we left; he thought we didn’t see, but I saw. I saw every time.”

Long nights at the restaurant, doing the accounts and creating the menus. John remembered his gran laughing about James having a lover, only it was a lover with an oven and a walk-in. He wondered if she’d known, and when he thought about the dry laugh that accompanied the words, he thought she might have.

“And when he died, and my mother tried to attend the funeral – me in tow – your father, your precious Hamish, wouldn’t let us in the door. ‘It’s not proper, it’s not right,’ he said. ‘Family only,’ he said. Like we were nothing but a couple of rubber-neckers, not his own flesh and blood. My mum, she would have just walked away, but I told him who we were. I told him and I showed him and he knew I was telling the truth. And he still didn’t let us in. Told us we were liars and that he’d have us arrested for public defamation of character.”

Hamish, roaring with anger at the church door; John remembered the shouting. He’d thought it was fueled by grief. He was young, he didn’t know the difference. And the next week, Hamish took pilau off the menu, and never explained why.

“I don’t understand,” Harry was saying.

“No, of course not. You’ve always been on the inside, haven’t you? From the moment you were born, you were part of the family. No question, no doubt – the Empire was yours to inherit. Dandled on your granddad’s knee and all that rot. Well, I got my granddad twice a year, dressed and scrubbed to a shine and marched into the dining room to see him, like we were coming to worship at the altar of a false god. ‘Here, Jimmy, this is your granddad, smile and behave now, else he won’t let us come back. And shhh, mustn’t say anything about it, don’t want to embarrass his family now, do we?’ Like we weren’t family, we’re just the bit of fun he had on the side and couldn’t admit to having. Like my mother wasn’t his flesh and blood, like we meant nothing to him except the check he wrote every month to keep her in clover. And she loved him for it. Loved. Took every miniscule scrap he threw at her feet, cherished every one because it was his.”

Jim snorted. “Stupid cow. He didn’t love us. He didn’t care about us in the between times when we were out of sight. My mother was content with scraps and she should have had everything you had. She’d never done anything wrong in her life, except be born to the wrong woman.”

“That doesn’t give you the right—”

“To what? Take what I should have received?” Jim sneered. “I didn’t take it. I bought it. You sold it to me for six hundred thousand quid and a year to make yourself think you weren’t a failure. There’s not a court in the world who won’t hold up that contract, won’t say you should have read it a little closer before you signed, won’t say this is all sour grapes and a family squabble. Because that’s what they will say, if you try to make a public fuss. You think I care that my mum was born on the wrong side of the sheets? But you do, don’t you, Harry? You care about what people think
of James Watson, years after he’s dead and gone. You wouldn’t want his dirty little secret to see the light of day, would you?”

“Piss off,” said Harry, shaking.

“Oh, I will,” said Jim. “I’ll even give you a week to vacate the premises. Sunday, that’s your last day. Take whatever you like. I won’t be needing it. Leave the kitchen equipment, though. That’s mine.”

*

John walked out of the bank in a fog. Harry still gripped his arm, still pulled on him and used him for support, but John walked, blindly, until he stood next to the fountain where he’d met Harry only an hour before.

Or less. It might have been less. Time seemed to be disconnected from anything and everything.

“We’ll fight him. It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t have proof. What’s a birth certificate? He could have forged it. Mocked it up on a computer and printed it out. Maybe.”

The water pooled in the fountain, fell in a thin sheet with a roar that sounded eerily similar to Harry’s voice. The falling water and Harry’s voice: they blended together, background noise. John half thought he was falling, and wondered when he’d hit bottom.

“And the contract says, if I pay it off before the year’s up, it’s ours again. We’ve got the money. He’s got no right to just ignore us——”

Inexplicably, he thought of Sherlock. The time and the effort and late nights, when John had felt hopeful – everything ahead of him. The Empire restored to glory, Sherlock smiling in his bed. What rubbish – what a daydream. What had John been thinking? Sherlock wasn’t ever going to want to stay with him – a small restaurant owner, tucked away in Kent, far from London where Sherlock’s life was centered. Did he really think that Sherlock would ever actually trade the glory of celebrity for a boring life with him?

“It’s over, Harry,” said John. He could see their reflections in the sheets of water – shimmery, silvery, constantly shifting and changing. “He doesn’t have to take the money if he’d rather have the restaurant.”

“It’s our restaurant. It’s our legacy.”

“It’s his too.”

Harry laughed. “So you believe he’s our cousin?”

“Yeah.”

Harry shook her head. “I…I don’t want to believe it.”

“Do you remember him?”

“No, but I wouldn’t, would I? I never spent that much time there. And if he only showed up a couple of times a year.” Harry paused. “I remember Dad yelling at the funeral though. And…”

Harry took another breath. “He’s got Granddad’s eyes.”

John nodded. “Well. When do we tell Molly and the rest?”
Harry huffed, and shook her head. “So that’s it? You’re just going to let it go, just as he pleases? You were going to fight for it, John! You did fight for it – you called in Sherlock Bloody Holmes to turn it around and it worked, damn you, and you’re not allowed to just throw in the towel and say, ‘Ah well, it was a good try anyway’. That’s not fair.”

“Harry!” John barked, and Harry took a half step away from him, blinking at the sudden anger in his tone. “It’s over. If he wants it so much, he can have it.”

Harry took a shaking breath. “It was Granddad’s. You’re…just going to let it go? Just because he wasn’t the man we thought he was?”

“He was always the man we thought he was,” said John. “Just…we didn’t know all of him.”

“And so fuck him and his restaurant?” snapped Harry, and John rounded on her.

“You think I don’t care about the Empire anymore? You think it doesn’t fucking kill me to know that we’ve been busting our arses trying to save it for the last month, only to find out it wasn’t ours anyway? You want to know the truth, Harry? It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. It’s like everyone’s been saying all along. The Empire’s just a restaurant, just four walls and an oven and couple of chairs and tables. Granddad always went on about family and how that’s the most important thing, but obviously something got lost in the context since he neglected to mention that he had a fucking second one. But for a stupid trick of fate, we might have been the ones looking in from the outside. Not Jim Moriarty. I don’t blame him for being bitter.”

“So just let him have it, is that your answer?”

“I don’t know what my answer is. I don’t know what to think about it. I just…”

John threw his head back and looked up at the grey sky. Light grey, no real chance of rain, but it suited his mood. “I don’t know if I want to fight for the Empire anymore, Harry. I’m tired. I’ve been running on empty for a week now.”

“Sherlock Bloody Holmes,” said Harry bitterly. “I’m going to fucking kill him.”

“He’s got nothing…”

“He’s got everything to do with it. He used you for a quick lay and went off without a word and left you just as broken as he found you.”

John closed his eyes and breathed. The air was cold in his lungs, sharp and almost pleasurably painful. “I didn’t realize you saw me as broken.”

“John. You saw you as broken. Until Sherlock Holmes came and fixed you.”

John opened his eyes and shook his head. “Sherlock Holmes didn’t fix me. The Empire did.”

“So fight for it. Help me get it back. We can’t let Moriarty keep it. John…please.”

Harry rested her hand on his arm – and instead of the grip she’d been using all day, her touch was gentle, cautious, almost pleading. Please, said Harry. John wasn’t sure he’d ever heard Harry say ‘please’ in his entire life.

Somewhere, not too far away, the kitchen was beginning to fire up. Artie would be putting the soup over a slow flame; Molly would be preparing her mise. Mary was setting up the tables, rolling up the utensils and making sure the water glasses were sparkling. Every so often, John knew, they’d
look up at the new surroundings, the bright walls and the shiny pots and pans, and they'd grin, feeling hopeful and excited, things none of them had felt in ages. A new day at the Empire, and already it was sliding into routine. Cheerful, hopeful, energetic routine – but routine all the same. John’s heart hurt thinking about it all ending as quickly as it started.

And Sherlock. He’d be back in another three weeks, looking for the Empire, ready to film that last visit, to see how they’d fared without him. What would he think, to see the Empire boarded up? And should John even care? Because Harry was, in a way, right: he’d used John just as he’d used the Empire as another filler for his show.

If John fought to keep the Empire…was he fighting for the Empire? Or was he fighting for the chance to see Sherlock again, to show him he was worthy of him? Not just a restaurant manager who couldn’t keep his business in the black, but a truly successful businessman who was able to stand on his own two feet, be compared to Sherlock Holmes and not be found wanting?

John wasn’t sure. But he had the feeling if he fought for the Empire…it wouldn’t be for the Empire alone.

“I don’t know,” he said, finally, and turned away to start the long walk back to the Empire.

*

Harry didn’t want to go in.

“I’m going upstairs,” she said shortly when they reached the building. “I’ll come down in time for the lunch service, but….”

“Take your time,” said John. He didn’t watch her go up to her flat; he was too busy trying not to fumble with the keys in his hands.

The dining room was quiet and cool. The shades were still drawn, so most of it was in shadow, but John could see the four portraits hanging in the back, looking out over their domain. John didn’t look back; he didn’t think he wanted the reminder.

Music from the kitchen; John made his way through the dining room and opened the door quietly. Molly hummed as she worked; John stood in the doorway and watched her for several minutes, without her even realizing he’d come in. The kitchen was quiet except for the radio, playing something low and instrumental. A string quartet of some kind; John thought he could pick out the violin, and then the deep tones of the cello. It sounded familiar, some fancy version of a pop tune John knew he ought to recognize. He couldn't place it.

Molly's hair was pulled back from her face; she looked incredibly content and focused on her work. Her fingers moved quickly over the table, and John had to concentrate to determine what she was doing. Small rounds of dough were laid out, and Molly scooped them up in one hand, and used the other to drop a bit of some kind of dark mix into the center. She pinched the dough together, folded the ends in, and set them down on the table, patting lightly with her fingers, shaping the finished bit of dough before finally setting it on the nearby baking tray. One after the other, half a minute for each round. Molly's fingers flew, and John had the idea that she’d been doing this for hours, working so well that her fingers barely needed instructions to perform the task.

The timer buzzed, and Molly gave the dough another little pat before turning to the oven. When she saw John in the doorway, she gave a little jump, and laughed.

"Didn't see you standing there. You gave me a turn."
"Sorry," said John.

Molly pulled a tray out of the oven; golden-brown biscuits, light and airy, and the scent of cinnamon and cloves and nutmeg, like Christmas. Molly slid the paper to a cooling rack and put the tray on the hopper to cool.

"I came in a bit early, since Harry said you’d be late. I was just finishing up, so I’ll start on the lunch prep in a minute."

"I’m not worried."

"You didn’t take very long – did everything work out the way you hoped?"

Not even close, thought John. “Hard to say.” He watched as Molly slid the paper lining off the tray, the little biscuits rocking as they shifted.

“Eccles cakes,” she explained, before John could ask. "Just an idea. They're a bit small for dessert, but I thought maybe as a special treat on Sunday. We can send them out with the bills, what do you think?"

John's heart couldn't get any heavier. He walked across the kitchen to look at the cakes, and his own footsteps sounded ominous and heavy, so much so that he was surprised when Molly kept filling her circles of dough, kept humming her sweet song, and didn't immediately burst into tears.

The cakes were lovely and perfect, and smelled like every good memory John had of childhood. They were puffed a bit unevenly, but were no less charming for it, and when he peered at one, he thought they might have been shaped into...

"Hearts," he said, and picked one up to look at it.

"Well, yes. I thought—"

"Why did you make them hearts?" said John, and he turned to Molly, who looked back at him, baffled.

"Valentine's Day," she said finally. "I know it's a bit silly, but..."

John closed his eyes. He wasn't sure if he'd forgotten, or just chose not to remember. And Jim hadn't said the actual date.

And if that wasn't a fucking irony - the one date that any restaurant worth its salt would actually be able to rake in enough money that they might have stood a chance...and it would prove to be the last time the Empire served a meal.

"No," said John, and opened his eyes. "It's fine. It's not silly. They're lovely. It's a good idea, Molly. Thank you."

Molly smiled at him, but her eyes were still worried. "John - are you all right? You look a bit peaky."

"I'm fine. It's fine. It's all fine."

"No one believes you when you say that, you know," said Molly quietly, and she rested her hands on the table. "The whole 'it's fine, it's all fine' bit. I think it's what you say when you don't want to tell us the real answer, and you don't know how else to brush it all aside."
John took a breath, and couldn't meet Molly's eyes.

"It's all right," added Molly quickly. "I mean - that sounds like I'm making fun, and I'm not. I know there's things you don't want to talk about, and I know it's been horrible, the last few weeks, but it's been good too, hasn't it? And the Empire is starting to do so much better, the dining room's full nearly every service, and Artie hasn't cut himself in three days. And it's all right if you don't want to tell us everything, and I'm sure you're just letting us go on feeling better, by telling us you're fine, and maybe I'm ruining everything by telling you that you aren't fooling anyone, and I should just shut my gob—"

"The bank is foreclosing on the Empire."

It wasn’t quite true, but it was as good as. John wasn’t sure what kept him from divulging the truth: maybe because it was too embarrassing for Harry, who hadn’t paid attention. Maybe because he still felt as though he ought to fight harder for something he could possibly help.

Maybe he was ashamed of James, of the game he’d played with his children’s lives and inheritances, of the way he’d cheated one grandson out of the family, while at the same time instilling the other grandson into the importance of it.

On the radio, the music kept playing, the cello's low notes and the violin's swirling dance. Somewhere in the flat above them, Harry was walking back and forth, probably ironing the tablecloths or napkins for the afternoon’s service, or just trying to come to terms with the inevitable. The refrigerator fan kicked in with a sputtering lurch, and filled the kitchen with white noise for a blissful thirty seconds, and then puttered back out with a heaving sigh.

John let out the breath he'd been holding, and sat on the stool, drained and exhausted and suddenly afraid at how free he felt, having finally said it. Because having said it – it was done. He was giving up the Empire. He wouldn’t see Sherlock again. It was over.

"Oh," said Molly, her voice small.

John couldn't look at her. He stared at the small pastry heart in his hand. He couldn't remember picking it up. All he could remember was the cock-eyed grin on Jim's face, the smirking laughter in his eyes.

Molly picked up a circle of dough, and as smoothly as if she'd never actually stopped, dropped a bit of the spiced filling inside. She crimped the edges together, folded the ends in, and set it down on the table to pat it into the shape of a heart.

"Molly," said John gently.

"It's fine," said Molly, her voice thin. "It's all fine."

John let her think he believed it. It was easier. And when she turned to put the next tray into the oven, she leaned against it with her back to him, and John let her pretend that he didn't see her cry.

“When will you tell the others?”

“Tonight. Let them know they should start looking for another job.”

“Wait until morning,” said Molly. “Just…can we have one more night? One more really good night, all together.”

John nodded. “I don’t suppose it matters much.”
“No.” Molly heaved a sigh, and then turned to the stovetop. She started pulling down the empty ramekins that would make up her mise. “Someone should tell the production company, too. So they don’t waste the trip coming down here.”

“I’ll do it.”

“I could ring Greg, if you—”

“Molly. I’ll do it.”

Molly turned, her arms full of the ramekins. “All right. John, I—”

The Mamas and the Papas, John realized as the song on the radio ended. *Monday Monday, sometimes it just turns out that way…*

“You should get to work,” said John, and he left the kitchen before Molly could say another word. He kept his eyes down until he'd entered the manager's office, and once there, he leaned against the door, and looked at the heart he still held in his hand. It was still warm from the oven, and small enough to eat in one bite, so he did.

It tasted like Christmas, thought John, and slowly, every muscle screaming in pain, he started to pack.

Chapter End Notes

*Recipe: Eccles Cakes*
Chapter Twenty-three

Sunday dawned clear and bright and cold, which John figured was just as well, because had it been raining, he might have had to drown himself in it, which would have left Harry with the bulk of the moving that needed to be done before the day was out. And Harry was in no shape to move anything, because John suspected she’d been mildly drunk since Wednesday.

(Molly had been quiet when he’d told the rest of them on Wednesday morning. Harry had already been half pissed. John had been struggling to keep his voice even and calm and not burst into noisy, un-masculine sobbing. He hadn’t looked at anyone, not at first. He stuck with his initial lie – the bank foreclosing on the restaurant – and Harry, damn her, hadn’t corrected him.)

John would have liked to have joined her, get completely soused on whiskey or brandy or Guinness, but someone had to finish packing her things from the upstairs flat and move them to Baker Street. That was at least one good thing: with Harry living at Baker Street again, John wouldn’t be coming home to an empty house any longer. Of course, he wouldn’t have an excuse to leave it anymore, but John was determined to look on the bright side of things.

(Artie had sworn up a blue streak. “Fuck pissiter shite bollocks arse knob hole,” had only been the start of a five-minute tirade that in any other circumstance would have been extremely impressive, used the favorite curses of at least half a dozen different cultures, and earned Artie a mark of glory in the Cursing Hall of Fame. John didn’t know if such a hall existed, but for Artie, he might have had to create one.)

Sunday, and the only things left to pack, really, were the decorations in the dining room. Jim had said to leave the kitchen appliances, and John wasn’t going to argue – it wasn’t as if he’d need them, after all. For that matter, he still wasn’t entirely sure what he would do. Half of him figured that he’d eventually go back to Sarah’s clinic, do whatever certifications were necessary to bring him up to speed on general medicine and start seeing patients again. But somehow, the thrill of diagnosing urinary tract infections and setting sprained ankles didn’t exactly…well, thrill.

(Mary, bless her, had been the one to walk up to John. She’d taken the shaking left hand, tapping out a cadence on the table, and picked it up, kissed it gently, and then snuggled herself in under his arm, holding him tight around the waist. She’d tucked herself in so neatly, so comfortably, that John had put his arms around her as an automatic reflex, and once there, he’d broken, buried his face in her hair, and that’s when the tears had come, silently and with only the shaking of his shoulders for accompaniment. Mary had let him cry, and when he finally wound down, she pulled back, and kissed him gently, and asked, “What do you want us to do?”)

Now it was Sunday. The last day of service for the Empire, because John had no doubt that Jim didn’t intend to keep it running. He wasn’t sure entirely what Jim’s plans were – he didn’t really care, to be honest. The restaurant would open at half one, stay open until six, and by 8 that evening, it wouldn’t matter if Jim kept it as a restaurant or turned it into a museum. The Empire would cease to be John’s.

John lay in bed, and stared at the ceiling, and then got up.

Time to begin.

*  

If there was ever a perfect service, then it was on Sunday afternoon. The ovens didn’t malfunction,
the bread rose, the soup was served at the perfect temperature, Artie didn’t cut off his hand, Mary
didn’t drop anything, John didn’t trip and fall, and Harry, despite still being mildly buzzed,
managed to keep the dishes washed and the customers watered.

“I could leave him the washing up,” Harry suggested toward the end of the afternoon.

“Harry, that’s unprofessional.”

“Yeah, but I could.”

John was tempted. But….

“Wash them,” said John.

“You’re no fun,” complained Harry, and washed the last of the baking trays.

“I like this pan,” said Molly. “This is my favorite pan in the entire world.”

“Take it,” said Artie.

“I can’t take it, that’s stealing!”

“Yeah, from an arsehole. It’s justified.”

“No, it’s not!”

“To be fair,” called Harry from the washroom, “he only said to leave the appliances. Take the pan,
Molly. If he throws a fit, I’ll shove twenty quid up his arse.”

Molly’s mouth dropped open and her cheeks went red. “I...okay.”

Mary spun in from the dining room. “Moll, got any more of those cakes? People are trying to bribe
me for them.”

“Please tell me you’re letting them,” said Artie.

Mary rolled her eyes. “Please.”

“Is that a yes or a no?” asked Artie, leaning his chin on the warming table.

“It’s a maybe. I need to know if I can deliver on the bribe, otherwise I’ll be run out of town.”

“That’s what I’m going to do,” decided Artie. “I’m going to Switzerland.”

“Switzerland,” said Mary flatly.

“Yeah. I’m going hiking. Clear my noggin in the fresh air. See a few waterfalls. Maybe try to throw
sodding Jim Moriarty over one. Or at least his effigy.”

“You do that, Artie,” said Mary, and she patted his arm. “Moll? Cakes?”

“Coming!”

“Jim Moriarty and Sherlock Holmes,” said Artie dreamily. He lifted his hands up, clearly
indicating the men with them. “Can’t you picture it? One after the other.” Artie whistled their
descent, and lowered his hands to warming table, where he mimicked an explosion. “Per-kow!”
Mary shook her head, and grabbed the plate of Eccles cakes. “Thanks, Moll.”

“It’s not Sherlock’s fault,” said Molly to Artie as Mary spun back out to the dining room.

“Maybe not,” said Artie, “but it’s not like he helped, either.”

“He made the Empire better.”

“Which is making it closing worse.”

Molly sucked in a breath, and glanced around the kitchen before leaning in. “John loves him.”

“Uh-huh,” said Artie, eyes wide. “And what’s the wanker done to deserve it? John loved the Army and John loved doctoring – look how those turned out. He’s just repeating his own history, insert the Empire and Sherlock and you get the same tragedy. Caring isn’t an advantage, Moll. Better to close yourself off and hate the world.”

“You think hate isn’t just another form of caring?”

“Works for me,” said Artie with a shrug.

“No,” said Molly after a moment of studying him. “I don’t think it does.”

Artie’s mouth dropped open. “Oi!”

The dining room door opened again, and Mary stuck her head in. “Er, guys? John?”

John looked around the corner from the washing-up room.

“Come here,” said Mary quietly, and after a few cautionary looks with each other, they followed her.

The dining room was nearly empty. The last customers were shrugging on their coats, chatting and laughing, friendly and well-fed. Their table was littered with the debris of crumbled serviettes and half-full glasses of water and wine and scotch. The quartet was just headed out the door when one turned and saw the group standing by the kitchen door.

“Oh, hullo,” said the man, eyes smiling. He was adjusting the hat on his thinning, slicked back hair, and he had a sharp nose and deep-set eyes. He seemed to look right through John to his very heart, and John wondered if he knew the fellow. “Are you the proprietor of this establishment? Excellent meal, sir, excellent.”

“Thank you,” said John.

“Yeah, really…really good,” said another of the quartet. He was whippet-thin, with stubble on his chin and hair that might not have seen a shower in weeks. There was a certain vacancy to his speech, as if he was thinking something on the other side of the world, and he fixed the plaid scarf around his neck like a fashion accessory.

“We’ll have to come again,” said a third – he was a bit more heavy-set than the rest of them, with tight curly hair and a knowing grin. “Always good to revisit the old favorites.”

“This was our last meal, actually,” said John. “We’re closing for business tonight.”

“Oh?” asked the first man. “That’s rather a shame. Well, take your final bow, sir. The food was excellent.”
John couldn’t speak. He simply nodded, and felt Mary slip her hand into his. He gripped her fingers tightly.

The quartet headed out into the night; the fourth man, who hadn’t said a word, looked back and smiled at them. He had a kind face, friendly eyes, and a moustache that was surely the envy of any Hussair worth his salt. John thought he could see a bit of military bearing, despite his girth.

“I’m sure it will all work out,” he said gently. “A good evening to you all.”

And then they were gone. John let out the breath he’d been holding.

“Well,” he said, and looked around the empty dining room.

“Oh,” said Molly, faintly.

“Yeah,” said Artie.

There wasn’t much else to say. John knew they were thinking back to the first time they’d seen it, not even two weeks ago – with all the lights blazing, and the cameras running. With the people outside lining up for a glimpse and a nosh. It felt as if it were a thousand weeks ago, instead of two.

“I wish we’d been able to stay open another week,” blurted out Molly. “So Sherlock could have—”

“Molly,” groaned Artie. “The wanker up and left without a word. We shouldn’t give a rat’s arse what he could have or could not have seen.”

“It’s all right,” said John.

“I can wish it!” cried Molly. “I just…I wanted a happy ending, that’s all.”

“Oh, go read a fairy tale,” said Artie disdainfully.

“Shut it, you two,” said Harry, and she went to lock the door. She wasn’t halfway across the floor when it opened again, and Jim Moriarty stepped inside.

“Oh, for fock’s sake,” said Artie.

Jim’s hand went to his chest in mock shock. “Is that any way to greet your new boss?”

“It would be if you were my boss,” counted Artie.

“Oh, right,” said Jim. “Which reminds me. You’re fired.”

“Eh,” said Artie with a shrug.

“So,” said Jim, beginning to stroll across the dining room to examine a map on the wall. “What was our take for today?”

“Our take,” said Harry. “I read the contract. Everything we earn up until midnight tonight is ours, not yours.”

“Well,” said Jim, peering at the map. “Knowing the take gives me an indication, that’s all.”

“I’ll give you an indication. You’re a bloody wanker, that’s your indication.”

“Artie,” hissed Mary.
“Indication of what?” asked John. Mary’s fingers were still grasped in his hand; he thought he should let her go, but if he did, he might have flown at Moriarty.

“Oh,” said Moriarty. “Of whether or not I should keep the Empire running, or burn it to the ground. I’m inclined to just chuck it all and burn it, you see. But if you’re bringing in, I suppose I could rehire your staff – Wiggins excepted, of course, don’t take it personally, but you’re something of a little punk – and keep the old fires going. Moriarty’s Empire – has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“You arse,” said Artie, shaking. Molly put a hand on his arm in a desperate bid to steady him.

“See?” said Jim. He walked back toward the group. “Punk.”

“I’m not working for you,” said Mary. “I’ll go to London first. I’ll die of tuberculosis. Find another waitress.”

“Me neither,” said Molly quickly. “Not the dying part, though. Sorry.”

Jim appeared to consider this, his shoulders and head bobbing side to side. “Mmm…all right.”

“Get out,” said Harry.

“Never mind,” said Jim, and his expression turned from playful to cruel. He stared at John. “I changed my mind. Happens; I’m just soooo changeable. But on second thought, the Empire can’t be allowed to continue. It just can’t. Do you know what I’m going to do, Johnny boy? Can you guess?”

Jim was nose to nose with him now. John held himself tight, kept his back straight, stared right into the heart of darkness standing before him. He felt Mary behind him, could practically hear Artie’s angry breaths and the whimper in Molly’s throat.

“You love it, don’t you?” said Jim softly, staring at him. “It means so much to you, this building. Everything that happened in it. Your childhood and your best memories. You don’t see the new chairs or tables or flooring when you look in this dining room, do you, Johnny? You see the draperies and the carpets. You see James Watson, walking around as if he were still here. You went to medical school, but it was always the Empire. You went to Afghanistan, just like your grandfathers, but it was always the Empire. It’s not just a restaurant, is it, Johnny boy? It’s your heart beating in this building, I can hear it. Can’t you? Ba-bump. Ba-bump. And do you know what I’m going to do to it?

“I’m going to burn it,” said Jim softly, staring at him. “I’m going to burn it down the ground. Burn it straight out of you.”

Artie was like a shot from a gun; he flew at Jim, wrapped his arms around him, as if to tackle him straight back down to hell with a blood-curdling yell. For a moment, John couldn’t think; all he could see were the two of them, arms locked around the other, falling, and he was so shocked he couldn’t move.

And then Harry and Molly had their arms around Artie, pulling him back, pulling him off Jim Moriarty, and everyone was shouting and hollering, and John could hear the shouting along with a ringing in his ears.

“You fucking spider, I will fucking write you out of the fucking story!” howled Artie, pointing at Jim.

“Artie, stop it! Stop it!” Harry shrieked.
“Please, Artie, please just stop, it’s okay, I promise!” Molly begged.

Jim stood up. His breathing was ragged, his hair was mussed, and he tugged on his suit coat to straighten it. “Westwood!” he snapped at Artie, angrily, and then glanced at John. “Your little bulldog can attack me as much as he likes; I’ve still won.”

And John….began to laugh.

It hit him so clearly – Jim standing there, angry and defiant and sore. Artie, face red and hands clenched, a picture-perfect rendition of righteous indignation. Harry’s face set and determined. Molly near tears but her mouth an even, unerring line. Mary standing behind him, her fingers in his, her hand around his shoulders, as if she were afraid he’d fly at Moriarty as well.

“John?” asked Harry, turning to him.

“I’m fine,” said John, and he struggled to hold in the laughter. “I’m…I’m fine.” He turned to Mary. “It’s okay. You’ve got me. I know.”

John watched Mary’s eyes turn from quizzical to smiling. If there was anyone in the world who understood John – it was Mary. Always Mary. “Yeah,” she said slowly, and she dropped her arm. “Okay.”

“Take it,” said John to Jim. “Burn it. Whatever you like. Doesn’t matter.”

This was clearly not the answer Jim expected. “Excuse me?”

“This building – it’s just a building. It’s four walls and a lick of paint and an oven,” said John. The grin was so wide on his face, he thought he’d start to float. “And if you can’t understand that – well, I feel sorry for you. I really do.”

“I’m going to burn it down,” said Jim, as if explaining to a small child.

“Have at it,” said John cheerfully. “Might want to make sure the insurance is paid up on it first, though. Bit of friendly advice. ‘Course, they won’t pay out on arson. That’s what it’d be, arson, wouldn’t it?” he asked, turning to Harry. “I mean, we’ve got witnesses to him saying that’s what he planned to do.”

“Yup,” said Harry, catching on, and she grinned at him.

“They won’t be able to prove it,” said Jim. “I’m very good.”

“I’m sure you are,” said John. “But even if they don’t catch you – it won’t matter. You really think my heart is tied up in this building? You’re wrong. You’re so wrong. You don’t understand a thing.”

“Really,” said Jim, cold. “Why doesn’t the great and noble John Watson explain to me where I went wrong?”

John took a step forward, nose to nose with Jim Moriarty again. “I believe you, you know. I believe you are my cousin, that James Watson was your grandfather.”

Behind him, there was a gasp from Harry, a small sound from Molly, and a curse under Artie’s breath. But John stared at Jim, saw the man’s eyes dart back and forth as he tried to understand.

“All you had to do,” said John, “was to come to me or to Harry, tell us your story. Tell us who you
were. We would have welcomed you. Maybe not right away, but...we only have each other left, you know. And I don’t know about Harry, but I would have tried to include you. To make you feel as if the Empire was yours too.”

Harry made a strangled sound, as if she were trying to reconcile herself to such a thought.

“No, you wouldn’t have,” said Jim. “You would have hated me.”

“Maybe at first,” said John. “I would have gotten over it.”

“You would have hated me,” insisted Jim.

“All right,” said John. “I would have hated you. But I wouldn’t have discounted you as not being family. That’s what you don’t get, see. This building, this isn’t my heart. This is just a building. So burn it. Straight to the ground, dance around the flames. The part that’s important to me – the part that I love more than anything on this Earth, you can’t find in these walls. It’s them.” He waved his hand back to Mary and Molly, Artie and Harry. They were deadly silent behind him, but they were still there.

John leaned forward, until his nose nearly touched Jim’s. “Burn it. Burn it all. You’re not going to touch me. Ever. Again.”

John stepped away. “Get out of my restaurant.”

Jim sucked in a breath. He tugged on his suit coat, and stared at all of them.

And then, without a word, he turned and left. The door bell rang a merry tune as it slammed behind him.

John let out the breath he’d been holding for three months solid, and turned to face his family.

They stared back, eyes wide, and John was surprised to find that the tears in their eyes matched the tears in his.

“Well,” he said into the silence, “Molly. You’re definitely taking that pan with you.”

“Oh, John,” said Molly, and threw herself at him.

*

“So,” said Harry, as John pulled the car up to the house on Baker Street. The back was full of the flotsam and jetsam from the restaurant. Artie had taken the maps of India and Japan; Mary had kept the earthenware jars from the Middle East and Italy. Molly had decided on not only the precious pan, but the baking trays, cooling racks, Silpats and, in a fit of scavenging hysteria, the KitchenAid mixer.

“If he’s just going to burn it,” she said. “And if he’s not, he doesn’t deserve it anyway.”

“Hear hear,” cheered Mary. “Hand over the dishtowels, those are mine.”

“Better you than me,” said Artie.

John had taken down the portraits of his grandfathers himself. The Johns, in their dated uniforms and suits; Hamish with his wide, welcoming smile. James, quiet and mysterious in a way that John only now appreciated.
He didn’t see judgment in their expressions anymore. Now, he looked at them, and thought he saw them smiling in approval. He wrapped them carefully in the extra tablecloths, and carried them to the little blue car waiting in the alleyway.

“So,” said Harry in the car, sitting outside the house on Baker Street with their history waiting in the backseat. “What next?”

“No idea,” said John. He turned off the ignition, but didn’t get out right away. “I called Greg Lestrade on Friday.”

“Oh,” said Harry. She stared straight ahead. “Don’t imagine he was too pleased.”

“No. Disappointed, shocked, horrified, all that. Said they’d still air the show, though.”

“Really?”

“Well, it’s not as if we’re the first restaurant to close before he could return.”

Harry was quiet. “I’m sorry. I wish…I wish we could have stayed open another two weeks, so you could see him again.”

“Yeah, that’d be good film, wouldn’t it?” John scoffed quietly. “All the awkward silences and unspoken apologies. Worse if he just swanned in and out as if nothing happened.”

“John—”

“No, it’s …it’s not all right. But it will be. I just need a bit of time.”

“You loved him.”

John smiled. “I don’t think past tense applies.”

Harry nodded. “I miss her.”

John didn’t ask who she meant. He reached over and pulled Harry into him, let her bury her face in his coat. Harry didn’t cry – Harry never cried, not really, not over the important things. But she wrapped her arms around him as best as she was able in the little car, and when her breaths had evened out, she squeezed him tight.

“I know,” said John. “Let’s go somewhere.”

“Huh?” Harry pushed herself up.

“Let’s go somewhere. Artie says he’s going to Switzerland. Let’s go.”

“To Switzerland?”

“No! To…I don’t know. Thailand. Australia. Argentina. Somewhere with fantastic and fascinating food. Where there’s bright colors and beautiful landscapes. You can photograph them. I can eat. Let’s just go. Nothing’s holding us here anymore. The house can sit empty for a little while longer.”

“John – how? We can’t just go off and travel.”

“Why not?” John turned to her, getting excited now. “We’ve got seven hundred thousand quid and nothing to spend it on. I’m not quite ready to retire yet. We’ve got to do something – so let’s go out
and figure out what.”

Harry laughed. “You’re…you’re not joking.”

“I don’t think I’ve been more serious about anything in my life.”

Harry bit her lips, but wasn’t able to hold in the smile. “I don’t even own a camera anymore.”

“Seven hundred thousand quid,” John reminded her. “We’ll buy you one. A fantastic one.”

Harry began to laugh. “Oh my God. We’re going to Thailand.”

John grinned at her.

“It’s a good place to start,” he said.

Sherlock was bored.

It wasn’t a familiar boredom. Over the last three weeks, Sherlock had discovered that there were multiple ways to be bored. Ennui, which was the familiar, pre-John version of boredom, when nothing in the past, present or future held any sort of appeal or promise. When the only thing to do was to destroy BBC property with a pencil and trade insults with whomever happened to be near.

Then there was tedium, when there was something that posed some sort of interest on the horizon. Far enough away that it wasn’t quite on his mind just yet, but at least beckoning with a seductive promise of entertainment, however fleeting.

But in this moment, Sherlock had an entirely different kind of boredom, because there was an underlying impatience to it. Something was coming, something delicious and wonderful and all Sherlock wanted was for time to speed up, for the waiting to be over, for the impossible time to be over.

Sherlock anticipated, and this sort of boredom was the worst kind, because the only thing that went through his head was the repetition of the single word. John. John. John.

“Right, so,” said Lestrade, climbing into the front seat of the car next to Sally. “That’s Brummie done. Next stop, Blackpool.”

“Off we pop, then,” said Sally, and started to pull out into traffic.

Sherlock sat up. “Upper Brickley.”

“Hmm?”

“Lestrade,” said Sherlock shortly. “We’re going to Upper Brickley, not Blackpool. I realize it’s a lot of cities that begin with B, but it is your job to keep them straight.”

“We’re not going to Upper Brickley,” said Lestrade absently as he looked through his clipboard. Sally glanced away from the road, for just a moment, and when Sherlock glared at her, her head snapped back on target. “Sally, did you make the hotel reservations?”

“No, I thought we’d just park our carcasses on the nearest available park bench.”

“Piss off.”
“Stop asking stupid questions.”

“Upper. Brickley,” insisted Sherlock, and he leaned forward in between the front seats. “Lestrade, you’re not listening to me.”

Another glance from Sally. Lestrade’s neck tensed.

“Honestly, Lestrade. I can read the muscles in the back of your neck; you’re concealing something.”

“Well spotted,” muttered Lestrade.

“Upper—”

“I heard you the first ten times, Sherlock. We’re not going to Upper Brickley because there’s no reason to go. The Empire closed two weeks ago.”

Silence in the car. Sherlock let go of the seats and fell back, stunned.

Closed.

“That’s impossible.”

“And yet, it happened,” said Lestrade.

“But…that’s impossible. There was no reason for them to close. They were earning money, the customer base was solid. They had more than enough income to qualify for a loan to cover the debts Harry Watson incurred, there was no reason—”

“John Watson rang three weeks ago,” said Lestrade. “He didn’t want us to make a wasted trip.”

Sherlock bit his lip. “John rang you.”

Lestrade didn’t answer.

“John rang you.”

Impossible that the Empire could have closed. The only thing that remained was that John didn’t want him there. Improbable, but it had to be the truth.

Sherlock thought of Lestrade’s angry words in London, and wondered exactly how improbable it was that John simply didn’t want to see him again.

Sherlock sank back down onto the backseat. He pressed his fingers together and thought quietly.

“Sherlock, I’m sorry.”

“I’m thinking,” said Sherlock shortly.

“Look, I know you were looking forward—”

“Please stop talking, Sally, you’re lowering the IQ of the entire car.”

Sally sighed with impatience, but didn’t say another word.

Sherlock returned to his planning. Improbable. Impossible. For a moment, he wasn’t entirely sure he knew the difference.
Two and a half hours later, Sally pulled up to the little hotel in Blackpool. Sherlock half recognized it from three weeks previously. He smiled. That made things somewhat easier, because he knew the layout.

Half an hour after that, he had already stolen Sally’s car and was driving toward Upper Brickley and John.

* 

As he drove, he planned.

Drive into Upper Brickley. Go straight to the Empire. Park the car, walk through the front doors, find John, snog him senseless in the dining room, create a scene, possibly end up with their pictures plastered on Page 3 of the Daily Mail.

Well, that was one option.

Drive into Upper Brickley. Go straight to the Empire. Park the car, walk in through the kitchens, find John at the stove, snog him senseless. Have to suffer the hoots and catcalls of Molly and Artie, who would undoubtedly be quite pleased with themselves and with him.

No, not quite.

Find John at the stove, attempt to snog him senseless, but be beaten back by the irrationally overprotective force of Molly and Artie, who would whip him with wooden spoons until he was left bleeding on the pavement in the alleyway.

Yes, that was more likely. Better to go with the dining room scenario, publicity be damned. It wasn’t as if he had a show to consider anymore.

Then again, John might care.

Right then.

Drive to Upper Brickley, go straight to the house on Baker Street. Park. Slip into John’s bedroom through the window. Wait.

Yes. There was always the possibility that John would think he was just another intruder and kill him before turning on the lights, but at least whatever happened would be private, and privacy was something John appreciated. Mycroft would ensure that John got off any murder charges.

Bloody hell, Mycroft would very likely take John out to dinner afterwards in thanks.

The plan now formulated, Sherlock sped up a little, and when he saw the signs indicating Upper Brickley, he set his mouth in a thin line and tried desperately not to smile. Mustn’t meet John smiling. Mustn’t appear smug in any way. Calm, contrite, collected. That was what Sherlock needed to be.

He drove through Upper Brickley, bypassing the Empire, because if he saw the lights on, he might give up on the plan altogether and simply stop in. Mustn’t stop in.

Baker Street. Sherlock turned the car, drove the short distance down it, and parked. The little blue car was in the driveway, but that wasn’t anything unusual. John would have walked to work, of course. And the lights being off – well, there were still a few hours of dinner service left, of course. Nothing unusual there.
Sherlock leapt easily to the trellis, and began to climb. It was when he reached John’s bedroom window that he discovered the unusual.

John’s bedroom window was locked.

Sherlock clung to the trellis and considered.

Well. Perhaps not quite so unusual. He considered breaking the glass, vetoed that idea, and scaled down the trellis again.

The front door was locked. As was the back door. There wasn’t a key under any of the potted plants or the mat by the front door. John wasn’t tall enough to rest a spare key on the top of the doorframe. Frustrated, Sherlock looked through the kitchen window.

The kitchen was spotless. Not a single dish left in the sink. Not a single unscrubbed pan left on the hopper.

But what was worse, what was most telling of all: the refrigerator was unplugged. Sherlock could see it, the cord a dark snake on the counter, where someone had unplugged it.

The only reason it could be unplugged was because someone did not plan on using it for some time.

Sherlock backed away from the window and tried not to think. He got back into Sally’s car, started the engine, drove, and tried not to think. Autopilot took him into town, the very short trip to the Empire, and once he turned onto the street, he knew. He wasn’t thinking, but he knew.

Because the Empire was...gone.

Sherlock parked the car and stepped out onto the pavement. He kept one hand on the roof, a touchstone, something to keep him grounded, while he watched the ash and debris carried by the wind into the day’s fading sun.

The building that had formerly housed the Empire was a shell, darkened by fire and utterly destroyed within. It looked a bit like the space left behind when a tooth had fallen out; Sherlock could see straight through the collapsed brick walls into the kitchen, and beyond that into the alleyway behind it. There were scorch marks on the walls, the once-silvery paper melted and curling, barely recognizable. Here half a table; there a chair fallen on its side. The door to the walk-in had been removed entirely – likely a precaution against people who might be accidentally trapped inside. Sherlock could see the buckled walls of the oven, the gaping hole in the floor of Harry’s flat, deeply darkened with smoke damage.

Sherlock stared at the wreckage, and wondered, almost wildly, where John had gone. He hadn’t been in the restaurant, had he? Lestrade would have said if John was dead. Sherlock couldn’t see smoke, the fire had clearly been some time ago. Lestrade would have known, if John was dead. He would have told him. He would have—

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock barely heard the voice. It wasn’t quite the one he wanted to hear.

“Sherlock.”

The hand on his arm now, and Sherlock looked blearily at the woman standing next to him. He was so addled, his mind racing through the building across the street, that it took him over a minute
to remember how to speak, and then another few seconds to remember her name.

“Mrs Hudson. I…”

She smiled sympathetically, and pulled him away from the car. “It’s a bit of a shock, isn’t it? Come on, I’ll get you a tea.”

Sherlock let her pull him into her bakery. The windows were gone, he noted, boarded over with plywood, but inside the lights were blazing. He almost wished it was dark and dim, or that at least he could keep looking at the wreckage of the Empire. Perhaps that was just as well; he might look for John’s ghost to stand up and wave.

Mrs Hudson puttered behind the counter, setting out plates and cakes and forks and tea, a non-stop litany of talk.

“The blast took out my windows; lucky I wasn’t standing near them, I would have been thrown across the room. Beastly cold inside. Aren’t I lucky for ovens going all the time? And everyone stops in now, they want a bit of a look, and a chance to mourn a little, too.”

There was a knot in Sherlock’s throat, and he worked his jaw, unable to speak. Mrs Hudson glanced up and saw him, and for a moment was shocked.

“Oh, no,” she breathed, and left the tea things on the counter and went to take up Sherlock’s hand. “No one was hurt. The building was empty.”

Sherlock couldn’t breathe. “John—?”

“No there,” said Mrs Hudson firmly, and only then could Sherlock let loose the breath that had been choking him. He closed his eyes and breathed again, the sensation of air filling his lungs and being pushed out again.

When he opened his eyes, Mrs Hudson was still there, patting his hand, looking concerned.

“What happened?” asked Sherlock, as calmly as he could manage, which wasn’t terribly calm at all.

“Oh!” said Mrs Hudson, disgusted now, and she dropped Sherlock’s hand and went back to the tea things. “The bank happened. A silly, ridiculous loan that Harry made. I’m not sure about the details; they were set to pay off most of it, I understand, but there was some kind of incidental charge they didn’t know about, and they couldn’t pay that, some silly small amount, and so the bank foreclosed. Valentine’s Day, even, isn’t that just the fly in the soup?”

“The bank,” echoed Sherlock. He thought of Jim Moriarty, the insidious little man in the grey suit, and wondered how he could go about slipping nightshade into his dinner.

“Yes. Horrible. And they were doing so well, too – nearly two weeks, and they were all hopping. Never a line out the door, understand, but rarely more than two or three tables without customers. So very well. You’d have been proud.”

Mrs Hudson set the tray of things down on the table in front of Sherlock with a clatter and collapsed on the seat opposite him. “Oh, it’s awful. I’ve had the Empire across the way since I opened this bakery. I was convinced it would see me out. I’d always had half a mind that John or Harry would cater my funeral. Terribly sad. I can’t seem to stop crying.”

She sniffed, less for emphasis than for need, and wiped at her eyes again. They were red, Sherlock
noted, and he glanced at the tea tray.

Muffins, dotted with berries and sprinkled with sugar.

“Molly is working for you.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs Hudson. “I took her on the next day. Such a clever baker. She’s really too good for me, but she needs someone to buck up her courage before going up to London to be with her young gentleman.”

“Lestrade is hardly young.”

“An expression, dear. Mary’s working in Canterbury, some lovely little restaurant there. Biding her time, I think, trying to decide what she wants to do. Artie—” Mrs Hudson sighed and poured the tea out. “Would you believe he’s declared that he’s going back to school? I never would have thought it. Claims he’s going to learn to be a journalist. He wants to expose corruption and write chivalrous tales where good triumphs over evil. He had a very clever way of putting it, I’m sure I’m not getting it quite right.”

“Close enough, I’m sure.” *But John, what about John?*

Mrs Hudson didn’t say. She simply drank her tea.

Sherlock picked up the cup, and set it back down again. He took up the spoon and began to stir it.

“You could add sugar or milk first.”

Sherlock slammed the spoon back on the table.

“Traveling,” said Mrs Hudson, and she was so matter-of-fact that Sherlock half wondered if the old woman wasn’t the cleverest of them all. “Harry talked about Thailand, John had his heart on Australia. They had all that lolly from the loan the bank wouldn’t let them pay off, and John had it in his head to use it to get some ideas for a new venture, so it’s even a business expense. They left two days before the fire. I think Mary planned to write to them and let them know, but she said she wasn’t even sure of their itinerary.”

Sherlock was up like a flash, and halfway to the door when Mrs Hudson spoke again.

“Don’t.”

He stopped.

“I broke his heart.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Hudson, and sipped her tea. “That’s a bit of why I’m saying it, Sherlock. You broke his heart.”

“I can mend it for him.”

“No.” Mrs Hudson set down the teacup and turned to face him. “You can’t. If you fix it for him, he’s yours. I’m not saying it wouldn’t be a good thing – but it wouldn’t be the right thing, for John. Or for you, I think. If you come together, you need to do it when you are whole, not because you are broken.

“And anyway,” added Mrs Hudson, turning back to her tea. “I think he’s already on the way to mending it himself. Now sit down and drink your tea, because Lestrade rang Molly an hour ago,
and I’m sure he’ll be here soon, if the shouting I overheard on the phone is any indication. I’d rather not send you back to Blackpool without something in your stomach.”

Sherlock watched Mrs Hudson drink her tea, and considered his options.

“So I just…wait. And hope he comes back. Is that it? I don’t get to talk to him again, or see him, or tell him that—“ Sherlock swallowed. “I left without telling him goodbye. I didn’t even tell him I was going. What kind of person does that, Mrs Hudson? To someone who…” Sherlock let out his breath in one deep huff. “How am I supposed to tell him what he means to me if I can’t even say the words aloud to myself?”

“A very good question,” said Mrs Hudson. “And one which I think needs answering before you say anything at all.”

A chink between the plywood and the windowframe; if Sherlock stood very still in exactly the right place, he could see a thin strip of the burnt-out Empire. He stared at the wreckage, imagined John walking away, whole and unscathed, without once looking back. His jaw set and determined, his chin high, his spirit unbroken.

Sherlock straightened his own back. He could do this. He could. If John could go on…having lost everything that mattered, with only the memory of a bare week to sustain him…Sherlock could find the strength to do it as well.

He turned and carefully sat down across from Mrs Hudson.

“The muffins are a bit hot still,” said Mrs Hudson. “Don’t burn your tongue on the berries, now.”

“Thank you, Mrs Hudson,” said Sherlock, and drank his tea.
At first [making mistakes in the kitchen] broke my heart, but then I came to understand that learning how to fix one’s mistakes, or live with them, was an important part of becoming a cook.

--Julia Child

Dear John and Harry,

You’re both brutes, absolute brutes. I opened the box you sent and screamed. I think the neighbors thought I was being murdered. You’re very lucky I didn’t have a heart attack or it would have been your fault! I put the mask on the back of the door in the loo; now every time someone closes the door for a wee they see it reflected in the mirror and oh, what a laugh I have hearing them holler. Thank you.

Sarah saw it, and screamed for a minute, and then came right out and demanded one of her own. She says it’s Maori, and she’s keen on anything from New Zealand, and please to send her one, John. I’d let her have this one, but my sister will be here next week, and I’ve been aching to take the Mickey out of her.

But honestly, it’s awful. And not so much as a note to tell me anything about it or even where you are! Lucky for you, Harry gave me a general idea of where you’d be and when, so I’m going to mail this package off to the address in Thailand and hope it doesn’t miss you.

I’m quite jealous, by the way. There’s a Thai restaurant across the street and it’s lovely. They recognize me, too – it’s funny, the people who say, “Oi, don’t I know you from somewhere”. Scads of them, but none of them really ever remember why, they just leave me larger tips, particularly the men, who might be feeling guilty over one-night assignations they’re afraid they’ve forgotten. It took a few days before I realized that’s why the tips were overlarge. How ridiculous! If any of those men had spent the night and forgotten, you know I wouldn’t let them get away that easily.

But then there’s the ones who do realize, and then it’s questions, questions, questions. “Oh, it’s so lovely to see you up on your feet. So terrible about the Empire. How is Molly? How is Artie? How is John?” I tell them, yes, thank you, I was never really off my feet, but I’m glad to be here. Molly is lovely, she’s working as a baker and quite happy. Artie is pursuing a range of interests before he settles on one. John is getting a bit of travel in. We’re all doing splendidly, thanks so much for asking.

I tell them it is terrible about the Empire, and no, there aren’t any plans to rebuild at this time. I don’t tell them that the police are still investigating the rumors of arson, though I don’t know where the rumors originated. (No, honestly, I don’t! Molly and Artie swear up and down that it wasn’t them either, and I’m sure it wasn’t either of you.) There’s even been a private investigator out to question all of us – Dippick or Dimmock or something like that – so don’t be surprised if someone comes knocking on your door as well. I told him you were out of the country when the Empire burnt and that seemed to make him feel better, so perhaps he won’t bother you after all.

But he hasn’t closed the investigation either, and the last time I saw Jim Moriarty in town, he was looking rather skittish.

They’re always happy to hear about Molly; her love of baking shone through, I suppose. And she really is happy with Mrs Hudson (who tells me she goes to Baker Street to air out your house every so often; she tells me this, and immediately adds that she’s not your housekeeper, but she’d even
dusted once or twice to keep it fresh, just in case you return unexpectedly. Send her something lovely. Not a mask.)

They chuckle when I tell them about Artie. I don’t tell them that he’s decided against journalism; now he’s decided on being a doctor, because as he says, he can slip poison in and no one would be the wiser. I told him he ought to be a butler. “But the butler always does it,” said Artie. “Oh, Artie, such a cliché; no one would suspect the cliché.” I think he might actually try it, though, so please don’t hire a butler if it’s Artie.

But they’re never quite satisfied when I tell them about you, John. “Travel?” they say, and their eyes light up a bit. “Alone or with a companion?” Which is a terribly nosy thing to ask, but I tell them you’re with Harry, and they look a little downcast. “Oh,” they said. “Are he and Sherlock still in touch, at least?”

“No idea,” I say, and then I have to fill someone else’s water glass, because if I stand at that table another minute I’ll pour the entire bottle of water over their heads, and that’ll be the end of me.

The restaurant’s lovely. The manager is quite nice and the day after the show aired, he let me call in sick without even complaining about having to find coverage. The other waitresses are sweet and the menu is quite nice and the kitchen staff is a bit uppity but otherwise very dedicated and the customers are mostly regulars so they know what they want and we know it too, and it’s all just so incredibly boring that I could choke myself on an apron. I’m halfway tempted to go to London and try to find something there, but I’m afraid that everywhere will be boring after those last few weeks. Nearly everywhere, but I think applying to work with Sherlock again would be about as sensible as shooting myself in the foot or offering myself up to Artie as a test subject.

I’m also not entirely certain how you would feel about it, John, so I’ll lay my cards out and let you tell me what you think.

And now for my enclosure. Greg brought it down when he visited Molly a few days ago – they’re terribly sappy with each other, it’s all sugar and cream when they’re in the same room together. It’s utterly disgusting, be very glad you’re not here to see it. Greg says it’s region-free, so you ought to be able to play it in any DVD player you can find. And do sit and watch it, both of you. It’s lovely, it really is. I have to admit, it hurts a bit to watch, especially knowing it’s all gone and we’ll never be able to go back, but…oh, what a lovely hurt, in a way.

It makes me miss you both terribly. Because you know I don’t think about either of you the rest of the day. Except when I shut the lav door, and then I don’t miss you at all.

There’s one other episode on the disc. I can’t decide if you should watch it first or last; perhaps you should flip a coin. Irene Adler is an absolute witch, but I’ve never laughed so hard in my life.

And John…if you ever return to Upper Brickley, or if you never return…we’ll still love you. I just wanted you to know.

With love,

Mary

*

[EXTERIOR, Upper Brickley, sunrise. Birds are singing, a car passes on a lonely road, headed out of town. Deliveries to the local markets, children headed to school, shops opening. Shots of the town slowly waking up, but except for the incidental noises captured on film there’s no voice-over]
or speech during any of this.]

[EXTERIOR, The Empire.]

SHERLOCK V.O.: The Empire, Monday morning. The restaurant is typically closed on Mondays, and its staff takes this opportunity to take a breather from the pressures of customers, and instead learns to try something new, while the production team uses the lack of customers to give the dining room a new look to match the new menu.

[INTERIOR, The Empire’s dining room. Someone strips the wallpaper from the walls with a satisfying tear. Behind them, the tables and chairs are slowly being carried out.]

DESIGNER: Bright, we’re thinking bright. Lots of light, lots of open space. This is a lovely old building; there’s hardwood under the carpet so we’re going back to that. It’s easier to clean than carpeting.

[The buzzing whirr of a sander, as someone sets to work on the dusty and stained hardwood floors.]

DESIGNER, cont.: All the darkness and the carpeting, it’s just a cover. We want to strip it away and leave everything exposed. The Empire’s got nothing to hide.

[Another shot inside; the portraits of the Johns, James, and Hamish are being taken down from the wall. The camera focuses on the oldest portrait, that of John H., as the worker rests it against the wall, and then wraps it carefully in a spare tablecloth.]

JOHN v.o.: I’m named for my great grandfathers. The first John – well, the original John H., his son was the second John – the first John H, he was in the British Army in the first Anglo-Afghan war, in 1880 and 1881. He was in Pakistan for four, five days, not very long, and then he was injured and caught malaria and was shipped home. He brought home some souvenirs, the rugs we’ve got on the walls, and a recipe for Afghan pilau that he made every year until he died. He ended up marrying my great-great grandmother, Mary, and they had my great-grandfather, the second John.

[Now the next John:]

JOHN v.o.: That was…1890. He was twenty-four when the First World War started. He had one of those wartime marriages, went off to fight in the trenches, managed to make it through with barely a scratch, and then went on to Russia for their civil war after leaving his wife pregnant with my grandfather, James. He brought home recipes for breads and chickens and red peppers.

[The portrait of John #2 is wrapped up and taken away. James takes the stage.]

JOHN v.o.: My grandfather, James, he’s the one who started the restaurant when he came home from the Second World War. He joined the Navy, I think mostly to needle his father, and he brought home all these Asian dishes: noodles and fresh garlic and ginger. And he came back to Upper Brickley, and he’d always grown up with this food that his dad and granddad had brought back, and he wanted to share what he’d found with everyone. So he opened a restaurant, in 1949, and it was a fantastically stupid move, because rationing was worse than during the war, and he and my gran nearly went broke with the venture. But they stuck it out.

[Now for Hamish.]

JOHN v.o.: My dad, Hamish, he kept it up after my Granddad died. He’d grown up with the Empire, like me. Never thought he’d do anything different. I’m not sure he was all that great of a
cook, actually— but he believed in the restaurant. He was always happy to let us go our own way, me and Harry. Harry with her photography, me with doctoring. I think it’s because he knew we’d always come back.

[A pause, while Hamish is wrapped and carried into the manager’s office, to join the other three portraits leaning against the desk.]

JOHN v.o.: He was right.

[INTERIOR, Office, JOHN sitting at the desk, obviously being interviewed.]

VOICE o.s., recognizable as LESTRADE: You went to Afghanistan.

JOHN: Like the original John H., yes. He was a doctor, too. My life mirrors his in some pretty interesting ways. He didn’t have the Empire to come home to, though.

VOICE: Is that a good or bad thing, you think? Having the Empire?

[JOHN smiles, appears to think for a moment.]

JOHN: Both. The Empire’s given me something steady to hold onto. Trying to save it, trying to keep it a viable business— that’s given me purpose. I needed that, desperately. I think any soldier coming home, injured or not, we need something like that. We need something steady and some kind of purpose, or we just wake up in the mornings and the depression, it’s so heavy, you can’t even get out of bed. You can’t do anything but sort of see the world in shades of grey. If I hadn’t had the Empire—I don’t know. I would have been wandering around lost, waiting for someone to recognize me, waiting for something to happen to me. God knows if it ever would have done.

VOICE: And bad?

[JOHN’s smile falters, just a little.]

JOHN: Well. Maybe not so much bad. Not really. It’s because of the Empire that I’ve figured out who—what I need. If I can’t have it…well, that’s not the Empire’s fault. I’ll just have to hope it works out for the best, won’t I?

[INTERIOR, The Empire’s kitchen. MOLLY is kneading a round of sticky dough. She’s wearing an apron over her chef’s whites, hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and she’s concentrating as if taking the hardest exam of her life.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: In the dining room, the old is replaced by new. But in the kitchen— the new is being replaced with the old. Not in terms of food— but in terms of energy. The Empire’s problem is that it has been bored. Stuck in a rut where they served food that meant nothing to them or to anyone, stuck serving the same uninteresting dishes day in and day out. But one thing the staff has in spades is heart— and like ripping up carpet to find hard-wood underneath, it only takes a little bit of work to uncover it.

MOLLY: So Sherlock left me a task. We’re not going to have a bread basket anymore, not as such. Instead he says I need to work on making a fresh pasta dish of some kind. I’ve got a recipe and a few variations, and I’m to try every one of them.

ARTIE: Pasta is boring. Now, this—

[ARTIE brandishes a kitchen torch, setting the flame as high as it can go. The crackle and hiss of the torch clearly delights him.]
MOLLY: Artie, if you keep doing that, you’re going to run out of butane.

ARTIE: I will buy more.

MOLLY: You’re broke.

ARTIE: I will rob a bank and use the funds to buy more butane. And then I will buy a larger torch.

MOLLY: Aren’t you meant to be doing bread puddings?

[ARTIE wanders off; MOLLY turns back to her dough. A few moments later…]

ARTIE off-screen: OUCH.

MOLLY: I told you to stop playing with it.

ARTIE o.s.: I think I burned off my eyebrows.

[INTERIOR, unknown room, likely a hall or corridor judging from the stairs; the washroom is just visible at the bottom. MARY is packing up tablecloths. The pixilated manager is helping her.]

MARY: I’m not going to miss ironing these anymore, I can tell you that.

MANAGER: Maybe we should save them.

MARY: To use as what? Togas? Oooo, that’s an idea. Let’s have a Roman night. Show up in a toga and you get a free drink.

MANAGER: Show up in a toga, and I think you’ve had plenty of drinks already.

MARY: Oi, Greg, what do you think? Would you show up in a toga if we offered you a free drink?

VOICE o.s.: Depends on the drink.

MARY: Depends on if Molly serves it, you mean.

MANAGER: And if she’s in a toga.

VOICE o.s.: Oi!

[INTERIOR, Kitchen. MOLLY frowns at a pot of gently boiling water.]

ARTIE: Well?

MOLLY: This is nothing at all like baking a pie.

ARTIE: There’s a box of pasta on the shelves. I’ll never breathe a word.

[But MOLLY shakes her head.]

MOLLY: No.

[She turns back to the chopping block and starts to mix up another bowl of flour and water.]

JOHN v.o.: Granddad believed in it. He loved the Empire, with everything he had.

[Another shot of ARTIE, carefully aiming the kitchen torch onto the ramekins, as the sugar slowly
melts and then goes golden brown. He grins.]

JOHN v.o.: He slept here, a lot of nights. He had burns on his arms up to his elbows and I don’t have a memory of him except for in this kitchen or this dining room, cooking food or serving food or watching his food being eaten.

[MOLLY again, setting a plate of ravioli in front of MARY, who squeals with glee, and lifts the fork to her mouth without hesitation. MOLLY watches, the pride evident in her face, while MARY eats with obvious enjoyment.]

JOHN v.o.: He always had this expression of... I don’t know, joy, maybe. Like that by eating his food, you were giving him the best of compliments. And I’d watch him, and I’d think – that’s the best thing ever. To watch something you’ve created be loved. To watch something you love be appreciated.

[Back to JOHN, sitting in his office, being interviewed.]

JOHN: I want that. Yeah.

VOICE: For you?

JOHN: For all of us. Everyone deserves to do something they love to do, and be appreciated for doing it.

[INTERIOR, The dining room, in fast-forward. The hardwood is being sanded, buffed, varnished. The walls are being sanded and repapered. The lighting is adjusted, the small shelving units are put in. Chairs and tables are replaced. And then it is done, and we’re looking at an empty dining room. At regular motion, a single figure walks in: SHERLOCK. He steps to the center of the room, looks around with a blank expression, and then gives a brisk nod of approval, before walking back out again.]

[A series of slow, loving, money-shots of the various things in the Empire’s kitchen: the oven, the racks of dishes, the pots and pans hanging overhead.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: One of the most important things to do when preparing a meal is to first prepare your mise en place: the line-up of all the ingredients you will need, properly prepared and ready for inclusion. Measure out the oils, chop the veg, mix the spices, sift the dry ingredients together. Without a proper mise, a chef can’t succeed.

[The crew, minus JOHN, wait in the kitchen in nervous anticipation. MOLLY bites her lip, ARTIE tosses an orange from hand to hand.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: It’s Tuesday, and the Empire has its mise en place. The dining room has undergone a refit; will it be a welcoming place to greet new customers, or will it remain bare and empty? Its staff had undergone trial by fire, learned to cook and cool properly in a matter of days. Will they turn out dishes fit for human consumption, or will they continue to flail and burn?

[JOHN now. He looks well-rested, a bit hopeful, but nervous: there’s an underlying tension under his skin. His eyes dart around, as if looking for someone.]

VOICE o.s.: Ready to see?

[JOHN startles, as if that wasn’t quite the voice he was waiting to hear, speaking words he didn’t expect. He shakes it off, gives a half-grin.]
JOHN: Yeah. Yeah.

[The dining room, and JOHN enters. It’s almost exactly the same angle as with SHERLOCK. Takes a few steps in, before stopping and staring in shock.]

JOHN: Oh, my…

[He turns, slowly, drinking it all in, and then sees the portraits on the back of the wall. His shoulders slump for a moment, he bows his head, and then looks up and laughs, just a little.]

JOHN: It’s…wow.

[The rest of the crew enters. Close shots of ARTIE, MOLLY, MARY, as they exclaim and squeal and point things out to each other, all terribly excited. Their voices carry over a long shot of JOHN and the PIXILATED MANAGER, heads rested together, backs to the camera, as they look at the portraits of their grandfathers on the wall.]

JOHN v.o.: I think when James started the Empire, he didn’t really expect it to outlive him. I mean, he probably wanted that, but I don’t think he expected it. I loved him. He was the most influential person in my life when I was a kid.

[The shot changes: the crew of the Empire hugging and giggling and wiping away tears.]

VOICE o.s.: Ready to open?

[JOHN looks around again, trying to find someone.]

JOHN: I…yeah. Sure.

[JOHN opens the door to the public waiting outside, and sticks out his head.]

JOHN: Oi, you lot, are you coming in to eat or not?

[Laughers, both inside and out, while people surge in.]

JOHN v.o.: The Empire was important to my grandfather – but I think family was always more so. I think he would have been happier knowing that my sister and I are still in each other’s lives, than he would be knowing the Empire still stands.

VOICE v.o.: Is she the only family you have left?

[A pause, while we watch JOHN be handshaked and back-slapped and hugged and kissed by the customers coming in the door.]

JOHN v.o.: Depends on your definition of family, I suppose. Not by mine, anyway.

[The service begins: in the kitchen, MOLLY and ARTIE are whirling dervishes, a seamless flurry of pots and pans and baking trays, calling out and responding with “yes Chef”, “no Chef”, “ten minutes Chef”. At one point, ARTIE gracefully ducks under a tray that MOLLY is carrying. They’re smiling and busy and their hair is damp from sweat and steam.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: There are lessons to be learned from all ventures, the failures and the successes both. Love what you do, or there is no point in doing it. Love who you do it with, or there is no point to them accompanying you. There is always a way to reach the goal, even if the goal changes midway through.
[In the dining room, MARY delivers plates of food and drink, her ponytail practically horizontal as she races, and she and JOHN dodge each other with grins of triumph.]

SHERLOCK cont.: It wasn’t an easy world in 1949, when James Watson opened the doors to the Empire. But he persevered and became one of the most important restaurants in Kent. He tried to pass that legacy down to his son and grandson. A recipe can be handed down. Hearts are another thing entirely. One doesn’t give one’s heart away lightly. It’s a dangerous thing, because it leaves you vulnerable to be loved or rejected in return.

[JOHN looks up from his conversation, looks around again, still trying to find someone. The hurt is evident on his face, just before he’s pulled back down into the conversation again.]

[And then the frame freezes.]

SHERLOCK v.o. cont.: The Empire’s mise was perfect. But sometimes perfect doesn’t ensure success.

[EXTERIOR, The Empire, after the fire. A long shot of the building, in ruins, followed by a few close-ups of the door with the scorch marks, the broken tables and chairs, the singed curtains in the breeze.]

SHERLOCK v.o. cont.: A few weeks after filming concluded, there was a fire which destroyed the Empire.

[MARY stands on the pavement just outside the building. SHERLOCK stands next to her.]

MARY: Oh, look – I can just see the warming table. And that’s the stool where you sat those first few days, do you remember?

SHERLOCK: Yes.

SHERLOCK v.o.: Luckily, the fire started in the early hours of morning, so no one was in the building. The portraits of the Watson forefathers had been removed for cleaning, and were undamaged. But everything else was gone.

MARY: We were doing really well – customers every night, and John was talking about getting another waitress in, which would have been lovely. I wish you could have seen him. The Empire. You would have been so proud.

SHERLOCK: Do you think they’ll rebuild?

MARY: I don’t know. Maybe.

[She turns away from the wreckage.]

MARY cont.: Do we have to keep looking? I don’t like to see it like this.

SHERLOCK: We’re done.

[A long shot while the two of them walk away.]

SHERLOCK v.o.: There are lessons one learns from successes. There are lessons one learns from failures. They’re not always the same lessons. But some things remain the same: there is nothing important worth doing that is not done with your entire heart.

SHERLOCK: Artie’s not still cooking, is he?
MARY: God, no. He’s talking about being an airline pilot now.

SHERLOCK: Oh, Christ. May God have mercy on his passengers.

SHERLOCK v.o.: The Empire may have failed, but the relationships created there – the love rekindled for cooking rejuvenated in those who worked there – those endure. Time and distance are merely details. Love, once born, never truly dies.

MARY: Molly’s turned baker. She’s really good at it.

SHERLOCK: Obviously.

SHERLOCK v.o.: Failure is a frightening thing. But I posit that it’s not failure or even fear of failure that sends me running to hide when I should stay. Scared of being bored, scared of being less, scared of being ordinary. It’s only after running that we learn that in running from our fears, we run to them.

[SHERLOCK and MARY are quite distant now.]

MARY: I’m feeling peckish. You?

SHERLOCK: Starving.

[They disappear from view; maybe they’ve turned a corner, or maybe they’ve gone into a restaurant. Who knows?]

SHERLOCK v.o.: Empires may rise, and Empires may fall. Some things last forever. Sometimes, all you need is for the right person to come into your kitchen to remind you of the things that matter, to say you’re forgiven for the momentary fear that opening your heart causes. We’re all waiting for that right person. Some of us are still waiting. Some of us will wait for as long as it takes. All we can hope for is that when the person does arrive, we’ve prepared our mise properly, and we’re ready to cook.

[End titles]
Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Notes

Please note there is now an epilogue…so this isn’t quite the end. :)

Many apologies for the delay in both responding to reviews last week and posting today’s chapter; our flight home yesterday went smoothly though late, and my son and I both woke up with fevers this morning. Many goodies next week to make up for it – thanks for your understanding and patience!

Sherlock was three steps out the door before he realized he’d forgotten his coat. The bone-chilling cold of the October night settled onto his fevered skin like a reversed blanket, and he closed his eyes and let his head fall back, relishing the sensation.

It was short-lived.

“Oh, for…!” groaned his sous, standing at the door behind him, and Sherlock didn’t move as he heard her scuffle across the pavement, and felt the heavy woolen coat draped across his shoulders.

“You’re going to catch your death, you know.”

“No one has actually caught their death by standing in five degrees Centigrade for three minutes without a coat, Jan.”

“Shut it and put on the bloody coat.”

Sherlock opened his eyes and struggled to slide his arms through the sleeves without dropping the coat or removing it entirely. Now that his skin had cooled from the ridiculous heat of the kitchen, the warmth provided by the coat was rather nice. “If my immune system were already weakened, then short-term exposure to subpar weather conditions would increase the likelihood of being infected by a virus of some sort, but the virus would have had to already be present, or present itself in short order. As my immune system has not been weakened, I am not in any particular risk.”

Jan’s eyes narrowed. She kept her eyes on the coat, and as soon as his arms were safely in the sleeves, she handed over the burgundy scarf.

Sherlock glared at it. “I hate that scarf.”

“Well, I hate running the kitchen when you’re away, so you’ll wear the bloody thing.”

“Why, Janet,” said Sherlock, lightly mocking, “and here I thought you were biding your time, waiting ever so patiently for me to get off my fat arse and leave you to peace in the kitchen again. Are you saying that you’ve actually enjoyed the last four months of me making your life hell?”

“Piss off,” said Jan.

Sherlock wrapped the scarf around his neck. It itched, just at the back of his neck. No matter how he wore it, how many times he adjusted it, it always itched in exactly the same place.

“I hate this scarf.”
“Buy a new one,” said Jan, unsympathetic. “Did you put in for the veg order?”

“Yes, Jan.”

“And the milk?”

“Yes, Jan.”

“What about the—?”

But Sherlock had already turned and was headed down the alley to the street. “Good night, Jan.”

Jan was undeterred. “If you’re going to leave me with all the work, I want a raise!” she shouted after him, and Sherlock flipped her the bird without turning around. Her laughter followed him as he reached the street.

It wasn’t all that late; half past eleven, and London was bright with lights and energy, squares of yellow and red shining from the windows and street signs. The cars and busses whizzed by; Sherlock stood on the pavement for a moment, letting it all sink into his skin, rush into his brain with all the synapses firing and clicking along. It was an entirely different sort of information upload than the kind in the kitchen, when he had to keep the orders straight and rolling, several dozen different dishes all racing for the finish line, which they all had to reach at the same moment as their counterparts. This cooks for ten minutes, that cooks for twelve, remember the cooktop in the corner runs a little slow, remember the oven on the far end runs a little hot, adjust and allow for changes and special orders.

London was exactly the same and entirely different.

Now, Sherlock saw the bus and knew where it was headed, where it had been, calculated the time it’d take to travel its route at this hour, the number of people on board, where they were most likely to disembark, adjust for the time it would take to stop the bus for the five seconds it would take for them to leave – no, ten seconds for that one, she had a mass of shopping bags at her feet – and whether or not it would serve to take him home. Four cabs going by, all with their service lights off, three with passengers, one whose shift was over and merely wanted to go home. Same direction that he was going in, might appreciate the extra fare that didn’t take him out of his way, but of course he’d never know the ease of Sherlock as a passenger, and thus wouldn’t stop.

Across the street, the shops were closed, the other restaurants half dark, the skeleton staff waiting for the last straggling customers to leave. Sherlock’s were gone, had been for forty minutes. He’d gone and done his hand-shaking himself before saying, “Thank you, lovely night, now leave.” It was sharp, it was rude, it was an extremely efficient way of emptying his restaurant of stragglers and allowing his tired staff to go home. It always worked, and most of the time, the customers laughed – and left.

Jan thought it was incredibly stupid. “What if they don’t come back?”

“They always come back,” said Sherlock, unperturbed.

“Someday, they might not,” predicted Jan. “You can’t be adorably angry forever.”

“By then I won’t want them to,” replied Sherlock, and that was the end of the discussion.

It was cold, standing on the pavement, and the sweat on the back of Sherlock’s neck, where his hair was wetly plastered to his skin, was growing more uncomfortable. If he turned right, there was a bar not terribly far away, where most of the sous and partie and kitchen staff were already
ensconced, drinking their brandies and whiskey sours, laughing over plates of fried clams and onion rings, which served mostly to soak up the alcohol so they wouldn’t have hangovers in the morning. Sometimes Sherlock joined them, sat in a corner and nursed his own drink, never participating but condoning their camaraderie all the same. Simply by being there, ten minutes at the outside, he was instilling a sense of family in them. Sherlock knew this; it’d been one of his hardest lessons as a young chef, that in order for a kitchen to work well, it had to work as a unit – but he’d never quite understood until…

John.

The thought was instantly painful, and Sherlock turned abruptly to the left, toward home. Another bus was approaching; it would take him reasonably near home, but even the thought of the brief human contact of meeting the bus driver’s eyes was too much just then. Much less telling a cabbie where he wanted to go. Sherlock shoved his hands in his coat pockets, ducked his chin into the scratchy scarf, and walked.

Eight months since he’d seen John. Six months since he’d walked with Mary near the ruins of the Empire, burnt to the ground. She’d pointed out the damage, but he’d seen the manager’s office, the door fallen to its side, and thought of when he’d kissed John against it. He could see straight into the alleyway beyond the restaurant, and thought of when he’d teased John with a chocolate pie, convinced him to follow him to dinner. (A dinner which they’d never actually had, come to that, though there had been others.)

And those other dinners. Sherlock remembered every important meal he’d ever eaten in his life: the crisp of the bread, the crunch of the garlic, the smooth silk of a soup slipping down his throat. The cream on the puddings and the sharp bite of pepper in a salad.

He didn’t remember those dinners with John in terms of food, however; he thought of them in terms of kisses, mouth on mouth, tongue on skin, the taste of John’s throat when he gasped, the feel of John’s fingers in his hair. The salt on John’s skin, the heady musk of John’s cock, the hardness of the floor beneath them and the softness of the mattress when they finally moved to the bed. The sharp smell of the latex condom and the deep, dense burnt-sugar smell of sex, hanging in the room like a cloud.

Five months since the show had aired. Sherlock had nearly given up. The first few weeks, he’d raced home after closing, let Jan handle the clean-up and the comforting, the orders and the stupid accounting that plagued any restaurant worth its salt. He’d catch a cab, head straight for his flat, charge up the stairs like a wild man on a mission…but there was never anyone there. No note. No message on the answerphone. Nothing.

Three weeks, and there was a crisis at the restaurant – one of the hoppers had caught fire and given one of the chefs a second-degree burn. They’d wrapped it up and continued with service, and the minute the last customer had gone home (after being told to leave in no uncertain terms), Sherlock had taken the boy to hospital himself, waited while he was given painkillers and a sterile wrapping, was scolded for having waited that long, and finally took the boy to his bedsit in a terrible part of the city.

By the time he’d managed to make his way back to Westminster, he was beat. It was hours after his normal bedtime. There was a flicker of thought, that if John would be waiting on any night, it would be this one.

John wasn’t there, and Sherlock was almost grateful for it. He fell asleep in his bed, fully clothed, and he didn’t race home again.
It wasn’t a long walk – forty minutes, if Sherlock didn’t stop along the way. Most nights, he didn’t. He didn’t really intend to stop, but went into the Waitrose anyway for milk, glanced at the veg and the meat, thought about cooking something more substantial than pasta, picked up a wedge of Parmesan, and headed back outside. The smell of the chips from the chippy across the street was tempting, but Sherlock knew from long experience that if he ducked in, even for a moment, the owner would spy him and he’d be caught for an hour, talking and trading stories, and he’d walk away with free chips in his stomach, but an hour less sleep.

Sherlock wanted sleep more than he wanted the chips, and he wanted to avoid human contact far more than he wanted the sleep.

Human contact meant relationships. Relationships meant family. Family meant…John. Sherlock didn’t have John, and didn’t want any other family, thus didn’t want any other relationship, thus human contact was unnecessary.

He unlocked the front door to his building, and slipped inside. The light was on, and Sherlock switched it off; Mrs Turner always left the light on for him as a courtesy, since he kept such late hours. He wished she wouldn’t; it wasted electricity and he knew where to find the switch anyway. It wasn’t as though he needed the light to climb the stairs. He jogged up, turned the corner on the landing.

This was the part he hated. Turning the corner. There was always the possibility that if he turned the corner, and looked up, he’d see John sitting on the top step, waiting. Five months since the show had aired, eight months since he’d seen John…and he still hoped, every single time, that tonight would be different.

It wasn’t.

John wasn’t sitting on the top step, and Sherlock brushed aside the momentary hurt. He ought to be used to it, by now. It still always took him by surprise.

Sherlock concentrated on the plan. Put away the milk, set a pot of water to boil, get out of the clothes that smelled of grease and sweat and roast beef and rosemary sauce. There was fresh pasta in the fridge; with a little butter and sage and thyme and the cheese, it would make an adequate meal before he collapsed in bed for a few hours. Maybe a shower first. Wake up, tea, toast, start again.

Boring.

Is this what life had become? Just as Lestrade had predicted. Boring.

Sherlock opened the door to his flat, and saw the light spilling out from the kitchen. The shades were drawn, he wouldn’t have seen it from the street, but now, standing in the doorway of his flat, he saw the light in the kitchen, around the corner, and he stood stock still, and waited, because all at once, he couldn’t move.

“Hello?” called John.

Sherlock couldn’t answer. Sherlock wasn’t even sure he could move, but he did, stepped around the corner to look into the kitchen, to the awesome and incredible sight of John Watson, standing at the counter, doing something unspeakable to a mass of green leaves.

Sherlock stared at him, counted to ten, and stared some more.

John’s hair was shorter – cut that morning, nicked himself shaving, the shirt was ironed ineptly
by a too-cold iron supplied by the hotel – and he had one of Sherlock’s aprons tied around his waist – cooking, there’s chicken stock simmering and another pot – ah, risotto, butter and garlic, very simple, it’s nearly done which is why he’s working on the herbs now. John kept his back to Sherlock, the knife moving smoothly on the cutting board. But it was John, it was unmistakably John, in his kitchen, cooking his food, and Sherlock clutched the shopping bag in his hands so tightly that the plastic might have become part of his skin.

“Sit down,” said John Watson. “Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. I thought risotto, I hope that’s all right.”

It was all right, Sherlock wanted to say. He sat at his table, partially because John had said, partially because he didn’t think he could stand another moment. I was thinking pasta but this is better. I hope you’re not using too much garlic. Garlic is only good if you’re eating it with me.

“You’re nearly out of Parm, I didn’t look before I began, so it might not be as creamy as it should be.”

I have some, Sherlock wanted to say. Picked some up, it’s not the best quality but all the shops are closed now. I would have broken into one, if I’d known you wanted it.

“Greg gave me the key, in case you’re wondering. I saw Molly when I stopped by his flat. God, they’re utterly disgusting with each other. Little coos and smiles and it’s enough to make you puke. You live on Baker Street. You never said.”

It’s how I could remember your address, Sherlock wanted to say. One of those ridiculous coincidences in life, parallel Baker Streets. Like the coincidence that you rang Mike, looking for help with your restaurant, and I needed a restaurant to fill a slot, and had the world shift just a bit, had you switched on a different channel that night, or if I’d started filming a week earlier, we might never have met. I couldn’t stand if we’d never have met, and I’d never have known why.

“I, uh – I broke into your wine,” admitted John, a bit sheepish, and Sherlock spied the open bottle on the counter, the glass which was nearly empty (and already been emptied once, Sherlock noted). “Impressive vintage.”

Mycroft gave it to me, Sherlock wanted to say. Wouldn’t have thought you’d need alcohol for courage. I do. Pour me a glass.

John set down the knife, crossed to the stove, gave the risotto a stir. He switched off the chicken broth and added in chunks of butter before giving the risotto one last stir. John moved the risotto from the heat, and added a sauté pan. As soon as it was hot, he poured in the cooking oil, which started to sizzle.

“Did you sleep with Irene Adler?”

“No,” said Sherlock, shocked into speech.

A sprinkle of salt, garlic sautéing, changing the air into something richer, spicier. John concentrated on the cooking for a moment; the garlic was surely brown by the time he spoke again. “Did you want to?”

Sherlock could not have lied if his life depended on it. “I wanted to want to. If I were interested in her, she would not have been interested in me.”

The garlic sizzled; John shook the pan, vigorously, with hasty, sharp jerks of his shoulders. Sherlock didn’t dare take his eyes off him, didn’t even want to blink. He watched as John cooked
“Stop talking,” said John, gruffly. “Just…don’t talk for a minute, all right?”

“All right.”

“You’re talking.”

“Sorry.”

“Sherlock,” warned John, and Sherlock pressed his lips together. It was tense now, and Sherlock’s stomach was tightly wound.

Angry. John was…angry.

John exhaled, long and slow, before he picked up the plates and turned, at long last, to Sherlock, ready to serve the meal he’d made in his kitchen.

“If the desire was mutual. If the desire was still mutual.”

John rested his hands on the counter, hung his head for a moment. Sherlock watched his back rise and fall as he breathed. The kitchen was quiet, and Sherlock couldn’t see John’s face. Hadn’t seen John’s face, he realized, not since he’d come home.

“John—”

It was tense now, and Sherlock’s stomach was tightly wound.
“You know,” said John, “for a man who’s as well-spoken as you claim, you’re bollocks at apologies.”

“I’ve never needed them before.”

“I’ve heard,” said John, and then sighed, exhausted. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

Sherlock’s heart skipped a beat; his mouth was dry and for a moment, he heard John’s words echo in his head. “John,” he tried to say, but the name caught on his teeth, wrapped itself around his tongue, refused to be said properly. His mouth was full of John’s name.

Sherlock swallowed. Imagined John’s name sliding down into him, resting somewhere in his chest, comfortably wrapped around his heart, engraved on the walls of his stomach.

“You’re angry with me,” said Sherlock, and John laughed.

“Angry doesn’t even begin to cover it,” he said.

“Why?”

John laughed – it wasn’t a pleasant laugh. It was dry and ironic and it made Sherlock’s stomach lurch in ways that weren’t entirely awful, were in fact very, very wrong. “That I even have to explain this to you…”

“Please.”

“You are such a fucking—”

And then he was up, out of his chair, though Sherlock didn’t know if it was because he stood or because John had pulled him to standing, tugged him in, his hand on the back of his neck. But John was there, and John was kissing him. Hard and fast and furious and John’s hands were clenched around Sherlock’s shirt, his teeth nipped angrily at Sherlock’s lips and tongue and all Sherlock could do was let John control it, let John ravage his mouth, and enjoy the ride.

And oh, wasn’t that interesting, exactly how much Sherlock did enjoy the ride.

He could have pulled away, thought Sherlock. Turned his head just enough to break the contact, and John would have backed up, their breaths hard between them, and he’d stand and apologize, slip out of the flat, and they’d never see each other again. That would be the end.

No.

Sherlock pressed forward, answered John’s unspoken question by his hands on John’s neck, opening his mouth to taste the garlic-roasted-butter of John. He felt John’s smile, the dampness on the back of John’s neck, the way John’s hand tightened briefly on his hair, pulling the small curls tightly, almost painfully.

Sherlock’s head was in a fog, everything in it swirling in a rush. The smell of brown butter and garlic, John here in his kitchen, kissing him, the crackle of the fire as it burned the Empire to the ground, the sound of Gregson’s footsteps echoing in the empty BBC corridors. All the small pieces, and then there was John’s hand on his chest, pushing him back, and Sherlock let John break their kiss.

John didn’t pull away; he rested his forehead against Sherlock’s, breathing heavily. He thumped his hands on Sherlock’s chest, once as if a test to see if he could, a second time, with more force, as if
he almost meant it.

“You left me,” said John.

“I had to.”

“You didn’t even tell me you were going. You just went.”

“It… it wasn’t my choice, John.”

“You could have said something, I was even awake when you left—”

“You were half asleep. You wouldn’t have remembered.”

“I remember well enough! You told me to go back to sleep, you could have mentioned that you had to go that day.”

“I thought—”

“You thought what, Sherlock?” John pushed against him again; Sherlock stumbled and fell back into the chair. John took a few steps back, as if for emphasis. Sherlock felt the rush of cold air where John had been pressed. “Thought you’d spare me the pain of a tearful, protracted goodbye? What, you thought it’d be too hard to actually tell me you didn’t care about me?”

John was wonderful, John was amazing, John paced back and forth in his kitchen, running his hands through his hair. All Sherlock wanted to do was kiss him, and he couldn’t even catch him. Maybe if he caught him off-guard…

“Thought you’d spare me the pain of a tearful, protracted goodbye? What, you thought it’d be too hard to actually tell me you didn’t care about me?”

“Christ, Sherlock. You took me to your bloody house, you kidnapped me and gave me this fantastic day that anyone else might have mistaken for a honeymoon, and then the next morning, you’re up and gone without so much as a bloody note. Without an explanation!”

“I did explain, in the last five minutes of the show, I explained—”

“That?” John laughed. “That wasn’t an explanation. That was fucking masturbation, you blithering idiot. You spouting bloody platitudes to make yourself feel better for the stinking rotten way you’d left it just proves you knew you were being an idiot.”

“I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Tell me what? That you didn’t want to be with me after all? That I was just a spot of fun in an otherwise boring week?”

“No!”

“I looked for you! All day long, I looked, and you’d just up and left. And then you go on about how you left me stupid coded messages that I’m supposed to interpret? That’s not on, Sherlock, that’s just – that’s not what you do to people, that’s not how you treat people who love you. You can’t just make someone care and then—”

Sherlock sat straight up in the chair. “Say that again.”

“What?”

“That bit – you… love me?”
John threw his hands in the air. “Of course I love you, you mad bastard!” he shouted, and Sherlock chortled with glee. John, angry, was a sight to behold. He shook and spun like a top about to topple, and Sherlock impetuously reached out and pulled him in by his belt, buried his face into John’s neck. John’s hands beat against his shoulders in protest, and then settled on his skin, still shaking with anger.

“Say it again.”

“You don’t just do that,” he repeated, the anger almost listless now, and Sherlock pulled away to grin at him.

“Not that, the other bit.”

“I love you.”

“Yes,” breathed Sherlock happily, and kissed John, because he wanted to know if John tasted the same angry as he looked. Quivering and hot and – yes, there it was, the taste of the wine on John’s lips. Blackberry-chocolate undertones which Sherlock could barely notice in the alcohol itself, he found on John’s tongue. John angry, kissing, was just as fiery and forceful as John angry, talking, because though it had been Sherlock stepping into John, it was John who pushed back, who wrapped himself around Sherlock and drove him back hard against the counter. “Ow.”

“You can’t just kiss this and make it go away,” scolded John.

“God, I hope not,” groaned Sherlock. The counter bit into the small of his back, but John was pressed up against his front, and Sherlock could feel the hard-on through the clothes. His own erection was getting harder by the moment.

“I’m serious, Sherlock.”

“So am I.” Sherlock swooped in for another kiss – mustn’t let John lose focus, must keep him near, must keep him angry, because Sherlock quite liked angry John. Kissing angry John, feeling angry John.

“Am…I…a…fucking…game…to…you?” gasped John through the kisses.

“Appropriate choice of words,” murmured Sherlock into John’s neck, just under his ear, and he gave the skin there a possessive lick. Mmm, sweat and dampness from the rainy evening earlier. John had been in London for at least half a day. Delicious. Sherlock wondered, if he kept John this angry, would John want to fuck him? A nice angry shag would be…well, just about perfect, really. Sherlock half thought he might deserve it, really. Maybe John would think the same.

“Oh my God,” groaned John. He tilted his head back and slumped in Sherlock’s arms. “I fucking hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

John found his footing and shoved against Sherlock, but it didn’t have much force to it. “I can love and hate you at the same time.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Sherlock, and started to pull on John’s shirt. “Show me.”

His fingers found John’s skin, hot and hard with muscle, soft with the stranded hair. John wriggled next to him, and stepped away. Sherlock groaned in frustration, and frowned at John, who looked disheveled and undeniably sexy: his hair was sticking in all directions, his shirt hung lopsided on
his shoulders and was mostly untucked, which did nothing at all to hide the tent in his trousers. His lips were already pink from exertion and kisses, and his pupils were wide and angry.

“We have to talk about this,” John was saying. “We can’t just hop into bed and get over it, I’m serious, Sherlock, I’m really angry.”

“I’m not stopping you,” said Sherlock, and fell to his knees to work on John’s belt buckle.

“You can’t just invite yourself into someone’s life and then leave them once you’ve made yourself at home. People don’t work that way.”

“Of course they do, John,” said Sherlock impatiently as he unthreaded the belt. “It’s only you who doesn’t work that way.”

“No, Sherlock, not just me.”

Now the button on his jeans. “And I did leave you a message.”

“Recipes do not count as messages.”

“The show, too.”

“I was traveling, and you think I’m honestly going to be able to interpret coded messages on a show not even airing on Korean television?” shouted John.

Sherlock looked up with a frown. “Please tell me you brought home a good recipe for kimchee.”

“Oh my God,” groaned John. Which was what Sherlock wanted to hear John say, though not quite in that context.

And anyway, the button on John’s jeans was proving to be impossibly stubborn. “Unfasten your jeans, John.”

“Look,” said John, who to Sherlock’s delight, actually managed to pop open the button on his jeans, “just because you think it’s romantic to leave coded messages on the telly—”

“Romantic?”

“…it doesn’t mean we’re all as clever as you are,” snapped John, and he roughly shoved his jeans and pants down.

“Oh,” said Sherlock, half disappointed as he watched the pants slide down John’s legs. “I had plans for those.”

“Oh, for—” John bent over to grab the waistband and pull the pants back up again, but Sherlock was nearly as quick, and tried to lean forward to appreciate the now-freed bits of anatomy instead. They tangled themselves for a moment, and then John toppled to the floor on top of him. “This is impossible. Where’s the bedroom?”

“Excellent idea, John, carry on,” said Sherlock under him. It took a minute to stand up, what with John’s jeans around his ankles and his pants around his knees, and there was always the possibility that the delay would bring John to his senses, but luckily John was too far gone for rational thought – at least, in terms of his physical state. “Never say you’re not clever, John.”

“We can’t all be super geniuses, you know.”
“Thank God, I’d be out of a job.” Sherlock frowned. “I am out of a job.”

“And that’s another thing,” said John, helping Sherlock to his feet. “You can’t honestly think I’d actually believe that pack of lies about you not wanting to continue the show. Christ, Sherlock, that’s about the stupidest – you wouldn’t quit making the show. It’s your center stage, it’s you showing off. You love showing off.”

“I was rather forced out.” Sherlock shoved and kissed John in turns, pushing him back to the bedroom. “I wasn’t interested in a game of he-said-she-said with BBC executives. No point in it, really.”

“No point? No point? We’re only talking about your reputation, Sherlock! Have you even looked at your fan base lately? They’re ripping you to shreds, they’re making wild accusations about you being an utter arsehole and wanker.”

“Hardly wild accusations, those.”

“Stop making fun! They’re saying you don’t care about the people you’re trying to help—”

“I don’t care.” Ah, in the bedroom now, excellent. Sherlock worked on disrobing John of his shirt, undoing the buttons one by one, and was terribly pleased to feel John’s hands doing the same to him. Much faster, they’d be naked any minute now.

“Yes, you do, and you shouldn’t let people go on thinking that.”

“I don’t care what people think about me, John.” Sherlock pushed the shirt off John’s shoulders, and noticed the flush under his skin. “It really bothers you. What people say.”

“Of course it bothers me!”

“Why?”

John didn’t answer – at least, not with words. He put his hands on Sherlock’s jaw and pulled him in for a kiss. Sherlock almost protested – John was still wearing his vest, and Sherlock’s trousers were still sadly on his hips – before he realized that John was kissing him, of his own initiation, and this was a marked improvement from shouting.

Though the shouting was very nice, too.

Sherlock let John kiss him, and worked on his trousers himself. Naked, naked was the goal. Eyes on the goal.

John broke the kiss, but didn’t move away. “Did you forget that I love you?”

“I still don’t understand,” complained Sherlock.

“Idiot.”

“Yes. Take off your vest, it’s in the way.”

And to Sherlock’s continued delight, John did. “I know something was going on with the BBC—”

“They cancelled the show. The Monday we were in Sussex.”

“I knew it!”
“Yes, yes, you’re very clever,” said Sherlock, and he stepped out of his trousers and pants – socks, bloody hell, he forgot the socks – and pushed John back on the mattress, which bounced with John’s sudden weight. John was wearing socks. Easy enough; Sherlock pulled them off by the toes.

“Oi,” said John to the ceiling. “You’re going to ruin those.”

“They’re socks, John, I’ll buy you another pair.”

“You will not, I might be out of a job but I’m not going to be your kept man, thank you!”

“You can manage one of the restaurants,” said Sherlock, unconcerned, and he pulled off his own socks before falling on the bed next to John.

“You don’t need a new manager.”

“I’ll fire someone.”

“Haven’t you been listening to a word I’m saying? You can’t just fire someone, you’ve built up a history with them, and I’m not—”

“Yes, fine, shut up now,” said Sherlock, and kissed John, because as nice as it was to hear John rail at him, kissing was better.

And John was kissing back, and his erection was firmly pressed against Sherlock’s stomach. Sherlock’s own erection was pressed against John, somewhere, he wasn’t entirely sure where, and Sherlock rolled a little on the bed, trying to determine without needing to let go of John. It didn’t matter, except that it did, and—

“You’re thinking,” said John.

“Where’s my erection?”

“Against my hipbone.”

“Ah.”

“Did you prefer it somewhere else?” asked John, terribly polite and annoyed all at the same time.

“Well, I was rather hoping to fuck you with it. Since I haven’t had the opportunity to do that yet, and you might be so angry with me that you won’t come back, making this my only chance.”

“You wanker,” groaned John, and fell to his back on the mattress, which was an improvement. He covered his face with a newly tanned arm, which was not, because it meant Sherlock no longer had easy access to John’s mouth for kisses.

“I’m hoping not, actually.”

“Oh my God.”

“You keep saying that,” complained Sherlock, and he crawled on top of John and wedged himself in between John’s legs. John didn’t protest, which was promising.

“You keep being impossible. Don’t you think you’ve fucked me over enough already?”

“Let me make it up to you,” suggested Sherlock, and worked his kisses down John’s clavicle, past
his stomach, which jiggled as John began to laugh.

“Oi, that tickles.”

“Stop laughing, you’re ruining the moment,” scolded Sherlock.

“What, can’t giggle in the bedroom? You’ve got a sad love-life, mate.”

“You’re angry with me, you can’t giggle and be angry with me.”

“Hey,” said John, and he sat up on the bed, the movement dislodging Sherlock from his kisses. Sherlock sat back on his heels, surprised. “That’s not how this works. We’re not having angry sex and then all of this goes away.”

“Of course not, John. We’re having angry sex because you’re angry and we’re going to have sex, but nothing is going away.” Sherlock frowned. “Unless…you want to. I…won’t stop you. If that’s all you want from me.”

“What?”

“You,” said Sherlock. “This is why you came here, isn’t it? To have it out with me? The nudity was perhaps my idea but you weren’t protesting. Why did you come here, if not for angry sex?”

John let out a breath, closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. Sherlock watched him, saw the expression on his face go from shocked to incredulous to angry to resigned, and he waited, heart pounding, naked and open and raw and feeling far more vulnerable than he had in his life.

When John opened his eyes again, he reached out and cupped his hand around Sherlock’s cheek.

“I told you,” said John. “I love you. And I got your stupid, incomprehensible message, and I think you’re a blithering idiot of a genius, and I didn’t quite catch what you meant by it, so I was hoping you’d deign to translate because I don’t know what the hell you were going on about.”

“Oh,” said Sherlock, because actually translating the message hadn’t occurred to him. “John. I love you.”

“There you go,” said John, and kissed him.

It was a lovely kiss, really. John was delicious and warm and vaguely alcoholic, and he was naked in Sherlock’s bed, with his legs around him, and Sherlock pushed John back onto the mattress. It was nice having John under him, too, and Sherlock went on kissing John, feeling John’s skin against his, their erections pressed between them, which was pleasurable and frustrating all at once.

“Now…was…that…so…hard?” asked John in between kisses.

“Yes, very,” mumbled Sherlock. Which reminded him, actually, and he tried to continue kissing John, while at the same time reaching for the bedside table drawer where he’d stashed the packages of prophylactics and the lubricant. He was successful only in terms of waving his arm about aimlessly.

“What the bloody—?”

“Prophylactics,” said Sherlock, more into the pillow than John. “Condoms, John.”

John began to laugh.
“Stop laughing, John! Angry sex requires that at least one participant be angry!”

“Oh, I’m angry,” said John with good humor, and he rolled under Sherlock, which gave Sherlock just enough leverage to reach the bedside drawer. The condoms and lube were duly extracted, and Sherlock wriggled back into place. “I’m about to let a bleeding idiot genius fuck me, I’m mad in every possible sense of the word.”

“You are?” said Sherlock, pleased and surprised into stating the obvious.

“Oh, Christ,” groaned John, and Sherlock decided that was enough religion in the bedroom for one night, and kissed John to shut him up. Angry John was lovely, but angry religious John was just too much for him.

John shoved back into the kiss – still angry, then – and reached his hand down to wrap his fingers around Sherlock’s erection. Sherlock sucked hard on John’s mouth when John pulled on it, flicking his fingers around the tip.

“This is what you want?” said John, his voice low and almost gravelly. It was almost unrecognizable, except that it was unmistakably John, just a lust-filled, angry version of him. Sherlock shuddered, and pushed up until he could look at John, see John’s eyes on him, watch John’s mouth move. “You want your cock in me, is that it?”

“Yes,” whispered Sherlock. It was insanely difficult to keep his eyes focused on John – his head was solidly focused on John, on every bit of John’s skin that was pressed up against him, on the bits that weren’t, on the feel of John’s hand on his cock, on the feel of John’s cock pressed into his hip.

“Say it.”

“I want to fuck you, I want my cock inside you, I want – oh, God——”

John’s eyes were glazed over. “Condom,” he gasped, and Sherlock scrambled for the foil packet, which slipped in his hands and nearly didn’t tear – and then when it did, tore the condom with it.

“Oh, for——”

John pushed Sherlock up, and reached into the drawer for another packet. He put the corner in his mouth and tore at it, opening the packet with a neat rip, and pulled it out.

“You,” said John, eyes locked with Sherlock’s, “are utterly useless at some things, you know.”

John took hold of Sherlock’s cock with one hand, and Sherlock’s breath caught in his chest. “Am I.”

“You are,” confirmed John, and he rested the condom on the top of Sherlock’s cock, without once breaking eye contact. “You’re an amazing chef.”

John leaned forward and kissed Sherlock’s lips, briefly, and with the kiss, rolled the condom on, just enough to cover the tip, using the fingers of one hand to gently brush against the shaft while his other hand circled, rolling the condom on. Sherlock shuddered, a small, tiny tremor that might have gone unnoticed, except for the frisson of energy it sent through his skin.

“You’re an absolute genius when it comes to knowing what works and what doesn’t in the kitchen.”
Another stroke, another brush, another inch, another searing kiss. Sherlock threw his head back, to allow John better access to his neck.

“You can be needlessly cruel and honest to a fault, but your employees love you or you wouldn’t have the smallest turnover in the business.”

More than an inch now – Sherlock groaned as John sucked at his neck gently, as his fingers moved against his cock. He barely noticed the feel of the condom. He did notice the agonizing slowness, and he rested his hands on John’s hips, dug his fingers in, to pull him closer. If John was closer, he’d move faster, knowing what was coming (which hopefully included them both).

“You’re fantastic in bed.”

“John—” gasped Sherlock. “For the love of God, hurry.”

“But you’re utter crap at communication,” said John.

“I just told you to hurry, what more do you want?”

“Lube,” said John, and Sherlock belatedly realized the condom was on, and he scrambled, trying to find the errant tube, hiding somewhere just out of reach. John found it first, was slicking up Sherlock’s cock with certain, skilled fingers, and Sherlock barely had the wherewithal to get his own supply, to slather it on John’s cock, run his slick fingers around John’s balls, to the waiting hole below. John groaned, let his head fall forward onto Sherlock’s chest, blocking Sherlock’s view.

“I can’t.”

“I can,” breathed John.

“Not fair.”

“It is from my view.”

“Of course it is from your view, you’ve got the view,” complained Sherlock, and John – damn him – had the nerve to laugh again.

“Stop laughing,” scolded Sherlock. “You are ruining the angry sex.”

“Does that make you angry?” asked John, and Sherlock shoved him back onto the mattress, which just made John burst into further giggles, but on the plus side, gave Sherlock better access. He worked his lubed fingers into John’s arse, and heard John’s giggles change into gasps, felt John’s muscles clench and release and relax around him. Sherlock fell to John’s side, still working his fingers in, and John reached up for a kiss, his arms shaking now. His kisses were hungry, desperate, together with a keening in the back of John’s throat, and Sherlock let John lead the kiss while he worked him below, opening and rubbing and testing and John lifted his knee up, to give Sherlock better leverage. When Sherlock found his prostate, John let out a hoarse groan into Sherlock’s mouth, and his entire body bucked and shook.

“Now,” gasped John into the kiss. “Oh, God, now.”

Sherlock shifted on top of him, slid his fingers out and found his cock, guided himself to the right spot. It wouldn’t do to miss. John would giggle again, and...

“John,” breathed Sherlock. “We left dinner on the table; it’s getting cold.”
“Oh my God,” said John fervently. “I hate you.”

Sherlock pushed in, slow, and John groaned under him, gripped his arms tightly. His eyes were closed, tightly, his face was screwed up in either pain or intense pleasure, and Sherlock couldn’t tell which. He moved his arms back up, ran his hands under John’s shoulders, jostling him a little. John’s skin was hot, and he was tight around Sherlock’s cock, and his entire body shook with effort.


John did. His pupils were blown, a thin ring of blue around the deep black, and Sherlock caught his mouth in a kiss, pushed in a little more. It was wet and slick and hot and John groaned again in his mouth, wriggled under him, held Sherlock tightly and to Sherlock’s delight, bore down, somehow pushed himself down onto Sherlock’s cock, desperate.

“God, would you just—” said John, anxious and eager and miserable and wanting, and Sherlock did, in one smooth, long, forever motion, and John cried out into his mouth as the tremors wracked through him, gasped and threw his head back into the pillow.

“Are you—?”

“Yes,” said John. “Fuck me.”

It was hot. Hotter than anything, hotter than the kitchen in the middle of the dinner rush in July. Hotter than anyone, hotter than sitting before an open oven, with the production lights focused on his back. Sherlock felt John’s heat around his cock, creeping up around his skin; his heart pounded through the heat, the sweat bubbled on his brow, ran down the center of his back, filled him up like flames.

Sherlock kissed John, mouths together, and in comparison to the heat below, John’s mouth was cool, fresh, mix of alcohol and clear water. Cucumbers soaked in wine, thought Sherlock, which sounded absolutely heavenly.

“You’re thinking, stop thinking,” groaned John.

“Cucumbers and wine,” said Sherlock.

“Christ, you’re thinking recipes.”

“Pizza oven,” gasped Sherlock, and he slid his cock out of John. “Open fired pizza oven.”

“If you’re making a joke about sausages,” grumbled John, and Sherlock slid back in, which was nearly as effective as kissing when it came to shutting John up.

For a moment, anyway. “I’m going to – Sherlock.”

“Yes,” breathed Sherlock, and he kissed John’s throat, just next to his Adam’s apple, only John’s skin didn’t taste a thing like apples, more like salt and sweet, the very basic flavors, the starting line for every delicious thing Sherlock had ever cooked in his entire life. That was John – the starting block, the baseline for every wonderful thing that could ever be made, and then Sherlock wasn’t thinking anymore, because John was shouting under him. Sherlock sucked on John’s skin, his entire body shaking and thrusting and pushing and then he was coming, coming, the rush of everything down in his cock, into John, into blankness, into everything.

John was slick with sweat; Sherlock rested his cheek on John’s shoulder, closed his eyes and
breathed in the scent of his skin. John was still shuddering beneath him, little aftershocks, and Sherlock kissed the skin under the side of his mouth, not wanting to move more than absolutely necessary. John’s arms wrapped around him, tightly.

“Hey,” said John. He sounded lazy, tired…happy. “Sherlock?”

“Mmm.” Sherlock didn’t want to wake up. He wasn’t sure he was awake. No, he was sleeping. He’d fallen asleep and he was dreaming, and John was in his bed and John was actually happy and if he opened his eyes…

“Food’s getting cold,” said John, and Sherlock nuzzled against John’s sweat-damp skin.

“Let it,” he mumbled, and John laughed beneath him. “Stop laughing. I told you, you’d still be angry after sex. You’re making a liar out of me.”

“That wasn’t me,” said John, and Sherlock felt the kiss on his forehead. “Hey. Open your eyes.”

“No.”

“Sherlock.” John’s voice was a warning now, and that was enough, the tension and the hint of annoyance, and Sherlock opened his eyes and propped his chin on John’s chest. John had a frown on his face, and he ran his fingers through Sherlock’s curls. “Do you really want me to be angry with you still?”

“Yes,” said Sherlock. “You should be.”

“Can I be angry in the morning instead? Because I don’t want to fall asleep angry, and I’d really, really like to fall asleep now.”

“All right,” conceded Sherlock.

They shifted on the bed; the condom was disposed of, tissues were used and torn and replaced and a large handful eventually joined the condom in the rubbish bin. They struggled for a few moments, negotiating positions by wrestling each other one way and then the other, before finally falling asleep on their sides, facing each other, hands clasped between them.

Sherlock remembered the food sitting in the kitchen just as John’s eyes fluttered closed.


“I’ll cook you another,” mumbled John.

Another dinner – one didn’t cook dinner in the morning. That meant John would stay at least until tomorrow night. That gave Sherlock plenty of time to convince him to stay for always.

“I’m not going anywhere, you idiot,” said John into the pillow. “Shut up and go to sleep.”

“I like it when you’re angry with me.”

“Fantastic. Go to sleep and I’ll be angry with you in the morning.”

“Promises,” said Sherlock, and did.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I need to apologize again for the lack of response to your lovely reviews. Call it the remains of the flu that kick my family’s asses last week, as well as the topsy-turvy reactions to the series finale Sunday night. I will get to them, I promise; I treasure every review and every one of you who has read and enjoyed Mise to the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Blog of Harry Watson

October 18, 2010

Time to move on from Korea. To tell the truth, I’m both relieved and a little nervous about it – John left for England four days ago, and Seoul is lovely, but…it’s not quite the same without him. I’m almost tempted to stay, except I feel a little bit at cross-purposes here. Like I’ve done what I came to do, and if I stay any longer, I’ll never leave. And anyway, we’d always planned to move on.

Trying to decide between Sydney and Tokyo. John had really wanted Sydney, but he’s not here, is he? (He’s fine, in case you’re wondering – he sent an e when he got into London; more on that later.) So it’s up to me.

I don’t know, Readers. What do you think? Should I go to Sydney or Tokyo next?

*

Sherlock was already awake when John opened his eyes. He lay on his stomach, watching John, unblinking. John smiled, still waking up himself, and stretched out his limbs, felt the muscles go taut as they pulled against each other, felt the duvet slip against his skin, made sensitive from lovemaking and sleep.

John groaned, mostly from the pleasure of the stretch, and he heard Sherlock breathe beside him. He rolled over and let his hand fall onto the mattress, just beside Sherlock’s chest.

Sherlock slid his hand under John’s, and John closed his fingers around it.

“Are you still angry?”

Sherlock’s voice was low and gravelly with sleep. John tugged on his hand and scooted closer on the bed. “I think being angry with you is a constant state of affairs. When do you have to go to the restaurant?”

“Three. I only have lunch service on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Convenient.”

“Yes, very.” Sherlock pressed his lips together, thinking. “When do you go back to Upper Brickley?”
John rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. “Whenever I want, I suppose. I didn’t tell anyone I was coming back.”

Sherlock frowned, and pushed himself up to his elbows. “You…you didn’t plan to come home?”

John glanced over at him. “No.”

“You…just came. Straight to London.” Sherlock sucked in a breath, and moved quick as lightning, until he was straddling John, staring straight down at him. “Your eyes are bloodshot, dark circles. You’d showered in the previous twelve hours, washed your hair—”

Sherlock leaned down and sniffed John’s hair, and John let out an involuntary laugh as Sherlock’s nose buried itself in the short blond strands. “Oi!”

“Lestrade’s shampoo,” said Sherlock, satisfied, as he pushed up again.

“I told you I saw him to get the key.”

“But you were there long enough to shower. And the clothes you were wearing last night were wrinkled in folded lines; they’d been packed, hadn’t they? You just arrived. You mentioned Korea. You flew in from Seoul, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said John quietly.

Sherlock sat back onto John’s thighs. “You…flew home.”

“Yes,” repeated John thickly, and he rested his hands on Sherlock’s hips. “Well…I think I did. I hope I did. I don’t know yet, I guess it depends on you.”

“Me?”

“If this is home.”

Sherlock scrambled off John, and fled into the kitchen. John could hear him rooting around, banging the cabinet doors, opening and closing and slamming shut again, a bit like he was angry or frantic or simply very, very frightened.

John stared after him, and then cursed. He screwed his eyes shut, and tried to stop his heart from pounding straight out of his chest.

He had just sat up and swung his legs out of the bed, wondering where his clothes had landed, when Sherlock came racing back into the room.

“Where are you going?” demanded Sherlock.

“Out. Away. Does it matter?” There were his boxers, on the floor next to the chair. John leaned over to reach for them, and felt Sherlock’s hand on his spine.

“John.” Sherlock sounded almost amused. “Sit up.”

John sat up, still holding onto the boxers, and looked at what Sherlock offered him.

The salt cellar, and a hunk of baguette.

“Bread and salt,” said John slowly, not quite willing to believe his heart pounding hard with hope.
“You’re the world traveler,” said Sherlock.

“I know what it means.”

“Wrong sort of bread. I suppose you don’t mind.”

John reached out and took the items from Sherlock; he twisted and set them on the sidetable gently, and then turned back to hold Sherlock’s face in his hands. “I’m old, injured, in debt up to my eyeballs, and have absolutely no idea what to do with my life. Are you sure you want me in yours?”

“You’re not that old, not that injured, not that in debt,” said Sherlock immediately. “And you’re going to spend your life with me.”

John stared at him, and then chuckled. “You’re so sure?”

“John. Of course I am.”

*

October 22, 2010

Tokyo is like New York if New York was polite and Japanese.

*

Dear Mr Moriarty,

We regret to inform you that the insurance coverage of The Empire Restaurant, 14 Montague Street, Upper Brickley, Kent, expired on February 14, 2010. Therefore, we at Janus Insurance are not liable for insurance payments to cover the cost of the restaurant. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our Customer Service line. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Ian Monkford Janus Insurance

*

Detective Inspector Dimmock dropped the files on the superintendant’s desk. “Anything planned for the weekend, sir?”

The superintendant barely glanced up from his screen. “Son’s footie game. Daughter’s dance recital. I assume those files are closed now?”

“Yes, sir. Nice twist to the Empire case, though. Turns out the insurance ran out two weeks before the fire anyway.”

The superintendant snorted. “So much for insurance fraud, eh?”

“Would be if I were convinced Moriarty did it.”

The superintendant glanced away from his screen then. “You’re still going on about that?”

“I’ve got a hunch,” said Dimmock, stubborn.
“The kid had turned in his keys. He didn’t have access. There was no forced entry and the fire started in the ovens. Plus he had an alibi.”

“Still,” said Dimmock. “It’s just too neat. What kind of man tells a room full of people that he’s going to burn down a restaurant, and then goes and does it?”

“A stupid one.”

“One thing Jim Moriarty isn’t is stupid, sir.”

The superintendent turned fully from the computer and folded his hands on the desk. “Are you saying you don’t want to close the case, Dimmock?”

“There’s not enough evidence to convict either one of them.”

“Then I suggest you let it go. Or let it sit on the back burner for a while longer.”

“Funny, sir.”

The superintendent turned back to his computer. “Anyway, it’s not like there was anything in it for the kid, was there?”

“No,” said Dimmock uneasily.

The superintendent sighed. “Look, David – he’s a good kid. He might not have any direction and I’m pretty sure half the time he’s a bit more south of the law than we’d like, but he’s never done anything that we wouldn’t approve of. And since insurance doesn’t seem to come into play anyway, you’re telling me you want to bring a whole world of trouble on his head and let that bastard Moriarty actually win?”

Dimmock opened and closed his mouth for a moment, before choking out. “Well. No.”

“Well, then,” said the superintendent. “Have a good weekend.”

“Right, sir. You too.”

*

November 2, 2010

Mrs Kobayashi has been trying to convince me to eat blowfish. I might be crazy but I’m not quite that crazy yet.

*

Work Roster, Week of November 10, St Bart’s Trauma Unit: Monday Early – Murray, Golden Monday Late – Watson, Chapel Tuesday Early – Murray, Trevelyan Tuesday Late – Watson, Trevelyan Wednesday Early – Chapel, Kelley Wednesday Late – Watson, Murray

*

November 17, 2010

I have really exciting news for all of you – I have my first sponsorship! Can you believe? I guess people are reading this blog after all (well, I knew that, but still). Nikon wants to let me give away one of their CoolPix cameras – I guess they’re impressed by some of the photos I’ve been posting.
And I’m going to throw in a few other things I’ve found here to liven it up a bit, because I feel bad giving away one awesome thing when there’s so much awesome around me. Here’s the rules…

*

November 25, 2010

Mrs Kobayashi is still going on about the blowfish.

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December 17, 2010

Business first: congratulations to the winners of my first give-away! That was a lot of fun, I didn’t think it would be half as entertaining as it was but I’m really looking forward to mailing out the Nikon CoolPix and the hand-bound notebooks. Congrats to TravelingAmy, Genovia8764, and VHunter. No idea how long your goodies will take to arrive, please drop me a line when they do. My last week in Tokyo – it’s a bit bittersweet, to be honest. Well, not bittersweet, it’s actually salt and ginger and crunch and not the least bit fishy, but you know what I mean. Tokyo is the first city I’ve been to without John, and I admit, part of the reason I chose it was because it was scarier than anything in Australia. Not anything against Australia – it’s a lovely country with lots of fantastic food and great adventures, but I guess I worried that it’d be a bit like going backward. John and me, we were going to such fantastic strange places together, if my first solo trip was somewhere they spoke English, I was worried I’d never strike out somewhere utterly foreign again.

I don’t speak a word of Japanese, all I knew about Japan was sushi and electronics and samurai warriors. And pan-fried noodles. Now I speak…well, not much more, but I still love it here, and, I’m going to miss a whole lot more than sushi when I go.

(Because it is time to go.)

But of all the things I’m going to miss about Japan, probably the one thing I’m not going to miss is Mrs Kobayashi bothering me about blowfish, and I’m going to start not missing that tonight, because here, friends, is a photo of the meal I’m about to eat.

This is the way I see it: my brother John gave me the courage to pick up a camera again. And all of you reading this gave me the courage to go somewhere strange and scary and wonderful. What sort of person would I be if I can soak up all that courage, and not use it from time to time? And you’re not reading this blog because I’m eating seaweed, are you?

So here’s to fish that can kill you, and here’s to Mrs Kobayashi for being a pain in the arse about it, and here’s to Tokyo, and here’s to you.

Next stop: everywhere.

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The trees in Upper Brickley’s park hold no counsel, share no secrets, and really can’t be arsed to bother paying attention to anything that happens under them in the first place.

Which was why, when the two young people showed up at two in the morning to bury a shoebox, the trees didn’t notice.

“Did you remember everything?” asked the girl, pulling on her red ponytail in her nervousness.
“Yes, I told you—"

“The butane? The torch? The—"

“Do you still have your key?”

The girl fumbled with her keychain for a moment, and then handed the thin bit of metal over. The boy opened the shoebox, and she dropped it in. It rattled and clanked with the other objects in the box.

“Someone’s going to find it,” she said. “This is stupid.”

“I hope they do,” said the boy. “Help me dig.”

Burying the shoebox didn’t take long. When they were done, the two people stood and looked down at the makeshift grave.

“I feel like we should say something,” said the girl.

“Jim Moriarty can rot in hell,” said the boy fervently.

“D’you think John and Harry know yet?”

“About the fire? Maybe.”

“D’you think they mind very much?”

The boy didn’t say anything for a few minutes.

“Yeah, probably,” he said finally. “But not as much as they minded the alternative.”

“Guess not.”

The boy and the girl left, and the park fell silent, except for the leaves rustling in the breeze.

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Every so often, someone will recognize him. John can usually tell before they speak; they’ll give him this side-eyed look, their foreheads will crease as they try to place his familiar face, name, voice. Out of context, most of them can’t figure it out.

“Do I know you from somewhere?” they ask, and it depends on his mood, on the day, on how many people he’s treated so far whether or not he tells them.

Sometimes, they don’t need his help. Those are the more-than-casual fans, who watch the shows and own the books and read the reviews and interviews.

“You’re John Watson,” they say, excited. “You were on that show, Restaurant Reconstructed. With Sherlock Holmes?”

How Sherlock would hate that phrasing.

“Yes.” No point in denying.

“So you’re a doctor now?”

“I was always a doctor,” says John, listening to their heart or palpitating the skin for bruises.
“So the restaurant was just…an aberration?”

“No,” says John, because the A&E isn’t exactly the place where John wants to get into his own history with the Empire. “I’m just going to prescribe some antibiotics and then you’ll be on your way.”

Sometimes, they think to ask. “Do you still keep in touch with Sherlock?”

It’s always the parting question, always as John is heading out the door. And John knows the answers they expect: doesn’t matter if they’re the truth or a carefully crafted lie.

“Yes,” is what most of them want him to say. “We talk every now and then. Good fellow, is Sherlock.”

“No, not really,” is what they actually expect him to say. “Sent a kind note after the show, but he’s got his own life, and I’ve got mine.”

Once, just once, there as a patient who was a real devotee. John hasn’t met many of them, not yet, though he knows Sherlock knows them all by face or allergic reactions. He deletes their names; those are immaterial when compared to what matters, like who prefers the extra pepper and who will become deathly ill with the inclusion of shellfish. Who had the blogs and the webpages, who have been to the restaurants – both Sherlock’s and those where he’s appeared. John can’t help but wonder what they would have ordered off his menu, what they might have said afterwards. The what-if, the would-have-been.

The girl in the A&E, his patient for the next ten minutes, watches him, never says a word, as if she hasn’t recognized him, but the way her eyes stay on him, John knows she has. Her brow never creases in thought; she doesn’t try to talk about restaurants where she’s eaten; she is nothing but respectful, seeking more information about her health and her recovery time, and John is almost at ease.

It’s as if they have reached an unspoken agreement about knowing who the other is; that they know, and that they know that they know, but will say nothing about it. And having made that agreement, decided not to refer to it again. In a way, it’s refreshing.

It’s only when he is done with his examination and the follow-up explanations that John says, as is customary, “Do you have any other questions for me?”

She’s quiet: and there, that’s the pause John has come to expect, when someone is weighing what is right with what is desired.

“No,” she says finally, drawing it out, making her decision (even if it’s one she doesn’t like).

“Go on,” he says, and leans back in his chair. He feels generous. He can.

It’s enough. She looks at him, eyes focused and serious. “Who does the cooking, when you’re at home? You or Sherlock?”

John holds his breath for a moment. It’s always about Sherlock, that last shot. Do they still talk, do they still see each other, is there anything between them still? But this one, she seems to know about it already. To be recognized, quite so thoroughly…John had wondered if he was such a known element, among the true devotees.

“Me,” says John, and she grins. John thinks he’s answered more than one question.
“Good,” she says.

“I think so,” he agrees. “Take care of the leg, now.”

It’s as he’s leaving that she fires off the last shot. He should have expected it.

“I’m sorry about what happened to the Empire.”

John pauses in the doorway. It’s a familiar ache in his chest, the remembered scent of the kitchen, the feel of the dining room stretching around him, the tinkle and laughter of the customers those last few weeks, blending with the whistles and beeps and sobbing of the A&E.

Sometimes, he’ll enter a kitchen or a restaurant, a small café on the corner, and the scent will be so familiar, he stops in his tracks, expect to see James Watson come around the corner, wiping his hands on a dishtowel, a smile on his face. He’ll order too much, sit for too long, just to pretend.

The memory of James, untarnished. Perfect, unaltered by later revelations. This is how James would want to be remembered, with the scent of garlic and ginger, not ashes and dust.

But here and now, she’s waiting for his answer. He smiles, fondly. “Don’t be. I’m not,” he says, and with a cheeky grin, goes on to his next patient.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and going on this journey with me. Words cannot express how much your love and reviews and support have meant to me over the last few months. I have treasured every review, every subscription, every kudos, and most of all, every one of you.

Huge thanks to my betas and Brit-picks, earlgreytea68, kizzia, and lady_of_clunn. They held my hand when I needed it and weren’t afraid to tell me when I’d screwed up, so I could make it better.

I sat down a year ago, wanting to write my own Sherlock AU, because there are so many wonderful ones out there, and I wanted to contribute my own. So thanks to everyone who’s gone before me, for inspiring me to join you on the playing field.

Like John, I don’t cook alone; I always have company in my kitchen, whether it’s my son who is desperate to stir whatever’s bubbling away on the stove, or my grandmother, who’s the whisper in my ear as I shape the cookies. I hope that you all cook with your benevolent ghosts behind you, and that your meals are the better for it.

Works inspired by this [Bed & Breakfast](#) by Kizzia

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